



## ENGAGING FAITH LEADERS

# We Will Speak Out

A global coalition of NGOs, churches and organizations who commit themselves to see the end of sexual violence across communities around the world.



**MenEngage Alliance**  
working with men and boys for gender equality

### CASE STUDY

### SUMMARY

We Will Speak Out (WWSO) is a global coalition of Christian-based NGOs, churches and organizations, supported by an alliance of technical partners and individuals – chief among them Tearfund, a MenEngage Alliance member - who together commit themselves to see the end of sexual violence across communities around the world.

WWSO has demonstrated significant promise as a model for engaging religious leaders, their faith communities and faith-based organizations in the work of reducing sexual violence, on the strength of a compelling commitment expressed in its founding document, the report *Silent No More*, and subsequent research which has outlined an effective pedagogy rooted in a nuanced understanding of gender norms and the transforming-masculinities approach to changing them. A challenge for the future will be enlisting support of increasing numbers of influential INGOs to WWSOs work, to expand its impact and strengthen its resource base.



Participants in the August 2016 consultation held by MenEngage Alliance and Tearfund, intended to generate greater understanding about faith-based approaches to transforming masculinities for gender justice.

“

We’re not here to strip away people’s faith. We’re seeking transformations from within. We approach faith leaders as community leaders, without judgement. We don’t say we’ve come to ‘dismantle patriarchy,’ but emphasize sharing and partnership, and working from within scriptural and specific cultural contexts. Prabu Deepan

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## DESCRIPTION

We Will Speak Out (WWSO) is a global coalition of Christian-based NGOs, churches and organizations, supported by an alliance of technical partners and individuals who together commit themselves to see the end of sexual violence across communities around the world. According to WWSO's mission statement, the coalition partnership 'works together to harness efforts to prevent and eliminate sexual violence by supporting faith groups to speak out against sexual violence, show strong and positive leadership and become a 'safe' place for people to go to.' Moreover, the coalition is committed to 'empowering women and girls, to transforming relationships between women and men, and to ensuring that the voices of survivors of sexual violence – women, girls, men and boys – are central to their work.'

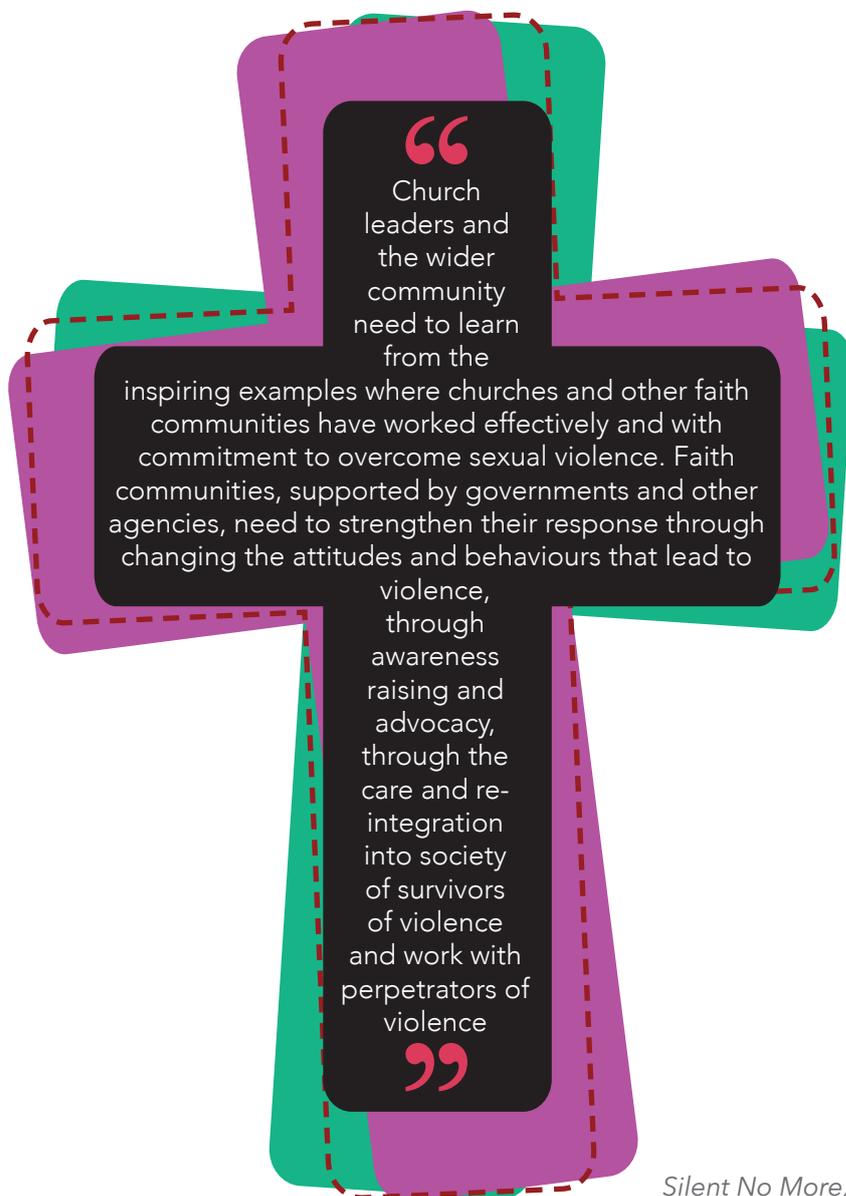
WWSO's current focus is ensuring that the church take action and that the 'Christian response is transformed.' The coalition concentrates on sexual violence specifically, while recognizing it is situated within a broader continuum of gender-based violence, and many WWSO members tackle sexual violence within that broader context. Of particular relevance to MenEngage Alliance is one of its stated outcome strategies: engaging 'men and boys in ending sexual violence, and demonstrating models for positive masculinities and femininities, and transformed gender relationships.'

