

To join the new Ending Violence Against Children Hub, go to <http://evac.jliflc.com>

Introduction

The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities (JLI) Ending Violence Against Children Hub (EVAC Hub) is dedicated to better understanding the role of religion and faith actors in protecting children against violence. The EVAC Hub brings together individuals and organisations from academic, policy and practitioner backgrounds, representing a variety of religious, spiritual and secular affiliations, with the aim of utilising both its networks and knowledge base to better inform and improve policy and praxis.

The UN defines violence against children as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.¹ ‘Child protection’ is directly linked, and refers to preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children acknowledging that these violations occur in every country and inhibit child survival and development.²

The global economic cost of violence against children is \$7 trillion.³ Approximately one billion children worldwide have experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence in the past year.⁴ Violence against children hinders chances for children to live free of poverty due to its long-term consequences on well-being and behaviour including health, education, income earning potential, social interaction, and more. In Sustainable Development Goal target 16.2, UN member states make a universal commitment to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, torture and all forms of violence against children by 2030.

In a world where 84 per cent of people are religious, faith communities have a unique, essential and indispensable role to play in ending violence against children. Faith leaders have unmatched moral authority and profound, trusted relationships with their communities; they even dictate behaviour, for better or worse. The faith community can address oppressive ideology and broken relationships on spiritual, emotional and physical levels. They have more holistic, sustainable influence and reach than any state or organisation. Yet, there remains a lack of substantial rigorous evidence to indicate the multiple roles that faith actors play in preventing and responding to violence against children. For example, what the strengths and weaknesses of support mechanisms are; the extent to which such mechanisms are integrated into international response systems; and how faith-based actors could be better supported in their work. This particular gap in knowledge is the focus of the EVAC JLI Hub. This data is crucial to help policymakers, religious leaders and practitioners inform policies and advocate for programmes and prevention efforts with faith communities to end violence against children.



¹ From article 19 of the CRC; UNICEF definition

² UNICEF (2006). What is child protection? Child Protection Information Sheet. https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/What_is_Child_Protection.pdf

³ <http://childfundalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ODI-Policy-Brief.-The-cost-and-economic-impact-of-violence-against-children.pdf>

⁴ Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children (2017). Retrieved 15 March 2017 from <http://www.end-violence.org/about.html>

There are several international policy-level declarations that indicate broad, interfaith commitment to protecting the vulnerable, such as The Kyoto Declaration,⁵ UNHCR dialogue on “Faith and Protection”⁶, and the GNRC Panama Declaration.⁷ Now, more than ever, we need evidence to help policymakers, religious leaders and practitioners better understand the roles that faith-based actors already play, and have the potential to play, in ending violence against children.

This briefing highlights some of the key evidence from existing academic and policy reports, and ends with six areas that will be explored in the new Ending Violence Against Children Hub.

What We Know

1. Faith communities have been among the strongest advocates for children’s rights in part because they highly value human dignity.⁸ Fundamental values of most of the world’s religions have informed the development of children’s rights, including: prioritizing children and the duty to care and protect them, bringing up children in family units, and a holistic notion of the child.⁹ This has been seen as both a moral imperative but also as a legal right guaranteeing children fundamental human rights under the auspices of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁰ However, faith communities have also at times opposed child rights, especially because of articles related to freedom of religion and perceptions that rights frameworks will limit the authority of parents and caregivers. Further, faith leaders and faith communities have also been involved in practices that harm children.

2. The resources and values of communities of faith are needed for a comprehensive community-based child protection response. The social resources of faith communities provide a volunteer base, wide networks and denominational contacts.¹¹ Most religious organizations are already providing support and services to vulnerable people, engaging them in child protection work is merely an extension of something they are doing.

3. Faith communities are well placed to enter family spheres for social transformation and change and for shaping family attitudes and practices to enhance child protection.¹² Child protection efforts at the family level are critical and can be meaningfully tailored towards understanding child rights, developing skills to increase family income to meet basic needs; and enhancing parenting skills.¹³

⁵ Kyoto Declarations broad principles shared by religious traditions (Dodd & Robinson 2010, p.4):

- “Violence against children damages their physical, emotional and spiritual integrity.
- Universal regard for the child as a person with rights and inherent human dignity impels people of faith to join with others in rejecting all forms of violence against children.
- Respect for the human dignity of the child transcends theological and cultural differences and forms a common purpose for working together towards eliminating violence against children.
- Raising the status of children and eliminating violence against them is crucial to a more peaceful and compassionate world.”

⁶ UNHCR, 2012. Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders. In 2012, at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Dialogue on “Faith and Protection” with faith, humanitarian and world leaders, faith communities worldwide committed protecting the vulnerable. The foundation for action was once again based on common ground: “... all major religious value systems embrace humanity, caring and respect, and the tradition of granting protection to those in danger.”

⁷ The Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Child adopted on May 11, 2017 by some 500 religious leaders attending the 5th Global Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children promised to: “strengthen our mechanisms for continuous self-evaluation and accountability to ensure our communities are never complicit in perpetuating violence against children, build child-safe institutions, and build evidence for the effectiveness of faith-based approaches to end violence against children.”

⁸ Melton, G.B. & Anderson, D., 2008. From Safe Sanctuaries to Strong Communities The Role of Communities of Faith in Child Protection. *Fam Community Health*, 31(2), pp.173–185.

⁹ Dodd, C. & Robinson, M., 2010. From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities can do to Eliminate Violence Against Children. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/eapro/UNICEF_Religions_for_Peace_Feb2010.pdf.

¹⁰ Unicef. “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” *Child Labor* (1989)

¹¹ Ager, J., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. & Ager, A., 2015. Local faith communities and the promotion of resilience in contexts of humanitarian crisis. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 28(2), pp.202–221.

