



Good Faith Approaches to Gender Equality

*How investing in faith-centered approaches
to shifting social norms creates lasting
change for women and girls*



Imago Dei Fund

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Acknowledgements

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Lead Author: Jena Lee Nardella

Project Team (Imago Dei Fund): Andrew Jones, Harriet Glassman, and Sharon Rajadurai

Partner Advisors & Reviewers: Cynthia Bauer, Sean Callaghan, Adonis Daniel, Prabu Deepan, Natsnet Ghebrebrhan, Sunita Groth, Rebecca Heidorn, Prossy Jonker Nakanjako, Domnic Misolo, Leticia Nkonya, and Sara Siebert

Editor: Scott Kauffmann

Graphic Design & Layout: Victor Huckabee

Case Study Participant Organizations: Beyond Borders, Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment (IFAGE), Kupenda for the Children, Raising Voices, Tearfund, and World Vision

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Introduction

“When we understand that God created us equal, the whole way we live with one another must change.”

—Pastor Adonis Daniel, *Rethinking Power* program, Haiti

At Imago Dei Fund, we’ve long believed in the power of faith to heal, restore, and transform. But we’ve also seen how religious faith, like any world story or ideology, can be misinterpreted or misused to uphold social norms that treat women and girls as inferior and limit their opportunities in life. Many of our partner organizations work in faith contexts; some are explicitly faith-based, while others are secular but engage religious actors in their work. What unites them is a shared understanding that **faith is one of the most powerful forces shaping belief, behavior, and social norms.**

We believe there is a **gold mine** of experiences and lessons in our grantee partner portfolio around **what is working** to shift patriarchal norms.

Distinctly, we see **concerted efforts** to remove barriers to women and girls' equality that are rooted in patriarchal traditions espoused by **religious contexts.**

For the past 15 years, the Imago Dei Fund has walked alongside visionary leaders and organizations, locally in Boston and around the world, who are committed to co-creating a more just, free, and sustainable world in which all human beings can thrive and flourish together. With locally-rooted change agents leading the way, our vision is for a growing number of women and girls to flourish in a world marked by mutuality and interdependence.

These case studies grew out of the impact we’ve seen in our partners’ work. They reflect the emerging evidence supporting an often overlooked insight: **when it comes to advancing the agency and rights of women and girls, engaging faith leaders and communities can open powerful pathways to change**—because the same religious structures that sustain inequality contain the best resources to dismantle it.

Local faith leaders are ideal catalysts for change. Not only are they often the most prominent reinforcers of social norms; they are the most trusted interpreters of the authoritative beliefs underlying those norms. To the extent that their faith commitments can be rightly understood as valuing all persons equally, faith-centered approaches can lead to durable shifts in social norms that advance women and girls' status and opportunities in traditionally patriarchal communities.

Likewise, frontline implementers and funders can be essential actors in the pursuit of justice, freedom, and flourishing in communities around the world. To the extent that their efforts reflect genuine mutuality, patience, and openness to the value of the religious commitments held by the communities they serve, we’ve found that their approaches to addressing the deeper roots of gender-based injustice are working.

In this report, we draw on the insights of six of our partners (faith-based, faith-inspired, and secular) that are working with communities across diverse regions and faith traditions to create a more enabling environment for women and girls. They work across a range of interventions, from protection from violence and access to basic services to economic participation and control of assets. All of these are entry points for working with male allies and engaging religious and other leaders in efforts to advance women and girls' agency and life opportunities.

Their experience represents a gold mine of learning around what shifts long-standing social norms impeding opportunities for women and girls. This report explores:

What types of faith-centered interventions are most effective at shifting harmful social norms?

What factors enable their success?

What barriers limit funding for this work?

And how can funders better support this work?

Through interviews, program documents, and field evidence, we've gathered lessons, insights, and stories about what's working, what challenges persist, and what types of support are most needed to sustain and scale this work.

Most of the efforts to shift social norms explored in this report showcase Christian leaders and communities. That said, many of our partners featured here work across a broader range of religious and traditional leaders, and the findings presented in these case studies reflect our partners' experiences across other faith traditions as well.

We hope this report serves as both a resource and an invitation to learn from frontline leaders how faith-centered approaches can play a vital role in shifting harmful social norms and advancing women and girls' status and opportunities in life in deeply rooted, lasting ways.





Beyond Borders

Rethinking Power

In Southeast Haiti, Beyond Borders works to overcome poverty, prevent violence and abuse, and develop leaders by supporting community-led movements to end child servitude, guarantee access to quality education and prevent violence against women and girls. Its community-based *Rethinking Power* program asks people, ‘How are you using your power?’ By organizing the entire community to ask this question, it begins to address the root cause of violence against women and girls and the power imbalance between women and men.



Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment (IFAGE)

Positive Masculinity and Biblical Equality

The Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment (IFAGE) works in Western Kenya with grassroots organizations and faith communities to address sexual and gender-based violence. Their flagship programs—Positive Masculinity and Biblical Equality—invite pastors to revisit texts like Genesis and Ephesians to uncover justice-centered readings. IFAGE engages community leaders through capacity building, mentorship and advocacy, and works with men and women, faith leaders, and youth in order to end sexual and gender-based violence.



Kupenda for the Children

Kupenda transforms harmful beliefs and practices surrounding disability to those that improve children’s lives. Many in low-income countries, like Kenya, misunderstand disability and view it as a curse of God. To change this, Kupenda collaborates with influential faith and community leaders to reduce stigma associated with disability. By engaging local communities to honor the inherent worth of every person, Kupenda challenges negative cultural and religious narratives around disability, ensuring that people with disabilities are valued, included, and empowered in their communities.



Raising Voices

SASA! Faith

Raising Voices is a feminist organization that works to prevent violence against women and children in East Africa and beyond. It strives to influence the power dynamics shaping relationships between women and men and girls and boys by catalyzing social change in communities. Raising Voices’ *SASA!* program is the first evidence-based violence prevention approach in Africa working to reduce the risk of violence against women at the community level. *SASA! Faith* is a faith-rooted adaptation of the globally recognized *SASA!* methodology, adapted by Raising Voices and Trócaire, working with churches and mosques across the world.



Tearfund

Transforming Masculinities

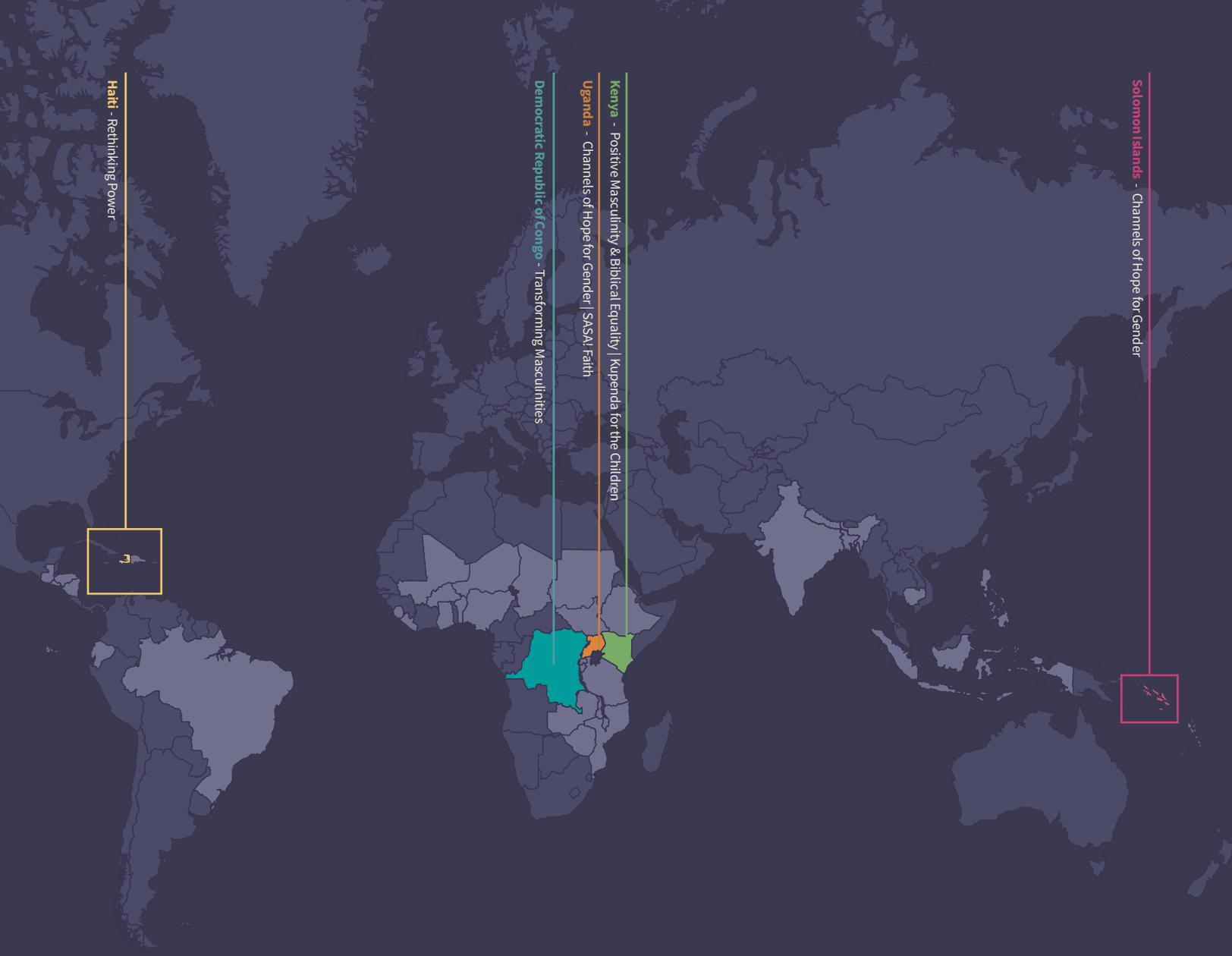
Tearfund UK is a global faith-based organization with multiple areas of focus including: Advocacy, Church and Community Transformation, Disaster Response, Economic Empowerment, Environment and Climate, Peacebuilding, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, and Water and Sanitation. Tearfund’s work that is the focus of this case study is within their *Transforming Masculinities* programming, which aims to challenge social norms and harmful concepts of gender and masculinities by working through and within faith communities.



World Vision

Channels of Hope for Gender

World Vision is an international Christian organization that partners with children, families, and their communities to address the root causes of poverty and injustice. Advancing gender equality is central to its work. In over 40 countries, its *Channels of Hope* program equips faith leaders to confront gender-based violence through theological reflection, re-examining sacred texts and personal beliefs, then expanding to community awareness, survivor support, and public advocacy to foster lasting change.