Tweet from the Tearfund-MenEngage Alliance consultation, August 2, 2016.



**WeWillSpeakOut** @WeWillSpeakOut · Aug 2

Our partner @imaworldhealth hosting today's @MenEngage faith consultation in DC today! BIG shoutout to them!!



*Silent No More, 2011*

The work of the WWSO coalition is grounded in action taken at local and national levels by WWSO members and other partners, but its remit is global. Similarly, the WWSO coalition takes a catalytic approach to its work: stimulating action by its members and others, but not directly implementing programmes through the coalition.

The current members of WWSO are the Anglican Communion, BMS World Mission, CAFOD (official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales), Christian Aid, IMA World Health, Lambeth Palace, Lutheran World Federation, Restored, Tearfund, Us, World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, World Student Christian Federation, and World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). WWSO works in partnership with individual survivors and

representatives of survivor groups, as well as the Sexual Violence Research Initiative and UNAIDS, which serve in an advisory capacity.

While WWSO is an institutional organization, it welcomes the support of the hundreds of individuals who have signed a pledge to support the work of the coalition. As well, it is grounded in the voices of women, men and children who have survived sexual violence. Increasingly survivors are organizing in groups, but WWSO also takes steps to engage with individuals, including through the Tearfund Inspired Individuals network.

Members of the WWSO coalition meet every year at an annual forum where they take decisions on collective work and share information about the work of individual members. Between these full membership meetings a steering group meets to guide the work of WWSO. In addition, WWSO has established four working groups to share expertise and deliver activities according to the following headings: advocacy and leadership; safe spaces, engaging women and survivors; and transforming activities.

WWSO advisory partners support the work of the coalition through the provision of technical assistance, sharing information and participating in seminars, workshops and other activities. WWSO's work is supported by a small Secretariat, currently based in the SGBV Unit at Tearfund in the UK.

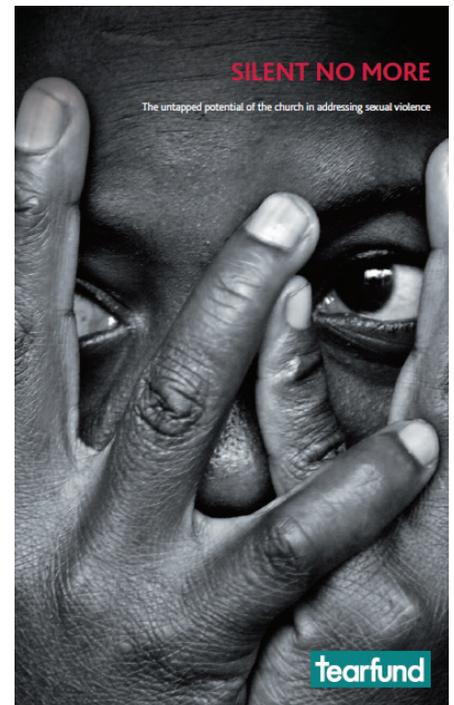
## HISTORY

The WWSO coalition was established in March 2011 with the launch of the Tearfund research report *Silent No More*, which focused on the untapped potential and challenges of the worldwide church to prevent and respond to sexual violence. The report was based on research commissioned originally in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.