¹² Robinson, M., 2010. Conflict, Child Protection and Religious Communities: A Review and Recommendations on Enhancing Protection through Partnership, (July). Available at: <http://jiflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/conflict-child-protection.pdf>.

¹³ Firelight Foundation, 2014. Protecting our children: How African community organizations strengthen child protection systems. Available at: <http://www.firelightfoundation.org/fund/protecting-our-children/>.

4. Individuals hold religious beliefs that help them to recover from or manage adversity. An established body of research documents how religious beliefs frequently operate to support resilience: spirituality and religion may positively influence children's socialization and development, helping them to find hope and meaning amid crisis situations. Values of positivity and ways of interpreting change equip individuals to withstand traumatic events.¹⁴

5. LFCs are uniquely positioned to engage with controversial issues as they may have access to issues that are considered sensitive, taboo or stigmatised, and are well placed to tackle harmful attitudes or practices. For instance, as part of its work to end the practice of female genital mutilation, UNFPA has shown how sensitively handled partnerships with local religious leaders have led to a fundamental shift “among religious leaders, many of whom have gone from endorsing the practice to actively condemning it” within their communities.¹⁵

What We Don't Know

1. How do faith leaders and religious norms and teachings provide support or opposition to children who've experienced violence? Faith leaders can facilitate access to services, and have the potential to influence community members' responses toward children who've experienced violence, and support to children who've experienced violence, but can also undermine the resilience of the same. Further research is needed to determine the ways that

religion is being positively applied to empower children who've experienced violence and create safe spaces, as well as to document practices that have harmed children or engendered fear. As violence against children is a fundamentally gendered issue, research is needed on how faith actors and faith-based responses are both implicated but also engage in countering these.¹⁶

2. To what extent do religious identity, values and practice provide psychosocial support and promote resilience of children? There is increasing recognition that psychosocial support includes spiritual nurture expressed in and through the practice of religious communities. The performance of rituals, the mutual support offered through communities and the advice of respected leaders all contribute to spiritual care. However, we know little about how vulnerable children engage with this on a personal level or how this contributes to building resilience.

3. What role do faith leaders play in advocacy and public debates? At times they can reinforce negative narratives. Conversely, they can also be agents of change who engage in local advocacy to protect children. Public advocacy to change social norms or strengthen reporting and referral mechanisms; political advocacy to challenge negative legislation or uphold international humanitarian and human rights laws.¹⁷ More research is essential to understand the effects that faith leaders have in these and other spheres.

4. What role do faith leaders play in child protection systems (both formal and informal) and how can this engagement be strengthened? In some settings faith leaders play little or no role in formal child protection systems but may be active in informally resolving child protection issues in the community whereas in others they are prominent agents that cooperate across a range of formal actors and structures. What factors influence



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¹⁴ UNICEF, 2012. Partnering with Religious Communities for Children. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/eapro/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children.pdf

¹⁵ Ager, A. & Nakib, S. El, 2015. Local faith groups as humanitarian actors. World Disasters Report 2015: Local Actors at the Centre of Effective Humanitarian Action

¹⁶ Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (Ed) (2016) Gender, Religion and Humanitarian Responses to Refugees. UCL MRU Policy Brief

¹⁷ Melton, G.B. & Anderson, D., 2008. From Safe Sanctuaries to Strong Communities The Role of Communities of Faith in Child Protection. Fam Community Health, 31(2), pp.173–185.

faith leaders involvement in these structures and how can they be enhanced? If faith leaders are active through informal community structures what social, cultural and religious considerations influence decisions about what is in the best interest of the child?

5. What is the role of faith on caregiving practices? Caregiving, especially in regard to discipline, religious education and moral guidance, plays a key role in children's lives. Faith perspectives may influence caregiving practices directly and indirectly to undermine or support wellbeing and further research is needed on how these caregiving practices relate to children's right to freedom from violence.¹⁸

6. What are faith implications in support or opposition in child participation? Patriarchy and hierarchy in many faith communities can be a barrier to child participation. Yet, elements of dignity and worth can be a promoter of the same. This needs further exploration

What Next?

Over the coming years, the Ending Violence Against Children Hub will:

- Conduct an in-depth Scoping Study to map existing best practice and challenges across a range of contexts
- Begin addressing the evidence gaps and questions raised by the Scoping Study through collaboration with research projects, and by commissioning its own research
- Widely disseminate evidence, learning and recommendations to practitioners and policymakers for implementation

The EVAC hub will also work alongside other JLI hubs to ensure complementarity, especially with the Sexual and Gender Based Violence hub.

Get Involved

Join this hub if you have a background in issues relating to faith and ending violence against children, with policymakers, children, families, communities and faith communities, and are keen to share your learning and shape the policy discourse on this issue with an international community of like-minded academics and practitioners.

Visit <http://evac.jliflc.com> for information on how to join the Ending Violence Against Children Hub. Alternatively, contact the Co-Chairs of the Hub

- Robyn Hagan (World Vision International): robyn_hagan@wvi.org
- Rebeca Rios-Kohn (Arigatou International): r.rioskohn@arigatouinternational.org
- Carola Eyber (Queen Margaret University): CEyber@qmu.ac.uk

What is the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith & Local Communities?

Founded in 2012 by a broad collaboration of international development organizations, UN agencies, academic institutions, and religious bodies, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities (JLI) is an international collaboration committed to gathering and communicating the highest quality evidence on faith and development worldwide.

JLI Goals

- Build cross-sector, multi-religious, collaborative platforms (Learning Hubs)
- Connect policymakers, practitioners, and academics