Haiti - Rethinking Power

Democratic Republic of Congo - Transforming Masculinities

Uganda - Channels of Hope for Gender | SASA! Faith

Kenya - Positive Masculinity & Biblical Equality | Kupenda for the Children

Solomon Islands - Channels of Hope for Gender

ADDITIONAL COUNTRIES

Rethinking Power

- Kenya
- Malawi
- Tanzania

Positive Masculinity and Biblical Equality

- Burundi
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Kenya
- Mozambique
- Nigeria
- Rwanda
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

Kupenda for the Children

- Benin
- Burkina Faso
- Burundi
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Dominican Republic
- Ecuador
- El Salvador
- Ethiopia
- Ghana
- Guatemala
- Haiti
- Honduras
- Kenya
- Liberia
- Malawi

- Mozambique
- Nicaragua
- Niger
- The Philippines
- Rwanda
- Sierra Leone
- Sudan
- Tanzania
- Uganda
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

SASA! Faith

- Ethiopia
- Fiji
- Kenya
- Malawi

- Pakistan
- Uganda
- Zimbabwe

Channels of Hope for Gender

- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- East Timor
- Indonesia
- Kenya
- Lebanon
- Malawi
- Papua New Guinea
- Philippines
- Rwanda
- Vanuatu
- Zimbabwe

Transforming Masculinities

- Bangladesh
- Brazil
- Burundi
- Cambodia
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- India
- Liberia
- Mali
- Nepal
- Nigeria
- South Sudan
- Sri Lanka
- Zimbabwe

The Case for Faith-Centered Approaches to Gender Equality

The case for faith-centered approaches to gender equality begins by contending with the perception that religious actors are barriers to change.

Globally, gender inequality remains deeply entrenched, with rigid patriarchal norms continuing to limit opportunities for women and girls. Indeed, many of the most harmful practices against women and girls are upheld—explicitly or implicitly—by faith communities. Female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage are rooted in long-standing beliefs that a woman’s purity determines family honor. Intimate partner violence often draws from the belief that men are divinely appointed as superior to women and that it is a man’s responsibility to hold authority over women. For example, a study in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) found that 60% of men and 45% of women agreed that the Bible gives men the right to physically abuse their wives.¹

Related myths in the gender equality sector include:

Faith leaders obstruct efforts to shift patriarchal norms and cannot be engaged constructively.

There is very little common ground between secular funders and faith-centered work; so the two cannot partner without fundamental compromise.

Faith-centered work lacks evidence and rigor by definition.

In practice, however, a growing body of research suggests a different reality.

The good news is that the same religious structures that can sustain inequality contain the resources to dismantle it.

Most programs and funding focused on women and girls assume, not without reason, that faith actors deploy religious beliefs to uphold the patriarchal status quo. Yet because the reality is nuanced, a black-and-white view risks missing meaningful opportunities to cultivate allies and catalysts for change within faith institutions and communities.

Faith-centered approaches, when carefully designed and locally led, have shown measurable positive outcomes, such as reductions in intimate partner violence and shifts in gender attitudes. The evidence is compelling:

- In eastern DRC, where more than half of men and nearly half of women initially agreed that there were times a woman deserved to be beaten, Tearfund’s *Transforming Masculinities* engaged religious leaders and faith communities in reflective dialogue on gender and violence. **Household surveys subsequently showed a 57% decline in women’s experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) and a 66% decline in men’s perpetration of past year IPV.** It also showed more equitable gender attitudes and a decline in attitudes that stigmatize survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).²
- In the Solomon Islands, where beliefs that perpetuate gender-based violence and inequality are deeply entrenched, World Vision’s *Channels of Hope for Gender* focused on encouraging faith leaders to overturn harmful social norms and reduce gender-based violence. **Household surveys showed that, in**

^{1&2} Tearfund & Prevention Collaborative. (2023). *Lessons from the adaptation of Transforming Masculinities in DRC: A Prevention Triad case study*. Prevention Collaborative

response to the statement ‘The Bible affirms that man is superior to woman,’ 79% of respondents disagreed, compared to a baseline of 59%. Another study of a three-year project found that attitudes of community members and church leaders toward recognizing women’s rights changed, with **the percentage of women who believe that women should not make decisions falling from 34% to 4% and the percentage of men who believe the Bible says that ‘man is boss’ falling from 83% to 66%.**³

- A randomized controlled trial in Uganda found that integrating gender-equitable teachings into Christian premarital counseling programs as part of *Channels of Hope for Gender* led to a five-percentage-point reduction in intimate partner violence—an impact comparable to that achieved by intensive secular GBV prevention initiatives. Importantly, this level of change was achieved with a lower-cost, faith-integrated approach, demonstrating the significant potential of faith-based actors in shifting social norms at scale. **The intervention also increased women’s decision-making power in households, highlighting the influence of faith leaders who publicly advocate for gender equity.**⁴
- The Raising Voices SASA! methodology, from which *SASA! Faith* is adapted using the same essential elements, is an evidence-based methodology that achieved **52% reduction of women’s risk of experiencing physical violence from their male partners at a community level.** In addition, SASA! reduced tolerance for men’s use of violence against women. In SASA! communities, **76% of women and men believed that physical violence against a partner is never acceptable, compared to only 26% in control communities.**⁵
- Within a multi-pronged approach that included meaningful engagement with religious leaders and faith communities in Haiti (including *SASA!*, *Power to Girls*, and *Safe and Capable*), Beyond Borders’ *Rethinking Power* program found **rates of intimate**

partner violence were cut in half—from 23% to 12%—between baseline and endline. For girls aged 15-23, reported **rates of physical/sexual violence dropped by nearly 40%**. Additionally, girls reported significantly increased agency in decision-making, peer relationships, and speaking out against violence against women and girls.⁶

Faith-centered approaches are generating this kind of impact in communities where religious institutions are often the strongest influencers of social norms. They shape not only what people believe, but how they behave—within households and in public life.

Social norms are shaped by two kinds of beliefs: (1) what I believe *others* do (descriptive norms) and (2) what I believe others *expect me* to do (injunctive norms). When many people in a community share these beliefs, they become social norms—unwritten rules that are reinforced through rewards for going along with them or consequences for going against them.

Philanthropy has often supported direct services that benefit women and girls. Most funds designated for gender equality are allocated toward services such as girls’ education, economic inclusion, and sexual and reproductive health. These investments are essential, but not sufficient to address the norms of the patriarchal world that women, girls, and communities inhabit.

The challenge is that women and girls still live under social norms that cast them as inherently inferior, subordinate, or secondary. At the same time, men and boys are products of this same environment and all too often come to believe they are superior. These norms—often inherited, rarely interrogated—are the soil in which gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, and child marriage are perpetuated, along with unequal access to education, health services, and economic opportunity. Without addressing these norms, even the most well-resourced interventions for women and girls risk treating symptoms while leaving root causes intact.

³ World Vision. (2020). *Channels of Hope Evidence Brief*, June 2020.

⁴ Boyer, C., Paluck, E. L., Annan, J., Nevatia, T., Cooper, J., Namubiru, J., Heise, L., & Lehrer, R. (2022). *Religious leaders can motivate men to cede power and reduce intimate partner violence: Experimental evidence from Uganda*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(31), e2200262119. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2200262119>

⁵ Raising Voices, LSHTM and CEDOVIP. (2015). *Is Violence Against Women Preventable? Findings from the SASA! Study summarized for general audiences*. Kampala, Uganda: Raising Voices.

⁶ Bourassa, A., Murphy, M., Wilson, R., & Contreras-Urbina, M. (2022). *Shifting Power and Reducing Violence in Haiti: Initial results of an impact of the Rethinking Power and Power to Girls programs in Southeast Haiti*. The Global Women’s Institute at George Washington University.

Faith leaders are often among the most trusted voices in their communities, with authority that extends far beyond the walls of worship. Their teachings shape gender roles, expectations around marriage and family, and attitudes toward violence and power. For example, a recent World Vision household survey in the Solomon Islands found that **78% of respondents in Temotu and 95% in the Weather Coast area indicated they would change the way they treat their spouse if advocated by their church leaders.**⁷

When faith leaders understand their sacred texts as affirming the equal value of all people, they can be essential to advancing the flourishing of women and girls.

Faith leaders shape what their followers understand God wants them to do. Social norms are sustained by shared beliefs—specifically, the perception that others behave in a certain way and expect the same in return. One of the most powerful drivers for shifting these norms is the recognition, through deeper engagement with sacred texts, that such behaviors may not align with religious teachings. Once significant numbers in a faith community believe God expects them to act differently, normative codes of behavior are on their way to being transformed.

Embedded into religious life are existing, regular structures and practices (places of worship, religious education programs, youth groups, and community-based activities) that can reinforce these insights and activate changes in community belief and behavior.

Programs such as *SASA! Faith*, an adaptation of the widely used *SASA!* model, have shown that engaging religious leaders can catalyze community-wide dialogue on power dynamics, resulting in significant reductions in the acceptance of wife-beating and increases in male participation in caregiving and household decision-making.⁸ Central to the model is mobilizing leaders, members and believers of a faith to come together to prevent violence against women. Where *SASA! Faith* has directly engaged religious leaders as catalysts for change, it has unleashed what one partner called “a forest of stories.”

Stories like Muslim religious leaders in Uganda utilizing their platform and authority to speak every Friday on their radio programs about intimate partner violence. Or like church pastors preaching against intimate partner violence in their congregations, directly shifting how husbands view their wives, their relationships, and the use of violence.⁹

A compelling finding from Tearfund’s *Transforming Masculinities* work in the DRC was that faith engagement (for both Christians and Muslims) showed a protective correlation in terms of reduced experience of IPV for women. It was also consistently shown to be associated with more empowering attitudes for both men and women. For example, those who were actively engaged with a faith group were more likely to believe that physical violence is not justified in any circumstances, and that a woman has the right to refuse sex.¹⁰

In Haiti, pastors trained through *Rethinking Power* have created a program called Family Sundays, bringing households together to discuss and explore what can be done within the family to balance power between women and men, and how parents can raise their girl and boy children to be valued equally. As a result, community norms have shifted measurably toward greater support for gender equality and reduced acceptance of violence.¹¹

With Kenya as the foundation of their efforts, Kupenda for the Children has worked with influential faith and community leaders in low-income countries to challenge discriminatory beliefs about disability, leading to greater inclusion of children with disabilities—especially girls—in education.¹² Similarly, the Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment’s (IFAGE) *Positive Masculinity and Biblical Equality* initiative in western Kenya has equipped Christian and Muslim leaders with not only the theological tools to reflect on power and gender roles, but also the tools to be advocates for land rights, to speak out against femicide, and to care for survivors by supporting them through tracking and tracing cases of sexual violence and connecting them with the police and access to justice. Faith leaders in this area are now being considered the protective eyes of the community.¹³

⁷ World Vision. (2015). *Solomon Islands Community Channels of Hope, Phase One Evaluation Summary*, October 2015.

⁸ LeRoux, E. (2022). *There is a forest of stories!: Learning from SASA! Faith implementation in six countries*. Raising Voices & Trócaire.

^{9&10} Sandilands, M., Jewkes, R., Baghuma Lele, U., & Scott, N. (2017). *Does faith matter? Faith engagement, gender norms and violence against women and girls in conflict-affected communities: Baseline research in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo*. Tearfund, UK.

¹¹ Bourassa, A., Murphy, M., Wilson, R., and Contreras-Urbina, M. (2022). *Shifting Power and Reducing Violence in Haiti: Initial Results of an Impact of the Rethinking Power and Power to Girls Program’s in Southeast Haiti*. The Global Women’s Institute at George Washington University.

¹² Interview with Cynthia Bauer and Rebecca Heidorn, Kupenda for the Children staff, November 2024.

¹³ Interview with Rev. Dominic Misolo, IFAGE founder, November 2024.

Good Faith Approaches to Gender Equality			Core Components	
CENTRAL GOAL	CORE STRATEGY	METHODOLOGY		
Focus on shifting norms upheld in religious contexts .	Engaging religious leaders' core beliefs . In a manner that speaks most deeply to them .	Through the use of sacred texts, guided discussion & self-reflection . Sustained, then, by community action .	 Engaging religious leaders' core beliefs	 Reflecting on sacred texts
			 Community dialogues & discussion	 Community mobilization for action

Lasting change in this area always begins with good-faith engagement that earns and extends trust.