The report's foreword, co-signed by then-Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and the archbishops of Burundi and the DR Congo, paints a self-described 'painfully honest' picture of the way churches have perpetuated a culture of silence around sexual violence and have largely failed to respond to the crisis and may even worsen its impact by reinforcing stigma and discrimination experienced by survivors.

Yet communities continue to look to their churches for leadership and care to transform this devastating situation. The study demonstrates how the largely untapped potential of churches can be released to help prevent sexual violence and reduce its impact.

“The silence of the churches on this issue is often the result of fear and their inability to envisage how to engage effectively. If churches could acknowledge their failure to provide the much-needed care, support, safety and leadership that communities are looking for this could be changed. Churches, however, cannot do it alone and need the support of aid agencies, governments and donors in order to walk this path. This is possible, but it needs to happen immediately. Until then, the church will continue to be an untapped resource in the response to sexual violence



The text of the report further outlines the approach required to address sexual violence:

“The silence of the churches on this issue is often the result of fear and their inability to envisage how to engage effectively. If churches could acknowledge their failure to provide the much-needed care, support, safety and leadership that communities are looking for this could be changed. Churches, however, cannot do it alone and need the support of aid agencies, governments and donors in order to walk this path. This is possible, but it needs to happen immediately. Until then, the church will continue to be an untapped resource in the response to sexual violence.

**The report also acknowledges the awkward dynamic between the church and NGOs working on sexual violence in individual communities:**

“The nature and influence of faith in such communities, and the work that the church is doing to reach out to those in poverty, is not often understood by aid agencies, governments or donors. Churches have too often failed to realise their mandate to care and to stand up for people on the margins – particularly those living with and affected by sexual violence. For this reason aid agencies, donors and governments too have failed to recognise the potential of the church to respond to this need.”

# CHANGING ATTITUDES AMONG RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The report identifies the empowerment of religious leaders as central to efforts to address sexual violence in faith communities: "Training the next generation of clergy at seminaries in how to better understand, speak out, train and counsel on the subject will begin to create the space and openness in which people feel they can talk about sexual violence.

By speaking out about the issue, clergy will make sexual violence a concern for their own congregations and the whole community. Clergy at all levels can speak out, at international, national and grassroots level within communities.

Changing attitudes to sexual violence, however, is "a long process, because it means changing the culture that allows rape to happen in the first place, and those attitudes that stigmatise the survivor rather than the perpetrator. Another key task is to challenge, change and provide alternatives to entrenched attitudes related to gender, specifically around the role of men and behaviour stereotypes."

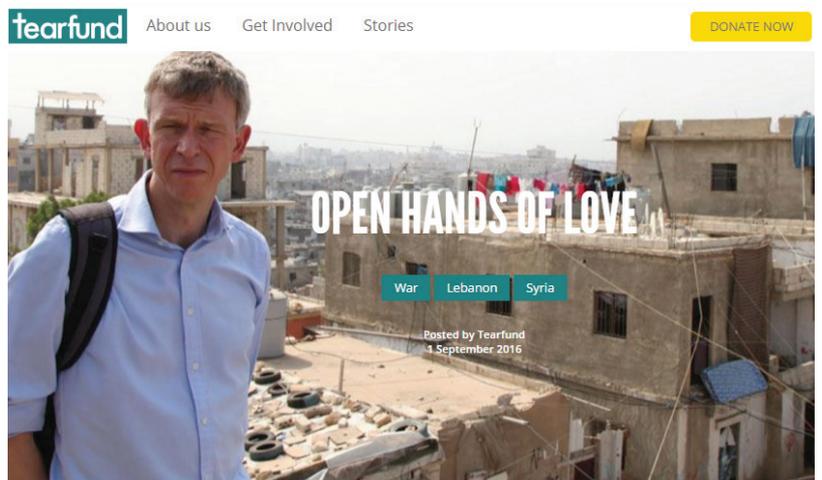
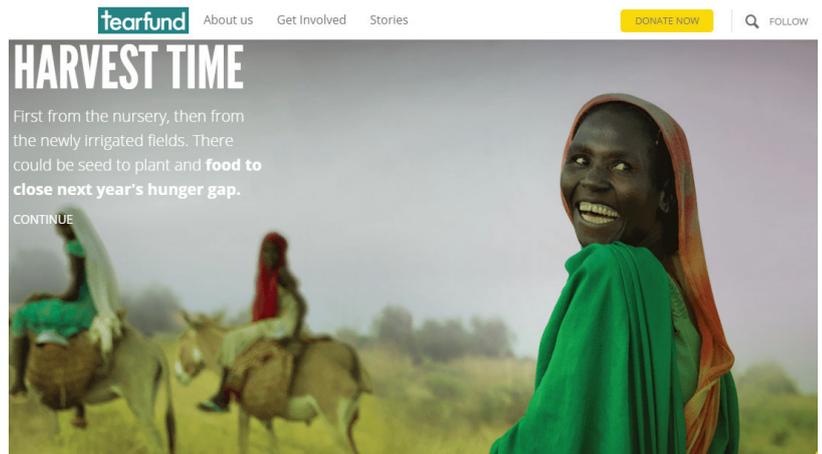
"Addressing the attitude of the clergy is vital in all of this. Most church leaders are influenced by the same cultural values as the rest of the community, including colluding with a taboo on discussing sexual violence and stigmatising its survivors. But clergy with a different set of values could become role models for their communities. They could promote care and support for survivors and lobby their governments for new laws about sexual violence, including pursuing justice with regard to the perpetrators."

**Prabu Deepan, Technical Lead for the Transforming Masculinities SGBV and Peacebuilding Team at Tearfund, described how this approach is implemented practically during a March 2016 interview:**

"Churches reinforce masculine norms in many ways, but we're not here to strip away people's faith. We're seeking transformations from within."

"We approach faith leaders as community leaders, without judgement. We don't say we've come to 'dismantle patriarchy,' but emphasize sharing and partnership, and working from within scriptural and specific cultural contexts. We start with local stories [of violence, from congregants], which are very powerful. We then ask, 'How did we get to inequality?' We encourage spiritual reflections, re-express the Christian message – and ask them how it can be applied. What we're really discussing is complicity, and what we're trying to encourage is a new way of thinking, to get men reflecting on how harmful toxic masculinities are, to themselves and others."

Stories from the Tearfund website, [www.tearfund.org](http://www.tearfund.org)



Through this approach we've seen many pastors transformed. It's a challenge to get them to see their roles differently and change comes slowly, no doubt, but the approach is to 1) show them alternative ways of behaving, and 2) the cultural relevance of doing so. We believe this is a methodologically sound approach, to see religious leaders as catalysts.

Prabu Deepan



Tearfund reinforced its transforming masculinities approach in its 2014 report *Masculinities, Faith and Ending Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in DRC Congo*: "If we are to uproot SGBV, it is imperative that we understand the broader dynamics of gender and triggers of violence. We need to examine male identities and roles, address their experiences of becoming a man, their experiences of trauma and violence within the family and their vulnerabilities in an evolving social environment. We must examine aspects of the harmful historical and traditional values, behaviours and knowledge that have influenced society and allowed SGBV to breed within communities. This will serve both genders and is a crucial component of intervention programming if we are to succeed in ending SGBV."

## OUTCOMES/ IMPACTS

Since its formation in 2011, WWSO has established a presence in the following countries, either through members' work in them or specific We Will Speak Out national coalitions: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (national chapter), Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, South Africa (national chapter), the United Kingdom and the United States.

WWSO successfully engaged with the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to host several high-level sessions at the "Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict" Summit in 2014, including a ministerial panel. It also helped organize an interfaith consultation hosted by the FCO in February 2016, bringing together 30 global faith leaders. MenEngage Alliance and Tearfund organized a two-day consultation in Washington D.C. in August 2016 designed to encourage a greater understanding of faith-based approaches to transforming masculinities on behalf of gender justice (see *Context III* below).

A separate We Will SpeakOut US was formed in the United States as a movement of diverse faith groups from across the US "joining together with other leaders for action and advocacy to end the silence around sexual and gender based violence (SGBV)." Its self-described mission is "to work at local, national and global levels to raise awareness, care for victims, encourage law enforcement and change our culture of tolerance and inaction".

From the We Will Speak Out website.

**WE WILL SPEAK OUT**  
WORKING TOGETHER TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE

HOME ABOUT PLEDGE COUNTRIES

Home » A story from the Solomon Islands

### A story from the Solomon Islands

A recent study found that two out of three women in the Solomon Islands have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner and that 36% of women knew of instances of family violence in the last week.

Channels of Hope for Gender is a faith based approach that explores what the Bible says about gender relations and challenges church and community leaders' understanding of violence.

Channels Of Hope; Addressing Gender-based Violence in...