Faith-centered efforts to shift norms are not one-time events or campaigns. They are journeys—slow, relational, and always grounded in trusting engagement with individuals, communities, and the belief systems that shape behavior. **These efforts don't start by prescribing new rules. They begin when all parties engage with a premise and posture of good faith.**

Generally, implementers recognize religious leaders and institutions as a key reference group. Many of those religious leaders report, however, that outside engagement often feels patronizing and tokenistic in that religious leaders are treated superficially, as a means to an end. So it's not enough to recognize the social power of the faith leader. **The key to unlocking partnership and transformation is for implementers to approach these relationships in a way that builds trust,** which requires:

- Honoring each actor's integrity and agency, presuming that these leaders will act rationally in accordance with their communities' deepest values and best interests
- Genuine understanding of faith communities' context, commitments and values
- Willingness to accompany faith leaders as fellow travelers, where everyone is on a path of learning and transformation

- Taking the lead in wrestling with reflection questions including:
 - *What do we believe?*
 - *Where do those beliefs come from?*
 - *How might we reimagine power, dignity, and leadership in light of those beliefs?*

Accordingly, all six exemplary interventions featured in this report share a consistent arc of transformation. Though each model is distinctly local and was developed independently of the others, they all arrived at a common thesis: that **enduring shifts in gender norms must begin by engaging the worldviews and moral frameworks that sustain these norms.**

More importantly, they also uphold a common value set: that **personal and communal transformation is made possible when people are met with respect and when the ground they stand on is honored before any invitation to move.** From there, trust and self-reflection open the door to collective dialogue, shared accountability, and public action. These shared values serve as the foundation for the **four core components** that define these good-faith approaches to transforming gender norms.

"So, this is the change."

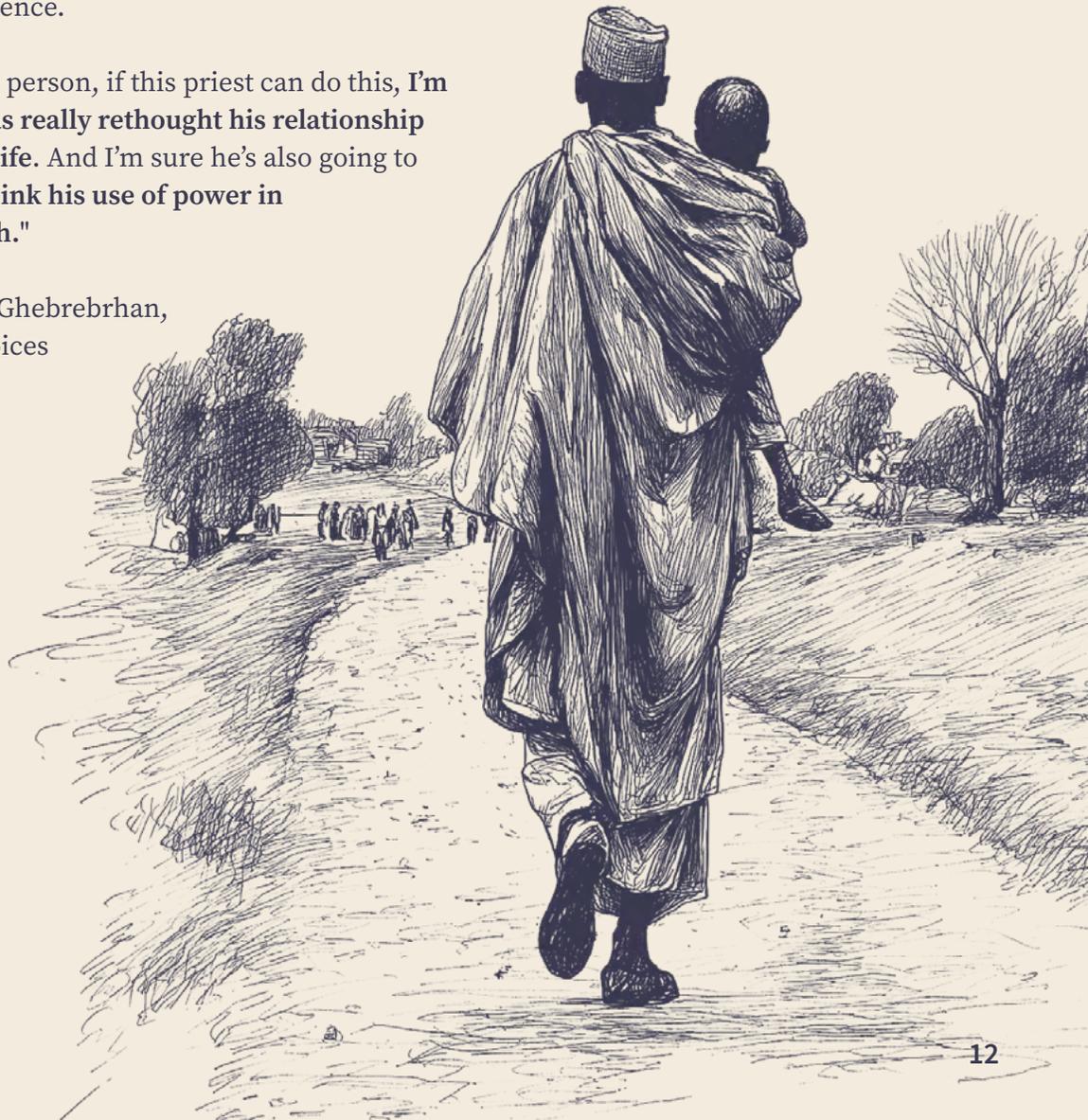
"Ethiopia has a really strong Orthodox community where the religion and culture are linked. A **priest is a very respectable individual in the Ethiopian community**. If they see a priest moving, they would just bow, and priests would normally carry a small cross, and they would kiss their hands and kiss their cross.

But look at this priest who is carrying a baby. This is unthinkable for the Ethiopian community because caring and maintenance are only for women. No man—let alone a priest—no man is expected to do this.

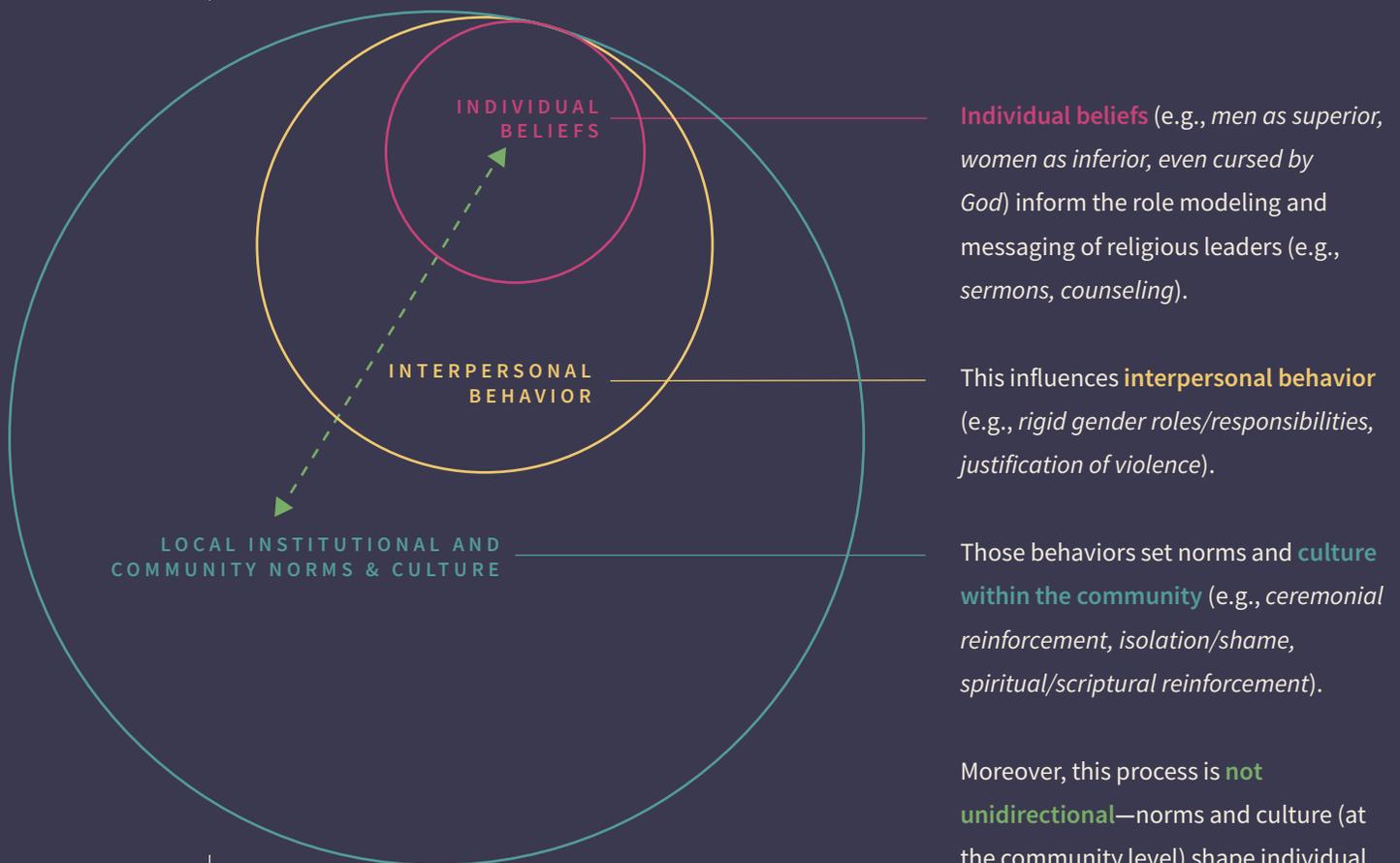
But this is one of the activists in the *SASA!* community that has really taken a role to carry. He's taking his sick child or he's returning from a clinic. So, this is the change. **Can you imagine his role modeling?** He has changed and is role modeling as a priest. He has a lot of influence.

And if this person, if this priest can do this, I'm sure he has really rethought his relationship with his wife. And I'm sure he's also going to really rethink his use of power in the Church."

—Natsnet Ghebrebrhan,
Raising Voices



How Beliefs and Relationships Shape Social Norms



Moreover, this process is **not unidirectional**—norms and culture (at the community level) shape individual beliefs and create a lens through which interpersonal relationships are viewed. Likewise our interpersonal relationships influence our belief systems and reinforce or challenge the social norms that we live in.

Adapted from the socio-ecological model to reflect the local nature of our grantee partners' interventions, working at the community level primarily as opposed to the national institutional or policy level.



Engaging Religious Leaders' Core Beliefs

“If faith leaders have good thinking, then there will be good preaching.”

—Prabu Deepan, Tearfund’s *Transforming Masculinities*



Approach

While the unique power and influence of religious leaders as gatekeepers and custodians of social norms is widely recognized by the development sector, typical engagement tends to be perfunctory and ceremonial in nature. What sets genuinely faith-centered approaches apart is their investment in accompanying local religious leaders on a journey of personal reflection and growth. (The use of the word ‘local’ is intentional; the trusted local pastor or imam—not the more remote leader up the religious hierarchy—models change that people will emulate).

Faith-centered approaches invite these leaders to reflect on how their beliefs and teachings influence gender roles and community norms, drawing from sacred texts as starting points. They examine interpretations that have upheld gender inequality, and many experience profound shifts in their own understanding of how their beliefs impact the well-being of the women and girls in their homes, congregations, and communities. With support, these local religious leaders begin weaving these transformed insights into their preaching, counseling, and community engagement. Once that shift begins, it can have a ripple effect.