**WE WILL SPEAK OUT**  
WORKING TOGETHER TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE

HOME ABOUT PLEDGE COUNTRIES

Home » Violeta's Story

### Violeta's Story

Violeta Ross, an anthropologist from Bolivia explains how she was raped and how this profoundly changed her life: how she contracted the HIV virus, how she contemplated suicide, and then how her family didn't reject or stigmatize her. This gave her the strength to carry on her life in a positive manner, campaigning to educate people, and provide support for people living with HIV

Inspirational women: Violeta Ross

I didn't realise two men were following me

**WE WILL SPEAK OUT**  
WORKING TOGETHER TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE

HOME ABOUT PLEDGE COUNTRIES STORIES RESOURCES LINKS

**1820 people have taken a pledge to end sexual violence**

Pledge Now

Prevalent in conflict, sexual violence is common within communities worldwide – but as an issue it remains largely hidden. Women, girls, men and boys are all at risk of sexual violence. As a coalition, We Will Speak Out are committed to working together to end sexual violence. [Read more](#)

Set aside the weapon of rape, say faiths by Church Times [Read more...](#)

**Key**

- Countries where coalition members actively work together
- Countries where coalition members work directly through partner organisations

USA United Kingdom Liberia Rwanda Democratic Republic of Congo Burundi Papua New Guinea South Africa

Twitter Stories News Resources

Deepan said that, in Africa, South Africa's activities are the most advanced, largely due to support from and commitment by organizations such as Sonke Gender Justice. Sonke has been working with Tearfund since 2013, collaborating on various in-country and regional work. Sonke and Tearfund, together with other South African partners, launched the WWSO South Africa chapter in 2014.

Sonke has also been involved in regional trainings and development of a toolkit for work with faith leaders, funded by UNFPA, and is currently working with Tearfund and other partners to further the agenda of WWSO South Africa with funding from Amplify Change. Tearfund and Sonke have further signed a memorandum of understanding for joint work in Africa's Great Lakes region. "Sonke has the know-how, and is adapting its approaches for faith communities, using Tearfund's "Transforming Masculinities" approach to engaging men and boys for gender justice," Deepan said.

### **The We Will Speak Out pledge has been signed by 1820 people globally:**



*We recognise our failure to respond adequately to sexual violence and our role in marginalising those who have experienced its devastating consequences. We recognise that responding to sexual violence is essential in our work, in our communities and in our world. We commit to addressing sexual violence in our contexts to the best of our ability, aiming to end it in all its forms, together.*

*And so...*

*We will speak out.*

*We will be silent no more.*

*We stand together in solidarity with the most vulnerable.*

*We dedicate ourselves to finding lasting solutions; mobilising leadership at all levels.*

*We will promote laws that model, protect and promote justice, enable healthy relationships and challenge those that don't.*

*We will work to ensure that these laws are enforced.*

*We commit to take action together to see all girls, women, boys and men freed from the threat and impact of sexual violence across the world.*

The WWSO website features stories compiled from survivors of sexual violence from Bolivia, DR Congo, India, Rwanda, and the Solomon Islands, as well as advocacy messages from prominent religious leaders. The site also makes available extensive Tearfund research on men and masculinities in Great Lakes countries of Burundi, DR Congo and Rwanda, as well as a study that explored the needs of survivors of sexual violence within the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

## **CHALLENGES**

Deepan, speaking on behalf of WWSO globally, said maintaining the coalition's momentum and energy, and mobilizing and engaging members around the year given their respective priorities, was an ongoing challenge. WWSO's working groups have not been active, he reported.

An informal search of websites of several leading international women's rights organizations, among them UN Women and YWCA, found no mention of WWSO, so outreach to potential partners could be improved.

## **CONCLUSION**

We Will Speak Out offers significant promise as a model for engaging religious leaders, their faith communities, and faith-based organizations in the work of reducing sexual violence.

The report *Silent No More* which spawned WWSO in particular provides a blueprint for religious leaders and should be consulted by organizations seeking to enlist faith communities in efforts to reduce sexual violence, for several reasons. On behalf of the leadership of one of the most influential and widespread Christian denominations in the world, the Anglican Communion, it expresses remorse, contrition and complicity for perpetuating a 'culture of silence' around sexual violence and have largely failed to respond to it – going even further to suggest that its faith community may have worsened the crisis by 'reinforcing stigma and discrimination experienced by survivors.' Having gone some distance toward establishing credibility for Anglican willingness to

address sexual violence, the report encourages dedicated grassroots efforts to do so by adopting a transforming masculinities approach.

WWSO members and partners, particularly Tearfund, have since augmented the report with substantial research on religious leaders' attitudes toward sexual violence – particularly in central Africa – in an effort to devise a pedagogical approach to enlisting leaders in violence prevention efforts. That pedagogy is grounded in local contexts and a nuanced understanding of both how gender norms are constructed and how religious texts and principles can be used constructively to bring about transformation of attitudes and behaviors. At the local level, results to date have been encouraging.

At international and global levels, WWSO has convened important consultations between religious leaders and reached out to NGOs, also with some success, but always with an eye to the often awkward dynamic that is the alignment of two parties – religious leaders and FBOS on one hand, and rights-based NGOs on the other – that have traditionally viewed each other with no small degree of suspicion. Those consultations (as well as ones convened by Sonke Gender Justice in 2015 and MenEngage Alliance and Tearfund in 2016) have demonstrated the benefits of dialogue between the two parties and have begun to sketch the outline of a joint agenda around such principles as strengthening the evidence base for FBOs, finding common language and framing for faith-based work, and strengthening secular understanding of faith institutions. Virtually all participants (and the studies they cite) argue for the need to outfit religious leaders with research and resources to undertake anti-violence work effectively, and believe firmly that religious leaders are an essential group to enlist in community efforts, given their widespread influence, particularly in the communication of localized values and norms.

WWSO has faced challenges typical of those faced by modestly-financed international networks – ensuring members' ongoing commitment chief among them – and will do well to branch

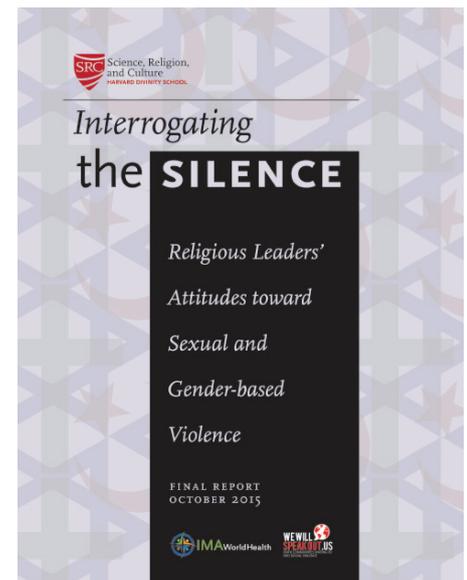
out beyond its focus on largely Christian leaders and communities. One of its signal challenges will be to mobilize the support of large INGOs whose resource capital is commensurate with the religious capital WWSO has already marshaled among faith leaders.

## CONTEXT: RELIGIOUS LEADERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL AND GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE

We Will Speak Out US helped to bring greater clarity to religious leaders' understanding of SGBV by supporting a 2014-2015 study of the issue by Harvard Divinity School. And while the study focused on religious leaders in the US city of Boston, predominantly Protestant Christian, it observed sufficient differentiation within responses to be instructive for other faith groups in other settings:

Of the 1000 Protestant pastors surveyed, an overwhelming majority (74%) underestimated the level of sexual and domestic violence experienced within their congregations, while only 56%, or just over half, were adequately familiar with local resources that specifically address sexual and domestic violence. And though 81% of pastors said they would take appropriate action to reduce sexual and domestic violence if they had the training and resources to do so, [the report] generated from this research highlights—at best—a significant blind spot within our churches in recognizing, responding to, and preventing sexual and gender-based violence

**The resulting report, *Interrogating the Silence*, said the study's results were 'astounding.'**



One of the signal contributions of the study is its positioning of religious leaders' response to SGBV firmly within the lived reality of their congregations – and all the challenges and nuances, and senses of denial and omission that come with it. For example, many respondents tended to view domestic violence as a 'sudden, unexpected, and spontaneous act,' which betrayed a desire to understand why these events take place, all while maintaining the religious leader's commitment to the spiritual and material welfare of all congregants—including the perpetrators of these acts:

"Religious leaders perceived their role to be one directed towards all their congregants, including perpetrators. By focusing on the spontaneity and unexpectedness of acts of violence, religious leaders intended to protect their congregants from being deemed unsalvageable."

Yet such an approach has a downside, the report stated: "it may also explain the reluctance of many victims and survivors to rely on the help of religious leaders in their communities."

Consequently, 'most, if not all, religious leaders interviewed in this study and included in other research on the topic had little if any awareness of sociological and ethnographic research on SGBV and on the reasons and mechanisms behind these occurrences...The commitment

of religious leaders to the welfare of all members of their community increases their need for deeper consideration of the underlying mechanisms behind these forms of violence. Such understanding would permit them to respond more actively and to more correctly recognize such situations without betraying what they perceive as their commitment to their congregants.'