“As we engage the religious leadership, the people who are listening to them are the same people who go into offices, who are teachers in schools, who sell in the market—all of these people then take all of those new belief systems wherever they go.”

—Pastor Adonis Daniel, *Rethinking Power* program, Beyond Borders, Haiti

Transformed faith leaders become some of the most influential voices for challenging normative beliefs around patriarchy.



Spotlight: Transforming Tradition as a Pastor

Most pastors in Haiti have been shaped by a faith environment where church leadership was dominated by men, and women were largely excluded from preaching or pastoral roles. One particular pastor in Southeast Haiti, Adonis Daniel, is a leader and staff member in the *Rethinking Power* program at Beyond Borders who experienced his own shifts in his understanding of gender and leadership. Over the past ten years, Pastor Adonis has been engaging church leaders and pastors through facilitated Scripture study and critical dialogue, to re-examine passages often used to justify male dominance, leading to personal transformations in their understanding of gender equality. A growing number of church leaders have begun incorporating messages of equality and partnership into their preaching, while also working to spread the engagement with other pastors in similar reflection. Today, congregations in his region that once resisted female leadership have appointed women as pastors. Many pastors have instituted once-a-month Women's Sundays, in which all of the leadership positions in the church are occupied and platformed by women. Where once it was unthinkable for a woman to lead, several churches in his region now recognize and ordain female pastors—a change he attributes to the steady, relational work of the faith engagement model.



"Transformation comes when we dare to look again at what we thought we knew," Pastor Adonis shared. "When we understand that God created us equal, the whole way we live with one another must change. Once we change, our preaching and our public stances also change."¹⁴

¹⁴Interview with Adonis Daniel, (S. Siebert, Trans.), *Rethinking Power/Beyond Borders* staff, November 2024.



From Domination to Service: How Scripture Transformed Bishop Luke's Leadership

In a small parish in western Kenya, Bishop Luke Arwa was known as a respected leader in his church and a long-standing member of New Baptist Church. At home, though, leadership meant control because of his misinterpretation of Scripture. Decisions were unilateral, and anger often set the tone. His faith was sincere, but his understanding of gender and power remained unexamined.

When IFAGE invited him to a training on *Positive Masculinity and Biblical Equality*, Bishop Luke was skeptical. But over five days, Scripture was opened in new ways. Passages he had long quoted—Genesis, Galatians, Ephesians—were reexamined with fresh eyes. The takeaway for him from the training was simple, yet radical: power in Christ is not for domination, but for service. Leadership is not about authority, but about love.

Bishop Luke left the training changed. He joined a local “Men’s Breakfast” group to continue the conversations and began mentoring younger men in his

church advocating for equal worth and dignity for women and men. At home, he practiced listening, sharing responsibility, and honoring his wife as an equal partner. His children noticed. So did his congregation.

Soon, Bishop Luke became one of IFAGE’s most active gender champions. He now helps lead community trainings, opens the gates of his churches as safe spaces to teach and dialogue around gender justice. His churches support survivors through para-social networks, and integrates messages of justice and partnership into his ministry.

His transformation didn’t erase the past—it testified to what’s possible when faith invites reflection, not fear. Through accompaniment and Scripture-based dialogue, Bishop Luke’s story became not just one of personal change, but of public witness: that equality is not a loss of status, but a restoration of shared dignity and genuine partnership.







From Harmful Social Norms

ROOT BELIEF / INTERPRETATION	NORMATIVE MESSAGE	SOCIAL NORM BEHAVIOR
Men are divinely appointed as superior and authoritative over women	"Man is the head of the household" / "Wives, submit to your husbands"	Male dominance in family, church, and leadership. Justification of wife-beating, coerced sex in marriage, denial of women from leadership or economic roles, and denial of opportunities for girls
Eve sinned first; women are more susceptible to moral failure	Women are to blame for sin and chaos	Gender-based blame
Masculinity is linked to control, provision, and discipline	Men must rule, provide, and protect	Violence as control; caregiving seen as weak or unmanly
Honor and shame are tied to female sexuality	"A woman's purity determines family honor"	Control over female mobility, clothing, and sexuality. Justification of female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage

To Transformed Community Behaviors

ROOT BELIEF / INTERPRETATION	NORMATIVE MESSAGE	SOCIAL NORM BEHAVIOR
Men and women are equally made in the image of God; submission is mutual, not gendered	Mutual dignity and shared authority	Increased women's participation in leadership and decision-making; shared roles in family, church, and society
The Fall introduced inequality; redemption calls for restored relationships	God's vision is restoration and mutual flourishing	Reduced justification for intimate partner violence and coercion; shared leadership in marriage and community
Servant leadership, not domination, is the Biblical ideal	True leadership is rooted in love, not control	Men embrace nurturing, caregiving, and co-parenting roles; reduction in male-perpetrated violence, stronger family cohesion
Women's voices and callings are affirmed throughout Scripture	Women are called to lead, teach, and prophesy	Women and girls participate in public life, faith leadership, education, and advocacy
Women and children are full members of the covenant community	The vulnerable are central to God's kingdom	All women and girls, including those who are often marginalized like widows and women and girls with disabilities, are included and their power affirmed



Why This Works

Faith leaders are deeply respected, trusted, and influential in their communities. Oftentimes, their influence extends beyond religious spaces into policymaking and governance.

Once faith leaders accept and internalize beliefs centered on human dignity and rights, God's purpose for men and women, and love for all people, **they become powerful role models and advocates for change.**

As they practice these beliefs and integrate them into their sermons, teachings, and advocacy work, **the message extends to households and communities.**

Key Takeaways

Personal transformation is a prerequisite for wider cultural and community change. **Transformation begins at the individual level** where faith leaders first undergo a shift in mindset and heart. Engaging them successfully is the foundation for changing harmful gender norms.

A crucial part of this engagement is accompanying **faith leaders to wrestle with unquestioned assumptions and beliefs**—debunking harmful interpretations and replacing them with messages of equality and justice.

Faith leaders are not always the key reference group for social norms change. In some contexts, traditional leaders were found to be the primary influencers rather than clergy. It's important to conduct spiritual landscape and social norms assessments to determine what beliefs are at play and who truly holds influence.¹⁵

¹⁵ Interview with Leticia Nkonya and Sunita Groth, World Vision staff, November 2024.



Reflecting on Sacred Texts for Critical Thinking

“I’ve found out that the Bible is very powerful when the person is convinced from a Biblical perspective that this is the right thing to do; it connects with the heart.”

—Rev. Dominic Misolo, Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment

Approach

This approach uses guided engagement with sacred texts to support critical thinking about gender roles, power, and relationships. Facilitators lead participants through structured sessions that explore Scriptural passages commonly cited in relation to gender norms. Participants are encouraged to analyze the texts in context, consider multiple interpretations, and reflect on how religious teachings have been applied in their communities. The process emphasizes discussion rather than instruction, creating space for individual and group reflection. This engagement helps participants draw connections between their faith and their lives, and consider how their beliefs may influence everyday attitudes and behaviors related to gender.





Spotlight: Uncovering Equality in God's Word

The Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment (IFAGE) works directly with clergy and faith leaders across sub-Saharan Africa to confront patriarchal interpretations of Scripture and equip them to promote gender equality through their theology, sermons, and spiritual leadership. Their flagship curriculum—*Positive Masculinity and Biblical Equality*—draws upon the Creation Story to explore gender relationships as described in Genesis 1. The program's founder, Rev. Domnic Misolo, explains it like this:

“When you bring the idea that men and women are created equally in the image of God with one substance, they realize, ‘Oh, we are the same.’ They begin to see how the Bible clearly states the ideal creation, how God intended it—with equal opportunity and roles, sent to care for and subdue the earth. God didn’t say, ‘Man, go do this. Woman, go be in the kitchen.’ But when things start to fall apart, Adam starts blaming Eve. Men start taking power and privileges against women. We can go back to the original plan of God. Let’s see the original mind of God before the Fall.”

Through IFAGE’s programming, the Fall is reframed as the origin of gendered roles tied to sin, while redemption is presented as an opportunity for men and women to reclaim equality and redefine their roles within households and communities. As a result of this theological reframing, IFAGE has reported that clergy who once reinforced patriarchal teachings are now preaching about mutuality and respect, leading to greater acceptance of women’s leadership roles and a measurable decrease in gender-based discrimination within participating congregations.





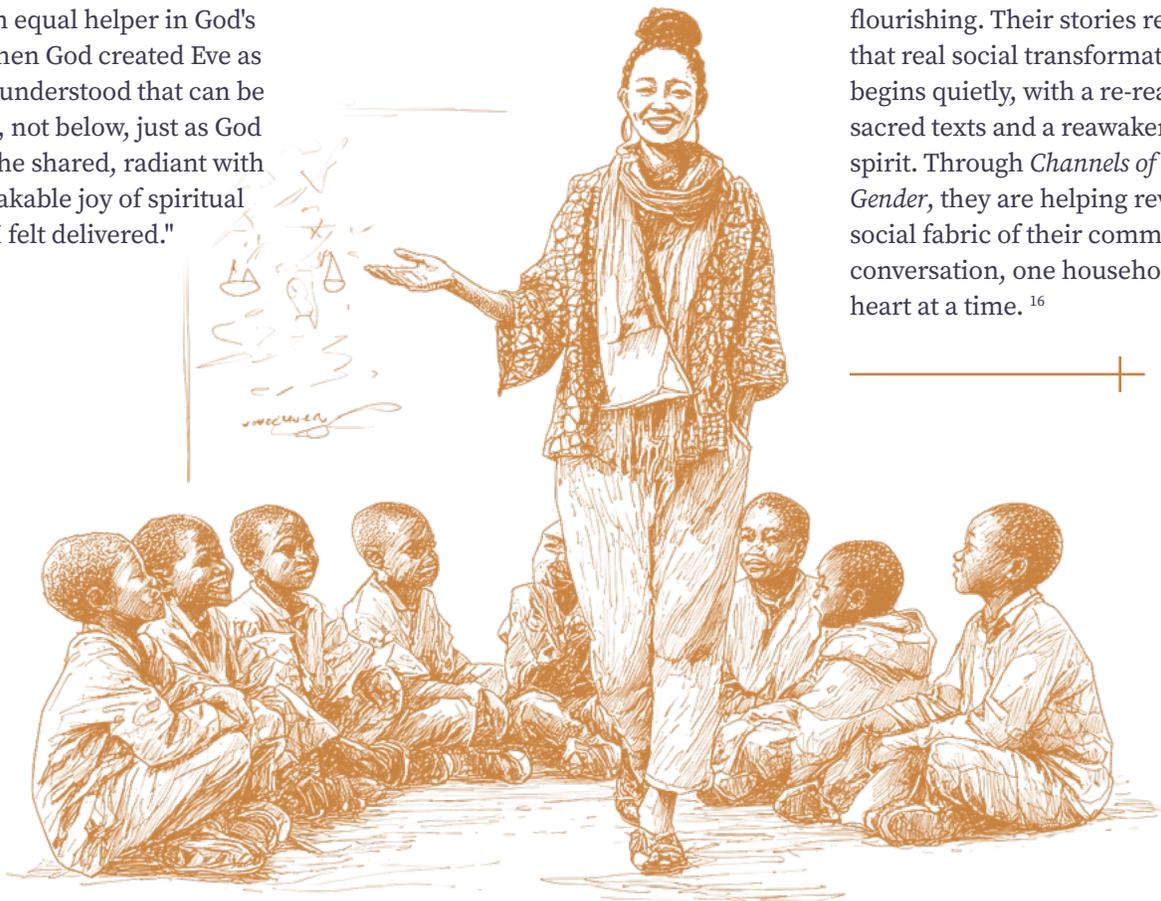
Respect, Not Power, is the Foundation of Love

Bongiwe Sibhayi, a Sunday School teacher from Umzimkulu, South Africa, grew up in a church that taught her to be silent and submissive. For years, the messages she received about what it meant to be a woman confined her spirit rather than freeing it. Everything changed when she attended World Vision's *Channels of Hope for Gender* (COHG) training. For the first time, she saw in Scripture a truth that had long been hidden: that women were created equal to men, bearing the same divine image and calling. Reflecting on the Genesis story, Bongiwe realized that Eve was not made lesser, but as a true partner—an equal helper in God's design. "When God created Eve as a 'helper,' I understood that can be above man, not below, just as God helps us," she shared, radiant with the unmistakable joy of spiritual freedom. "I felt delivered."