The report noted that religious leaders seemed aware of the inadequacy of their training on SGBV and in the resources available to them to deal with it. "For both religious leaders and their congregants, the absence of specific procedures or systematized ways of dealing with these incidents constituted a significant deficiency. Predetermined procedures would allow leaders and congregants alike to engage with such incidents more effectively and to better serve victims and survivors. The procedures would include how to provide immediate help, how to seek professional and more specialized help, and how to intervene to prevent further abuse, among other matters."

The complexities facing religious leaders in confronting SGBV had in some cases resulted in a kind of paralysis, the report concluded:

"Chief among these concerns is how they can lead conversations about SGBV in their communities without suggesting, for instance, that their community is plagued with these incidents at considerably high rates. They also struggled with their commitment to the cohesion of their communities, worrying that discussion of these incidents would threaten such communal integrity." And:

"Many religious leaders were deeply aware of how traditional views on roles of women in society and within family structure are implicated in incidents of SGBV. At the theological levels, religious leaders seemed aware of existing theological resources in their traditions that could help their interventions but were often reluctant to resort to them. We remark that the absence of active engagement with these resources confines religious leaders to a passive position in which they become unable to adapt these resources to the needs of their communities."

### Among the report's other conclusions:

- Religious leaders represent an important resource for dealing with issues of sexual and gender-based violence.
- More work is needed to equip religious leaders with tools and familiarize them with resources to provide support to victims and survivors of SGBV.
- Training and education on issues related to women's role in society and in the family, on gender relations, and on women in the family and work space are deeply needed.
- A more effective engagement can only be achieved through intra-community theological reflections that use existing resources, many of which were developed through interreligious reflections, to develop community-specific tools.

## CONTEXT II: RELIGION, GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN AFRICA

Sonke Gender Justice, along with the Institute of Development Studies, Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, and MenEngage Africa, also contributed to the dialogue between religious leaders and civil society organizations by conducting a religion, gender, and sexuality workshop with African religious leaders in Johannesburg in June 2015, attended by more than two dozen African religious leaders, predominantly Muslim and Christian.

The stated goal of the workshop was to build capacity around issues of gender, sexuality and human rights to enable participants to act as agents of change and emerge as voices against SGBV, transphobia and homophobia; and, in support of women's rights within their faith communities.

The workshop report, issued in November 2015, argued for the practical value of working with religious leaders:

"Religious doctrine shapes and informs decision-making at the individual and

collective levels, and sexuality and gender rights advocates must therefore work with faith-based organisations and religious activists to challenge harmful and discriminatory sexuality and gender norms and practices... Given the rise of religious activism in civil society, the political arena and in law- and policymaking, it has become imperative to offer training to organisations and individuals who work in the religious/ faith-based sector on issues of gender and human rights-based approaches."

Participants made clear that they needed more information about the issues themselves and how best to incorporate it into their work in faith communities. In particular, they said they aimed to find ways to normalize discussions around gender and sexuality, because silence around those issues had proven harmful.

### Among the insights which emerged from the workshop:

"One of the most important features of religion and culture is that they are linked to power and always articulated by the people in power – usually men. Religion and culture are related to patriarchy in the way that they reflect patriarchies and are used to maintain patriarchal structures. Additionally, cultures and religions rely on specific masculinities and femininities to reproduce themselves, which more often than not is accomplished through violence."

“ Participants noted that while human rights-based approaches form an integral part of legal and constitutional frameworks, religion often acts as a moral guide, influencing people's behaviour from a moral standpoint. As moral institutions they police the behaviour of followers. In this capacity, religious leaders have great influence in shaping minds by providing spiritual and moral guidance. The challenge arises when the ideal contradicts people's lived experiences. ”

A critical question arose: given that traditional leaders are important custodians of culture, how are cultural beliefs contextualized to avoid normalizing harmful practices without shunning culture and tradition? An example from South Africa was offered:

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In South Africa, around 30 per cent of teenage girls report ever having been pregnant. In other cases, teenage boys and girls are also experiencing sexual abuse... For young people, spaces must be made available to learn about their bodies, their sexual desires and sexual health, especially because these subjects are taboo within families and comprehensive sexuality education in schools is inadequate. Often, young people turn to other avenues of learning, such as friends, peers or the internet, all of which are potentially sources of inaccurate information. To avoid this, faith leaders must create safe spaces for young people to discuss these issues, particularly with trained experts who can give concrete advice.

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### The workshop recommended that religious leaders:

- Link core scriptural concepts of human dignity and life with the wider spectrum of human rights.