In her Sunday School classroom, Bongiwe began teaching girls and boys that all people are equal in dignity and responsibility. Where boys once ordered girls to clean their desks and blackboards, today they share the work together. "The love of God makes people equal in value and authority," she teaches. Her witness extends beyond the church walls, challenging norms that had gone unquestioned for generations.

Bongiwe's journey mirrors that of Senzo Sibayi, a young pastor from the same village, who also found his assumptions about gender dismantled through COHG. Wrestling with faith and culture, Senzo now teaches that violence and domination are not inevitable but are products of harmful beliefs. "Culture can change," he tells the men in his congregation. "Respect, not power, is the foundation of love."

Together, Bongiwe and Senzo are part of a movement rooted in patient, heart-level change—where Scripture is not weaponized to uphold inequality, but reclaimed to inspire mutual flourishing. Their stories remind us that real social transformation often begins quietly, with a re-reading of sacred texts and a reawakening of the spirit. Through *Channels of Hope for Gender*, they are helping reweave the social fabric of their community—one conversation, one household, one heart at a time.¹⁶



¹⁶ Misolo, D., & Nielsen Jones, E. (2021). *The Girl Child and Her Long Walk to Freedom*.



Why This Works

Sacred texts are deeply trusted sources of authority and meaning, and as such, are proper sources of appeal for social reform.

When participants apply critical reflection on texts that have been traditionally used to justify gender inequality, they begin to see that **power imbalances are not divinely mandated but are, rather, the result of human interpretation.**

Those who have long accepted male superiority as divinely mandated begin to question these assumptions, **shifting not only theological understandings but household and community behaviors.**

The authority of sacred texts **can then be used to uphold love, equality, and protection for all.**

Key Takeaways

It's important to **identify a trusted messenger** (usually a respected peer, faith leader, or pastor) to guide participants through reexamination of the texts, giving them a sense of permission to explore as well.

For Christians, one of the most sacred texts to engage is the Creation narrative, emphasizing that both men and women were created in God's image and entrusted with equal responsibility.

Training is a crucial part of this process. Facilitators are trained to ask questions that spark critical reflection rather than imposing new interpretations from the outside. **It's about teaching people how to think, not what to think.**

Some faith actors hold extreme views and will be resistant to change. **This approach focuses on faith and community leaders who are open-minded and willing to wrestle with these complex issues.**

BIBLICAL TEXT—GENESIS 1:27	PATRIARCHAL INTERPRETATION	GENDER-TRANSFORMED INTERPRETATION
<i>So God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.</i>	God creates humankind "male and female," but is often overshadowed by the second narrative (Genesis 2), where the woman is created after the man from his rib, which suggests man is superior to woman.	God creates both man and woman at the same time, in the same act, and blesses them with the same purpose: to reflect the image of God and to steward Creation together. Both are bearers of the divine image and entrusted with equal authority and responsibility.

"We ask people to look critically at what it means when the Bible says to love your wife. Loving does not mean creating suffering; it does not mean violence. It means caring for one another."

—Pastor Adonis Daniel, *Rethinking Power*, Beyond Borders, Haiti



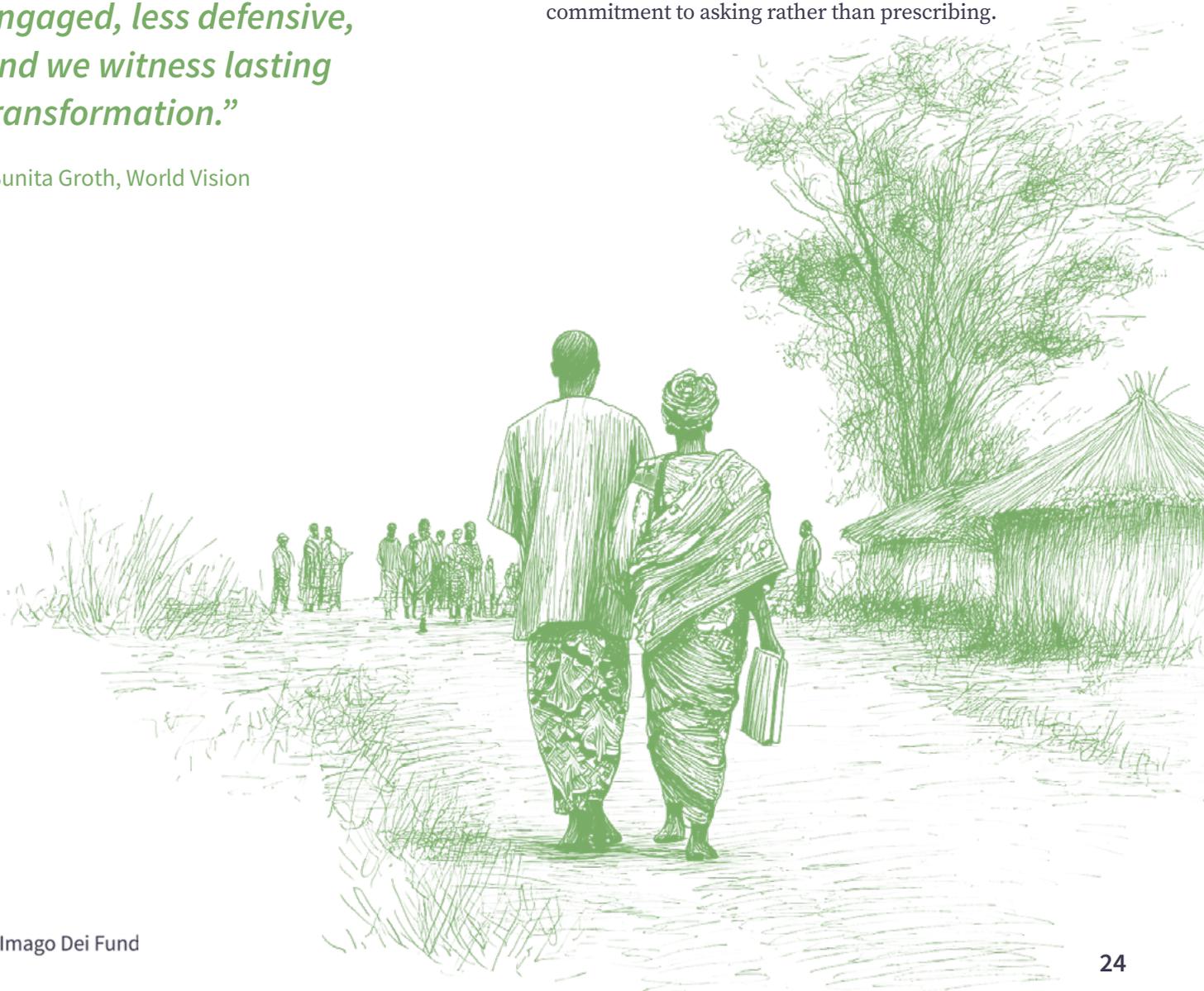
Creating Safe Spaces for Community Dialogue

“When we offer a safe, non-judgmental space where faith leaders feel heard and not forced into one way of thinking, they become more engaged, less defensive, and we witness lasting transformation.”

—Sunita Groth, World Vision

Approach

Structured community dialogues have emerged as one of the most effective tools for shifting gender norms—bridging the space between internal reflection and collective exploration. In the most effective interventions, these dialogues are crafted with great care—balancing vulnerability and rigor, story and Scripture, silence and speech. They are intentionally built around creating safe spaces for engagement, participatory learning, and a commitment to asking rather than prescribing.





Spotlight: Journeying Together Toward Change

Tearfund, through its *Transforming Masculinities* model, centers its approach on personal and communal transformation through structured dialogue. At the heart of the model are two key actors: faith leaders and gender champions. Together, they form the core of a community's support system for change.

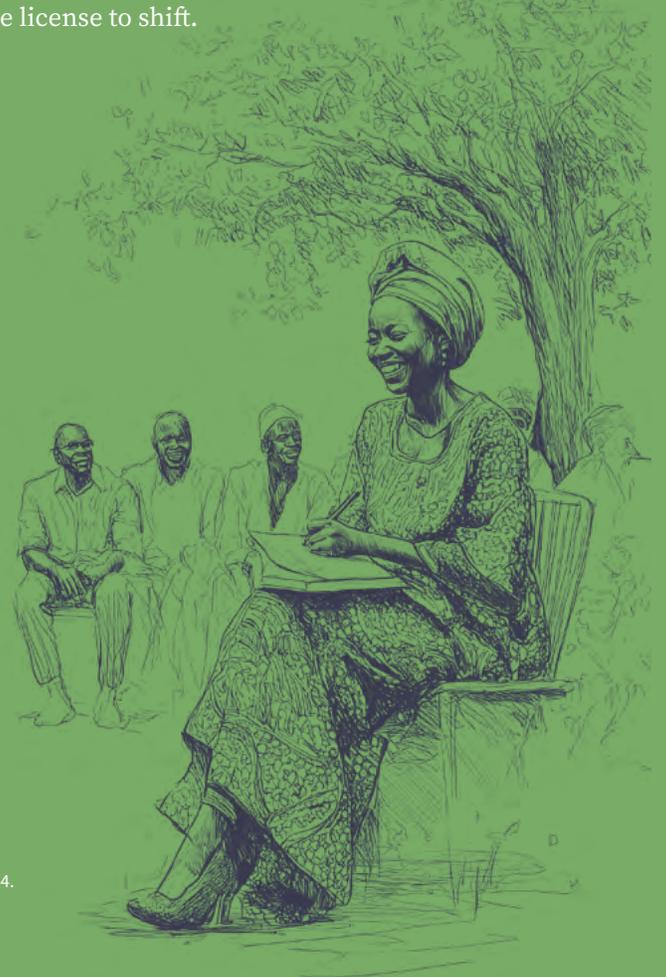
After completing an initial training, facilitators lead a series of small-group dialogues with men and women in their communities. These sessions unfold over several weeks, often beginning in single-sex spaces to foster vulnerability and honest, open reflection. Participants explore topics like identity, leadership, power, and partnership—drawing on Scripture, shared stories, and personal experience. In the final session, men's and women's groups come together for collective reflection, creating space for mutual recognition and the early steps of cultural change.

Importantly, facilitators are not introduced as experts but as companions. Their role is to journey alongside others, to hold space for honest questions, and to model the values they hope to see reflected more broadly.

"Our role is to journey with people. To ask questions that open new ways of seeing, not to prescribe behaviors," explained one *Transforming Masculinities* facilitator.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, after two years of community dialogues, participants reported significant declines in the acceptance of gender-based violence. Men who once believed in the right

to dominate their households began to speak about partnership and respect. Survivors of violence found greater community support and were less likely to face stigma. The transformation extended beyond private belief—it reshaped daily life, from the way couples made decisions to how congregations spoke about dignity and power. In fact, the program saw a **60% reduction in intimate partner violence**—a striking behavioral shift that outpaced changes in underlying beliefs. While attitudes affirming that “men and women are created as equals” shifted by only about 20%, community expectations had already begun to redefine what was acceptable. This gap between belief and behavior is not a failure but a sign of progress: social norms can often shift before individual convictions catch up.¹⁷ When individuals are accompanied with care, and when communities have a shared space to imagine something new, long-held beliefs and behaviors have license to shift.



¹⁷ Interview with Prabu Deepan, co-creator of *Transforming Masculinities* model at Tearfund, October 2024.



Balancing Family Power Dynamics Through Faithful Study

In a rural community in Zimbabwe, a man named Imam Balinda was known not for his kindness, but for the heavy-handed way he treated his wives. When *SASA! Faith* launched its community dialogues there, inviting respected men and women into a slow, scripture-centered conversation about power, relationships, and dignity, Imam Balinda was included. Some questioned the wisdom of this choice. His reputation made him an unlikely candidate for change. But the approach was not one of confrontation. It was one of accompaniment—of making space for reflection rather than prescribing outcomes.

Over time, something began to shift. Through careful facilitation, the dialogues allowed him not only to hear new ideas but to wrestle with them in the company of others. In these conversations, questions became doorways: What does true leadership look like? How does Allah call us to use our power? What kind of legacy do we leave in our homes? Imam Balinda found himself not accused, but invited—to rethink, to repent, to reimagine his role as a husband, a father, and a leader.

The change, when it came, was unmistakable. His wives, once silent and weary, began to speak of small miracles: a husband who helped with household tasks, who listened without anger, who treated them with respect. Their neighbors noticed, too. The same man who had once embodied the old, harmful norms now stood as living evidence that change was possible, even for those most deeply shaped by patriarchal systems.

Imam Balinda did not stop there. He became one of the most committed community activists in *SASA! Faith's* network, using his own journey as a testimony to others. In him, the community could see that transformation was not about losing status or dignity—it was about reclaiming the deeper call to mutuality, compassion, and shared power.

Through structured dialogue and careful accompaniment, change had taken root not in spite of his past, but through the long, courageous work of facing it—and choosing, day by day, to walk a different path.¹⁸



¹⁸ LeRoux, E. (2022). *There is a forest of stories!: Learning from SASA! Faith Implementation in Six Countries*. Raising Voices & Trócaire.





Common Model for Community Dialogues & Discussions

- Facilitators:** Faith leaders, trained local facilitators, and community champions (including both men and women).
- Participants:** Men, women, faith communities, and broader community members.
- Duration:** Typically ranges from a one-day intensive workshop (for initial engagement) to multi-week dialogue series (6 weeks or more), depending on the model. Some models use informal gathering opportunities in the faith community over the span of three years.
- Dialogue Format:** Highly participatory small group discussions.
- Key Themes:** Topics such as gender roles and norms, power dynamics, SGBV prevention, faith and equality, disability inclusion, and mutual respect.
- Integration of Faith:** Faith texts (Bible, Qur'an) used as central reference points for exploring gender equality and human dignity; reinterpretation of patriarchal passages.
- Expected Outcomes:** Personal transformation, shifts in community gender norms, enhanced support for marginalized groups, leadership in promoting gender justice.

WOMEN	TIME	MEN
All ready done the chores shamba	0800 HRS 0900 HRS 1000 HRS	Talking tea Dancing/singing news/shamba
Garda/veges/Firawous Feeding water etc	1000 HRS 1100 HRS	Relaxing at home Waiting for lunch
COOKING/preparing Lunch	1200 HRS	
	1300 HRS	Watching listening to news/sermon to the radio
Setting the table for Lunch & serving	1400 HRS	Strolling
Washing dishes & preparing to go for fellowship/ church	1500 HRS	Some Herding Some N/A
Chama/Sakeni	1600 HRS	Coming back from field
Picking kids from school	1700 HRS	Making porridge
Serving porridge	1800 HRS	Relaxing
Preparing supper	1900 HRS	Supper/preparing for work
Supper leading to kuku praying together	2000 HRS	NEWS
Hon Enrek	2100 HRS	BED
Washing dishes/ preparing B/Fast/Bathing	2200 HRS 2300 HRS	

Example Exercise on Women & Men's Roles (IFAGE "What Men and Women Do")



Why This Works

Sustainable change happens when **communities collectively reflect on and reshape their social structures**, behaviors, and attitudes around power dynamics within relationships, families, and religious settings.

Through small-group and community-wide dialogues, **expertly trained facilitators create the conditions for communities to realize that most people, in fact, do not expect them to adhere to harmful social norms** and that there is collective desire for change.

Role-playing exercises and real-life scenarios help participants understand the harm in their own communities, but also help them visualize alternative gender norms and healthy relationships.

A collective journey affirms to participants that they are not alone in this process and that they do not have to be the first or only one to change.

Over time, these conversations extend beyond discussion groups into everyday life—within households, congregations, and workplaces.

Key Takeaways

A crucial element of these discussions is the **careful selection of leaders and activists within the community who are willing to champion change**.

Effective training of facilitators is a slow and rigorous process that requires individual introspection and transformation and should not be done in a mass training setting.

Facilitators are trained to navigate difficult conversations with sensitivity, acknowledging deeply held religious beliefs while encouraging self examination.

Most approaches require **several consecutive days of carefully structured dialogues** to build trust and gradual transformation.

Intentional inclusion of women including spouses, church staff members, female clergy members and youth ensures more balanced conversations.

Single-sex dialogues initially build confidence, then **mixed groups foster deeper transformation**.



Community Mobilization for Action

"The (SASA! Faith) community-based activists and leaders become protagonists in the change process in their own communities."

—Sara Siebert, Beyond Borders

Approach

For change to take root and spread, it must be reinforced by local champions—trusted community members who are early adopters, challenging harmful behaviors, facilitating and sustaining safe spaces for dialogue, and modeling new norms in everyday life. Most often, these “champions” are leaders who have gone through their own personal transformation and have deep commitments to shifting harmful norms in their homes, congregations, and communities. Of all of the components examined in this report, the expression of the gender champions across the six interventions were the most varied—even across the geographies within each of the interventions—reflecting the particular needs and opportunities within each context. In the strongest interventions, this phase is marked by locally owned advocacy, ongoing leadership, and the integration of gender justice into religious and civic institutions. These are not parallel efforts to faith life but rather expressions of it. It is a community refusing to condone child marriage, even when justified by tradition. In this phase, personal change becomes a public witness.





Spotlight: This Is Who We Are Becoming

World Vision's *Channels of Hope for Gender* model trains Community Hope Action Teams (CHATs)—groups of local volunteers who lead grassroots efforts to prevent gender-based violence, support survivors, and advocate for child protection. These small, volunteer-led teams develop tailored strategies to address harmful practices in their own communities—whether it's child marriage, domestic violence, or lack of support for survivors.

CHATs go beyond raising awareness by organizing public forums, influencing local policy, establishing survivor referral networks, and partnering with health, legal, and educational institutions. In Uganda, one CHAT worked with schools and religious institutions to ensure girls who left school due to pregnancy could return. In other settings, they led campaigns

encouraging men to take on caregiving roles, normalizing what was once ridiculed. They also saw child marriage rates drop as faith leaders and CHATs began intervening in early marriage cases.

What makes CHATs powerful is not only their reach, but their roots. Because they are locally embedded and spiritually trusted, they shift not just behaviors but expectations. Their work signals to the broader community: This is what we now believe. This is who we are becoming.

"Faith leaders recognized...[we] are actually fulfilling our duties as pastors."

—Community Hope Action Team (CHAT) member





Why This Works

Gender champions are rooted and respected in their communities and thus play a key role in ensuring sustainable, community-led action on gender equality and gender-based violence.

Equipping transformed local faith and lay leaders ensures that **change continues beyond the lifespan of a formal program.**

Peer-to-peer influence is one of the **strongest drivers of social norm shifts.**

Once there exists a critical mass of people who are role-modeling **new behaviors that affirm and protect gender equality, social norms are likely to change.**

Key Takeaways

While faith leaders have essential roles to play in identifying and supporting gender champions, **broad engagement including community activists, lay leaders, and others who are already respected within their communities increases the likelihood of sustainable norm shifts.**

Intentional inclusion of survivors in challenging harmful beliefs within their own communities can be empowering for them.



Inclusive Community Transformation through Faith Leaders

Six-year-old Zainabu did not walk or communicate when we first met her. Born with severe jaundice that led to cerebral palsy, she faced deep stigma in her rural Kenyan village. Her parents believed her disability was the result of a curse and withdrew from her, leaving her care to her grandmother, who had limited resources to meet her needs. In a community where most families live on less than a dollar a day, Zainabu faced “double discrimination”: excluded for being female and for having a disability, making her that much more vulnerable to neglect, abuse, and isolation.

Change began when Kupenda for the Children invited local pastors, traditional healers, and government officials to a disability advocacy workshop. Instead of telling participants their beliefs were wrong, facilitators asked them to reflect on their own lives: did they, or someone they loved, live with a disability? From that personal connection, harmful myths—that disability is a curse from God, punishment for sin, or shame to be hidden—began to loosen their grip. The ripple effects were immediate. Community leaders identified 76 families impacted by disabilities, most of whom were stigmatized and lacked access to education or medical support. They brought these families together for a workshop with Kupenda to share their challenges, learn the causes of disabilities, and understand their legal rights. Although the families were motivated to enroll their children in accessible education, they soon discovered that the appropriate schools were too far away and already full.

In response, parents and leaders began regularly meeting and organizing their own advocacy efforts. Within months, the local government donated ten acres of land for a new school with physical therapy services and special education, and they committed to funding the teachers’ salaries. What began as a conversation in a workshop had grown into community action that transformed access to education, support, and inclusion for children like Zainabu.

Most importantly, her grandmother has helped shift Zainabu’s parents’ perspective, explaining their daughter’s value and the true causes of her disability. They now help with her transportation to school and visit frequently.

"I thank [Kupenda] for creating awareness on the rights of children with disabilities. This has transformed our beliefs, and more children with disabilities are being enrolled in schools, taken to hospitals, and valued by their communities. My child has benefitted with therapy services, education, and assistive devices... I am so grateful."

When local champions—trusted faith and traditional leaders, parents, and neighbors—experience their own transformation, they carry that change outward. Their community mobilization helps girls like Zainabu to access health and education, experience love and inclusion, and reduce their vulnerability to violence and abuse.



Change is a Journey

Perhaps the most consistent theme across all case studies: **this work takes time**. Faith-centered change unfolds through relationships, repetition, and reflection—sermon by sermon, small group by small group, community dialogue by community dialogue. In Uganda, one pastor’s decision to walk hand-in-hand with his wife—a simple gesture—signaled a profound break from norms of male dominance. In Kenya, IFAGE’s men’s dialogue groups meet monthly to discuss issues like femicide, land rights, and accountability. These regular gatherings create space for belief to evolve—and for behavior to follow. None of these interventions were approached as a one-off. Reinforcement and diffusion of messaging is key. In programs like *SASA! Faith and Channels of Hope for Gender*, transformation happens over years, not months. It requires presence, accompaniment, and continued theological engagement. Timelines must account for complex, multi-layered journeys.