- Infiltrate religious institutions, which are centres of communities, to facilitate community dialogues. 'We cannot be institutions that are devoid of social context – context reflects what will be fed into the churches.'



- Provide resources to other religious leaders.



- Align with existing networks focusing on the issues they seek to address.



## CONTEXT III: MENENGAGE ALLIANCE AND ITS ROLE VIS-À- VIS FAITH-BASED APPROACHES TO GENDER JUSTICE

MenEngage Alliance and Tearfund organized a two-day consultation in Washington D.C. in August 2016 designed to encourage a greater understanding of faith-based approaches to transforming masculinities on behalf of gender justice. Twenty-two experts came together to sketch the landscape of faith-based approaches to gender equality and to begin to develop a joint agenda around a shared belief that well-executed faith-based initiatives “can be an effective means of transforming social and gender norms, due to the credibility of religious leaders and institutions in society.”

By participants’ accounts, efforts to bring together religious leaders and civil society actors to advance gender equality are rife with challenges born of mistrust and misperception. One major challenge, for example, hasn’t been getting faith-based actors to the table, but secular development professionals, for there is a widespread assumption among them that faith and work on gender equality are incompatible.

Within social justice, human rights and women’s rights sectors, religion has been a contested space, given NGOs’ skepticism about religious leaders’ role in reinforcing patriarchal norms. Many organizations attempting faith-based approaches, moreover, have faced a backlash from women’s rights organizations and media who feel such efforts betray their basic principles – partially due to the lack of evidence supporting faith-based approaches to gender equality.

Conversely, religious leaders are often suspicious of NGOs, which are perceived as advancing a ‘Western agenda,’ and many that do get involved in this work risk being isolated from their peers and communities.

In such a challenging context, recognizing that commonalities in approaches and values exist and could usefully serve joint efforts should be pointed out: work to transform masculinities involves engaging with strongly-held beliefs on what it means to 'be a man' – many, in turn, based on cultural and religious interpretations of social expectations of boys and men. Transforming masculinities, similarly, could usefully draw on religious values such as hope, healing, redemption and reconciliation to advance gender equality

Some participants' experience had shown that although resistance to discussing issues of substantive equality or sexuality was common at the start of programs, faith communities and leaders generally opened up during later phases and were keen to talk about such issues, having typically lacked such opportunities previously. (One common strategy was to start with less-contested entry points such as violence against women, HIV/AIDS, or girls' access to education and from there introduce other issues once trust had been established.)

Building personal and collective accountability was identified as an important component of joint work; this required a recognition of specific areas of disagreement between both parties and a mobilization of faith champions to hold their peers accountable for misuse, abuse and misinterpretation of scriptural texts.

Ownership of programs and initiatives was also considered to be important. Alliance members such as Sonke, Shirakat and Muslims for Progressive Values have all embedded this element in their programs, and work directly with faith-leaders to jointly devise program ideas, activities and strategies. By doing so, they have been able to build ownership and respect among faith communities and leaders. They have found that faith-leaders generally engage well with programs and activities and in many instances even independently take the initiative to promote gender equality in their work.

Participants emphasized that activists who work with faith-based approaches need to educate themselves on religious texts and their interpretations, as they are at the core of peoples' faith. The considerable body of existing literature about faith and gender justice written by feminist academics and activists that could serve as useful tools in attempting to 'speak the same language' as religious communities and leaders.

Participants acknowledged that, given the diversity that exists within the gender equality field and among faith leaders and institutions, it is likely that alliances would be built only in relation to certain issues, rather than on a full gender equality agenda. A more comprehensive equality agenda will require continuous engagement and creative strategies over a much longer period of time.

**Given these dynamics, participants suggested:**

- Conducting a mapping exercise to understand what faith-based initiatives and resources exist within the MenEngage Alliance membership and what faith-based organizations are doing in relation to men and masculinities
- Strengthening the evidence base on the effectiveness of faith-based approaches.
- Tasking MenEngage Alliance to add a men and masculinities lens to work on faith and gender, by focusing on how people's faith shapes their masculine identity and vice versa.
- Holding urgently-needed conversations about power dynamics within religion and about the way the power of religion is played out in society.
- Collaborating in order to find common language and framing for faith-based work.
- Strengthening secular understanding of faith institutions.
- Working together to combat homophobia and discrimination faced by certain groups, often based on religious beliefs.
- In accordance with the MenEngage Alliance's accountability agenda, making a concrete effort to bring secular women's rights groups into the conversation.
- Creating more spaces for mutual learning and sharing of best practices.



Participants in the faith-based approaches consultation held by MenEngage Alliance and Tearfund.