“It is my strong belief that the dream of a world free from sexual and gender-based violence will remain nothing more than a wishful desire until meaningful structures of engagement and empowerment of faith leaders are put in place. We need to pour our energy into partnership and collaboration between religious leaders, governments, and international development partners and corporations. We need to cultivate solid and wise approaches and programs targeting faith leaders to preach on the truth about patriarchy and its deadly consequences. We need all of this and more in order to experience real transformation, human progress, and development.”

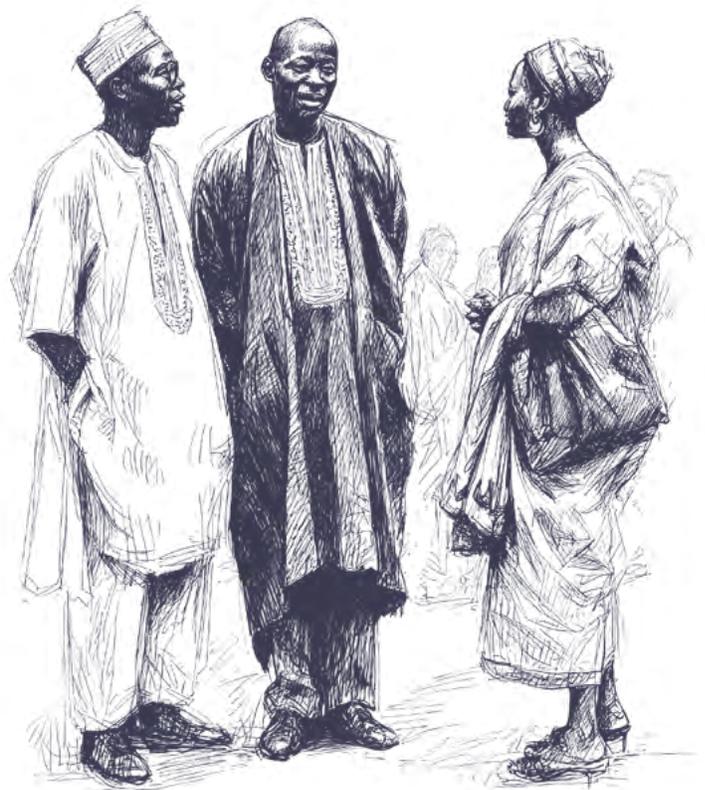
—Emily Nielsen Jones, *Imago Dei Fund* and Rev. Dominic Misolo, *Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment, The Girl Child and Her Long Walk to Freedom* (2021).

Recommendations for Funders

Gender equality is both a fundamental human right and a precursor for human flourishing, yet women and girls worldwide are too often denied equal treatment and opportunities.

Faith-centered approaches play a vital role in transforming harmful social norms and shifting the equation for women and girls. Without addressing the beliefs and values that underpin behavior, even the most well-designed policies and programs struggle to create enduring change.

We have seen how engaging faith leaders and communities can open powerful pathways for change across geographies and faith traditions. On the following page are four essential orientations for funders ready to deepen their engagement in this space, grounded in what works and what communities need.



Embrace faith as a force for justice

Across the cases in this report, success came when funders supported efforts that worked with and through faith—not around it. They valued theological engagement, trusted local leaders, and allowed faith-based frameworks to shape both process and outcomes.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

Support partners who center meaningful engagement of faith leaders as part of shifting harmful social norms

Build relationships with faith-based organizations that pair lived values with strong accountability and rights-based safeguards

Encourage learning exchanges between secular and religious actors to deepen mutual understanding and strengthen shared commitment to justice

Be flexible and commit for the long haul

Funders who made the most significant and lasting contributions understood the importance of the necessary time and trust that lead to the gradual transformation of social norms. They made space for continuous learning and long-term partnerships with patient expectations.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

Provide multi-year funding that reflects the iterative nature of belief and behavior change and the time required for new norms to take root and endure

Offer flexible funding that respects contextual differences and welcomes continuous learning and adaptation of plans and budgets

Support partners in defining realistic, context-sensitive timelines and outcomes, recognizing incremental shifts in leaders as meaningful progress—even before changes in community norms become visible

Back local leaders and organizations

Funders who fostered meaningful and lasting change supported trusted community sources who understood the social dynamics, language, and relationships needed to shift gender equality norms. The donors' role as outsiders was not to direct the work, but to support local leaders and organizations in doing it.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

Work with partners who prioritize local leadership and sustainable, community-driven solutions

Engage local leaders and institutions from the outset to build trust, ownership, and inclusive program design

Invest in the capacity of faith and community champions to lead, adapt, and sustain progress amid resistance and shifting community dynamics

Strengthen the ecosystem

Organizations working in this space often lack access to capacity development, evaluation tools, and peer learning opportunities that more established NGOs take for granted. The most impactful funders invested beyond the programs and into the ecosystem that allowed faith-centered actors to grow, share their impact, and sustain their efforts over time.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

Fund leadership development, mentorship, and training for faith-aligned gender advocates

Support monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems tailored to faith-based contexts

Invest in spaces for shared learning and collaboration across religions, denominations, and geographies

Good Faith Insights

What do we mean by faith-centered norms change?

Faith-centered norms change refers to efforts that work with, through, or within faith leaders and communities to shift harmful social norms, especially those that limit the dignity, agency, or rights of women and girls. Faith-centered approaches are not about proselytization. They're about **harnessing the moral authority and community trust that faith leaders hold** to spark reflection, support behavior change, and build more just and equitable systems from the inside out.

What enables effective faith-centered partnerships?

Effective partnerships are built on values-based language rooted in the community's own theological frameworks—terms like *mutuality, honor, justice, and equal worth in God's image*. They require mutual learning, cultural humility, and a willingness to accept that shared values may be expressed in different terms.

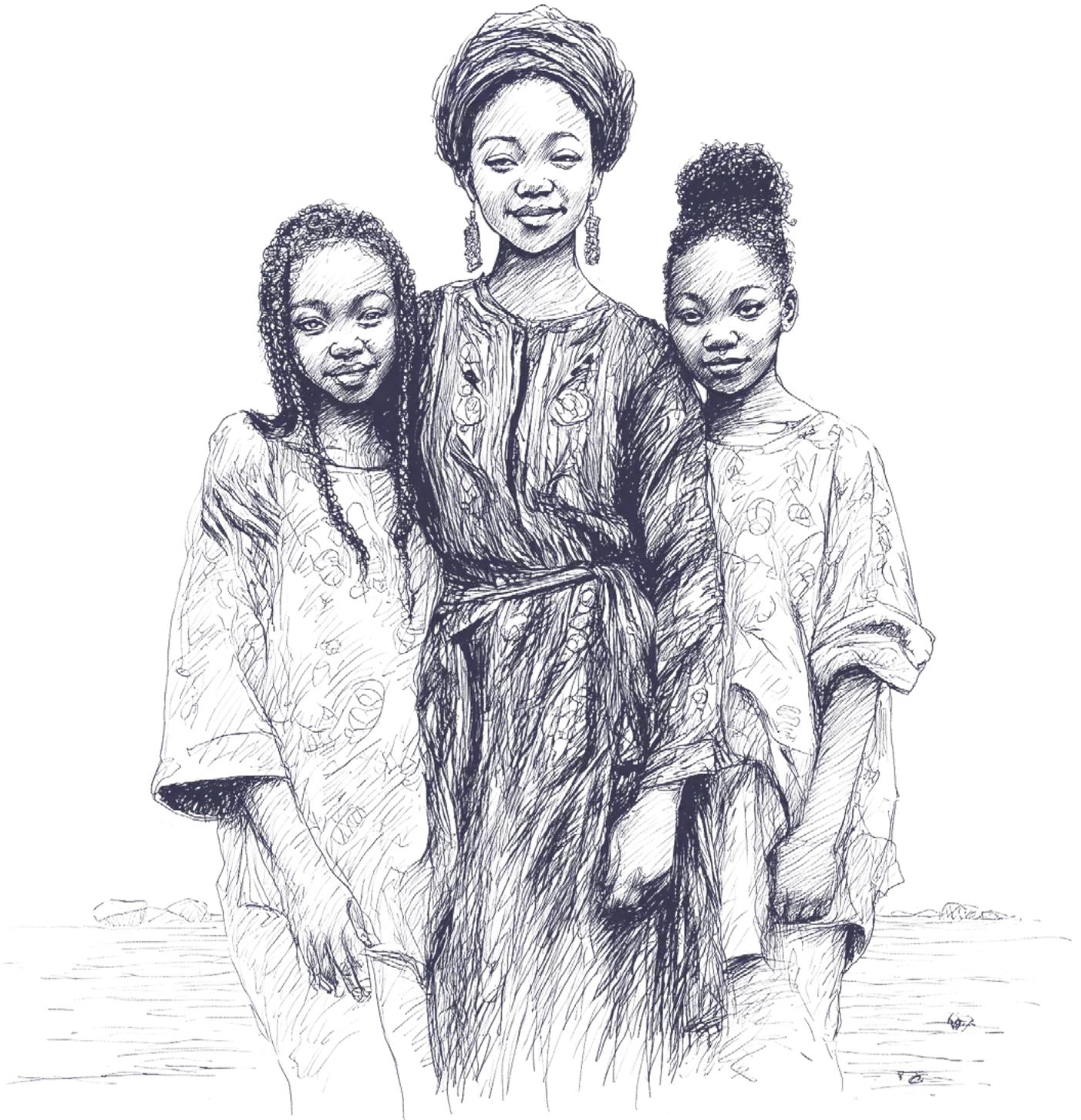
When these principles are neglected, challenges quickly emerge. Lack of careful attention to language and terminology can trigger resistance, as both faith actors and those working on gender equality from a secular perspective may lack trust in each other. Terms like *patriarchy, gender, or feminism* can carry ideological weight that associates negatively with foreign influence, moral decline, or conflict with doctrine. Many faith leaders have only encountered “gender work” in adversarial contexts—seen as critique, not care—which has bred strong distrust within the faith community regarding gender equality. Meanwhile, secular funders may hold assumptions about faith-based organizations, viewing them as rigid or prone to proselytization.

Across the efforts reflected in this report, **the greatest outcomes came when individuals and communities were invited to reflect together on what they believe and what they value.** The most enduring transformations began when faith leaders reexamined their sacred commitments and when outside partners showed up not to direct, but to accompany. Equally critical to these outcomes was the posture of funders who took a good faith approach: partnering in ways that valued the sacred commitments of communities and invested in the time and trust required for lasting shifts to take root.



We believe that by investing in proven faith-centered approaches, funders have the opportunity to unlock one of the most powerful—and most underutilized—forces for advancing the dignity, agency, and rights of women and girls.





Beyond Borders

HAITI

Rethinking Power (including SASA! Together, Power to Girls and Safe and Capable)

Core Approach

Rethinking Power is a comprehensive, community-based violence prevention initiative grounded in the *SASA! methodology*, which was developed by Raising Voices and adapted for Haiti. It combines multiple strategies—faith-centered reflection, youth engagement, school-based change, and community mobilization—to shift the power dynamics that drive violence against women and girls (VAWG), with specific programming for adolescent girls and women and girls with disabilities.

What Makes This Distinctive

- *Power to Girls*: A girl-centered innovation that integrates community mobilization for norms change, girls' groups, school curricula, teacher training, peer engagement, and caregiver involvement.
- *Safe and Capable*: A pioneering complement to *SASA! Together* that explicitly centers the rights and safety of women and girls with disabilities.
- Developed and led in partnership with local Haitian actors, artists, and faith-based leaders—grounded in cultural fluency and theological reinterpretation.
- Strengthened during crisis: sustained implementation through political unrest, natural disasters, and COVID-19, when women and girls' vulnerability to violence typically spikes.



Key Impacts

- Rates of intimate partner violence were cut in half—from 23% to 12%—between baseline and endline.
- For girls aged 15-23, reported rates of physical/sexual violence dropped by nearly 40%.
- Girls reported significantly increased agency in decision-making, peer relationships, and speaking out against VAWG.
- Community norms shifted measurably toward greater support for gender equality and reduced acceptance of violence.

How Faith Was Central

Faith leaders, who hold deep trust and moral authority in Haitian communities, became public champions of girls' rights and inclusion—preaching against violence and supporting new norms through prayer, Scripture study, and pastoral counseling. In a thoughtful and phased approach, faith leaders are invited into activities and events to see and experience for themselves the benefits of the *Rethinking Power* program—often moving from skepticism to activism.

Further Reading

[Rethinking Power: Is it possible to prevent violence against women and girls and leave no one behind in difficult times?](#)

[Shifting Power and Reducing Violence in Haiti: Initial Results of an Impact Study of SASA! and Power to Girls in Southeast Haiti](#)

[Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls with Disabilities: An Evaluation of Safe and Capable in Haiti](#)

Institute for Faith and Gender Empowerment (IFAGE)

KENYA

Positive Masculinity & Biblical Equality

Core Approach

IFAGE trains and educates men, community leaders, and religious actors on *Positive Masculinity & Biblical Equality* in order to identify and prevent the root causes of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. Through intensive theological training, structured community dialogues, and sustained mentorship, IFAGE supports the transformation of beliefs and practices around masculinity, power, and gender roles—rooted in faith and responsive to cultural context.

What Makes This Distinctive

- Deep theological reflection is at the heart of the model—unpacking and reframing key Scriptures to support gender equality and mutual respect.
- The approach equips clergy and lay leaders across denominations, including Anglican, Pentecostal, and traditional faith communities.
- Monthly “Men’s Breakfast” groups serve as ongoing forums for male leaders to discuss privilege, caregiving, and partnership.
- Gender champions are also trained as para-social and para-legal workers, creating a faith-based, community-level GBV prevention network and support system for survivors.



Key Impacts

- 128 gender champions trained in 2023, who led *Biblical Equality* sessions reaching over 30 community groups.
- 112 men completed *Positive Masculinity* training; 6 new peer groups formed across dioceses.
- 352 GBV survivors were linked to care through IFAGE’s para-social/legal worker network across seven sub-counties.
- Faith leaders began preaching openly on gender equality and supporting women’s leadership within their churches.

How Faith Was Central

IFAGE’s work begins with Scripture—not to dismiss or override it, but to deepen its interpretation. Clergy are invited to re-examine texts like Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28 to affirm equality as a Biblical principle. Sermons, discipleship groups, and counseling are infused with new teachings that reject male dominance and promote shared power.

Further Reading

[2024 Annual Report](#)

Kupenda for the Children

KENYA

Disability-Inclusive Faith and Advocacy

Core Approach

Inspired by their Christian values, Kupenda for the Children uses faith and community-centered models to transform beliefs and practices surrounding children with disabilities, replacing stigma with dignity. This work is particularly life-changing for women and girls, who are disproportionately represented among families with disabilities and face double discrimination. Kupenda works by educating families and community leaders about disability, advocating for their rights, and providing resources and support. In their training of religious leaders, engaging community influencers, and empowering caregivers and youth, Kupenda for the Children helps communities recognize children with disabilities as valuable and loved by God, thereby increasing inclusion, access to services, and protection from harm.

What Makes This Distinctive

- Addresses the common mis-belief among Christian, Muslim and Traditional Healing leaders that disability is a spiritual curse and draws on stories and values from sacred texts alongside medical education to reduce stigma.
- Targets a previously neglected but highly vulnerable population—children with disabilities—who are at higher risk of violence and exclusion, and especially girls with disabilities and their mothers who are most vulnerable.
- Operates at the intersection of faith, health, and disability justice—training both faith leaders and health professionals.
- Scalable model: developed in Kenya and adapted by partners for implementation in Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Haiti, and the U.S.



Key Impacts

- Kupenda's disability training reversed negative beliefs about disability among 75% of pastor trainees and 50% of traditional healer trainees.
- Faith leaders became powerful advocates and 65% of participants took action to support children with disabilities in their communities.
- Increases in school attendance, access to health services, and referrals to government supports.
- Community violence and harmful traditional practices (e.g., abandonment, confinement) were significantly reduced.

How Faith Was Central

Kupenda's strategy prioritizes faith leaders because of their moral authority and central role in shaping cultural beliefs. Sacred texts are revisited through a lens of inclusion and love, emphasizing that disability is not a punishment but part of the diversity of God's creation. Leaders then disseminate these teachings in sermons, community gatherings, and one-on-one pastoral support while also serving as role models for inclusion, advocacy, and physical support.

Further Reading

[Changing Cultural Perception on Disability Through Empowerment of Families and Local Leaders](#)

[Women and Girls Impacted by Disabilities](#)

Raising Voices

ORIGINATED IN UGANDA, ADAPTED IN 25+ COUNTRIES

SASA! Faith

Core Approach

Raising Voices creates evidence-based violence prevention programs based in the everyday realities of communities and supports others to use those methodologies. *SASA! Faith* is an adaptation of the Raising Voices *SASA!* methodology, contextualized for faith communities in collaboration with Trócaire. It mobilizes religious leaders, congregations, and faith-based institutions to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG) by critically examining power, core values of one's faith, and gender roles.

What Makes This Distinctive

- Raising Voices is the example of a secular, women's rights organization adapting their prevention of VAWG methodologies for faith communities.
- The *SASA!* methodologies are adopted by implementing partners around the world, and Raising Voices provides the technical assistance along the way.
- Focus on benefits-based activism which emphasizes the positive benefits of non-violence rather than the negative emphasis on the consequences of violence and on gender power analysis which aims to achieve balanced power in relationships, communities, and institutions.
- Follows a phased approach—Start, Awareness, Support, and Action—to facilitate norm change from within, grounded in the moral and theological frameworks communities trust most.
- *SASA! Faith* involves the whole faith community rather than just the religious leader.



Key Impacts

- *SASA!* communities achieved a 52% reduction of women's risk of experiencing physical violence from their male partners at a community level with reduced tolerance for men's use of violence against women.
- In *SASA!* communities, 76% of women and men believed that physical violence against a partner is never acceptable, compared to only 26% in control communities.
- *SASA!*, and its adaptations *SASA! Faith* and *SASA! Together*, are often referred to as standard evidence-based methods to prevent violence against women.

How Faith Was Central

SASA! Faith mobilizes faith communities and inspires everyone to live the faith-based values of justice, peace, and dignity in their intimate partner relationships. Rather than setting faith aside, the intervention uses sacred texts to deepen understanding of power, accountability, and justice. Religious leaders and congregations are invited into a journey of reflection that aligns their spiritual values with social action. By changing how power is discussed in the places of worship, the model fosters transformation from the inside out.

Further Reading

[Learning from SASA! Faith Implementation in Six Countries](#)

[Is Violence Against Women Preventable?](#)

Tearfund

17 COUNTRIES, INCLUDING THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO (DRC), BURUNDI, NIGERIA, NEPAL, BRAZIL, AND BANGLADESH

Transforming Masculinities

Core Approach

Transforming Masculinities is a gender-transformative, faith-rooted methodology designed to prevent sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and to promote gender equality by shifting harmful gender norms and masculinities. Anchored in Scriptural reflection, the approach engages faith leaders and trained lay facilitators—known as gender champions—to lead structured dialogues that support critical reflection, personal transformation, and broader social norms change.

What Makes This Distinctive

- Grounded in sacred texts from both Christian and Muslim traditions, promoting interpretations that uphold equality and dignity.
- Gender champions lead single-sex and mixed community dialogues, fostering trust and accountability.
- Promotes accountable practices at all levels (participants, facilitators, church leadership and related staff).
- Designed to easily integrate into existing religious activities like marriage counseling and men's and women's small groups.
- Adapted for diverse contexts including humanitarian crisis, family planning, and peacebuilding interventions.



Key Impacts

- 57% decline in women's experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) and 80% reduction in non-partner sexual violence (NPSV).
- 66% decline in men's perpetration of past year IPV; including a reduction of violence in faith leaders' own families.
- 40% of IPV survivors sought assistance from faith leaders—an increase from 2%.
- Beliefs that man should have the final word in the household dropped from 90% to 63% among men themselves.

How Faith Was Central

Central to the model is meaningful engagement with faith leaders with their own beliefs and behaviors regarding gender equality and gender-based violence. This intervention examines key themes like understanding the causes of human suffering, gender and the Creation narrative, and Jesus as a role model by leveraging religious teaching and reflecting on sacred texts.

Further Reading

[Rethinking Relationships: Evidence Brief \(DRC\)](#)

[Case Study: Prevention Triad Analysis \(Prevention Collaborative, 2023\)](#)

[Violence Against Women and Girls: Does Faith Matter?](#)

[Transforming Masculinities Implementation Guide](#)

[Transforming Masculinities: Quick Guide \(Tearfund\)](#)

Channels of Hope for Gender

Core Approach

Channels of Hope for Gender is a participatory methodology that transforms faith leaders to positively influence entrenched sociocultural norms that lie at the root of gender inequality and violence against women and girls (VAWG). It is designed to move the heart by creating a safe space to discuss taboo issues, inform the mind by providing concise technical information, and equip the hands to champion social change. The approach is anchored by a three-day workshop bringing faith leaders together and is then followed by congregations or communities developing action plans for gender equality.

What Makes This Distinctive

- Works from deeply established networks, partnerships and relationships across local/national, inter/intra religious bodies, and across Christian denominations.
- Designed as an enabling model rather than a standalone project—complementing sector-specific programming—and integrated into existing faith structures and national strategies.
- Community Hope Action Teams (CHATs) position faith communities as development partners, including two years of accompaniment and support by World Vision to ensure sustainability.



Key Impacts

- Nearly a million faith leaders have been trained globally in *Channels of Hope* methodology, with measurable shifts in their attitudes toward gender roles, violence, and other harmful norms.
- Participating communities reported increased support for survivors and greater involvement of women in religious leadership.
- In Uganda, where 920 faith leaders were trained to incorporate prevention of GBV into their couples counseling for more than 7,000 couples, evidence suggests that the project contributed to a reduction of intimate partner violence by 13% and a reduction in frequency of violence by 27%.

How Faith Was Central

With the belief that the Bible has so much truth to offer around gender equality, *Channels of Hope for Gender* explicitly roots its change process in Scripture and by starting from a Biblical worldview. Participants are invited to re-visit the Creation Story in understanding what it means for men and women to be made in God's image, and with the stories of Jesus and looking at the examples of how Jesus treated women. This approach animates faith communities to live more authentically with actions of love for one another.

Further Reading

[Channels of Hope for Gender: Solomon Islands Evaluation](#)

[Channels of Hope for Gender: Uganda Case Study](#)

[Religious leaders can motivate men to cede power and reduce intimate partner violence: Experimental Evidence from Uganda](#)



Imago Dei Fund

contact@imagodeifund.org

PO Box 170025, Boston MA 02117

imagodeifund.org

