

Sleeping Giants: Mobilising Faith Leaders as Agents of Change

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Key messages

- Faith leaders are motivated to challenge damaging practices in local communities when they understand the modelling of alternative social norms and behaviours as part of their faith ministries.
- Scriptures and theology can be powerful resources in mobilising faith leaders to become agents of change in their communities, in particular, when combined with public health information.
- Actively seek to engage faith leaders as agents of change, rather than as complicit in perpetuating harm, even though the social norms that support injustice and violence are often influenced by religion.
- Enable faith leaders to take on a 'champion' role in their communities, by acknowledging the centrality and influence of sacred scripture, and helping faith leaders make the link between the encouraged norms, attitudes and behaviours and their religious principles.

Introduction

In 2017, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities undertook a study funded by the UK Government through UK aid, entitled "Working effectively with faith leaders to challenge harmful traditional practices". This policy brief focuses on approaches reported successful in engaging faith leaders to address sensitive issues in their communities.

Faith leaders are men and women recognised by their faith community, both formally or informally, as playing authoritative and influential leadership roles within faith institutions to guide, inspire or lead others (of faith).

This may be within a formal religious hierarchy of accountability, but also includes informal movements such as house groups and outreaches.

How the study was done

A literature review, online survey, and five case studies were conductedⁱⁱ each study focusing on an organisation's work on harmful traditional practices (HTPs) and engagements with faith leaders. The literature review focused on a) HTP prevalence data; and b) HTPs within the context of faith and faith actors. The five case studies focused on Tearfund, Islamic Relief Worldwide, World Vision International, ABAAD, and Christian Aid, with an in-depth look at their work on four HTPs: female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), child and early marriage, honour-related violence, and son preference. The case studies used a combination of document review and in-depth interviews. A short online survey was also completed by 65 professionals to complement and broaden the information gathered through the case studies.

Faith leaders can be mobilised to address gendered violent practices

Faith leaders often lack the knowledge, skills and courage to discuss the harm that is caused by these practices or to address the underlying negative social norms. Furthermore, questioning harmful practices means challenging the patriarchal structures in which their communities and faith institutions are embedded, and that most often have shaped their own norms and attitudes. Mobilising faith leaders to discuss violent gender practices in their communities, such as FGM/C or child and early marriage, is therefore difficult.

Yet, while faith leaders can condone, justify or remain silent – and many do – they can also play an authoritative role in leading conversations to challenge and change practices often perceived as legitimated by faith. What the study found was that, when properly engaged and equipped, many faith leaders do challenge damaging social norms and behaviours in the community.

Faith leaders are sleep(ing) giants. They are not doing much [about FGM/C] now, but if they wake up, they can change it totally. Look what happened with Ebola here. With Ebola we had a game change when faith leaders came on board, it really changed things, it started reducing. So that is why I think we have to have faith leaders on board with FGM/C. It will be key (Engela, project officer, based in Sierra Leone, June 27, 2017).ⁱⁱ

Successful approaches for engaging faith leaders

Since faith leaders are often highly influential, authoritative community leaders who are ‘listened-to’ by community members, they have (often underutilised) potential for catalysing change.ⁱⁱⁱ The following approaches have been identified as successful in engaging faith leaders.

1. Scriptures and theology are powerful tools

Faith-based organisations often use sacred scriptures or scriptural principles to guide discussions on sensitive topics. They do so as a way of engaging faith leaders in language that they trust and respect, engaging with a

which they see themselves as expert. Scriptures and theology are important for discussing and rethinking norms and changing harmful attitudes and behaviour.

I've found that backing into the rights from a faith perspective is more transformational, less confrontational, and more sustainable. The way I describe it is that we ask: What does God say about you/women/men/violence/protection value of children? [versus] What does the UN say in these areas? (Female survey participant, FBO, working in Africa and Middle East).

Sacred scripture can be a powerful resource in challenging and transforming unequal, unjust and damaging structures and practices. Yet it often needs creative reinterpretation to become such a resource. It is therefore important to provide tools and materials informed by careful study of the sacred principles to help faith leaders promote more equitable practices and end harmful ones.^{iv} This provides them with the language to support such approaches in helpful, rather than defensive, ways.

2. Public Health and Wellbeing is often a key entry point

When practices that are harmful have a strong gender or health component, a theological approach is particularly fruitful when combined with public health information. Faith leaders in local communities often lack basic bio-medical knowledge, in particular on sexual and reproductive health. It can be very insightful for faith leaders to understand the health consequences of certain practices. Health and wellbeing information can therefore be important in reframing faith leaders’ understanding of harmful practices, and how these practices jeopardise women and children’s health and well-being.^v

(On sharing public health information on FGM/C with faith leaders): “So particularly in countries like Egypt, you know, it’s like a no brainer, ‘Oh, it’s harmful, it shouldn’t be done then’. Because [in] Islam, fundamentally, protection of health and life is primary” (Mabad, advocacy and policy specialist, based in England, June 22, 2017).

source document that they find authoritative, and on

Sharing health information with faith leaders is often an easier introduction to sensitive topics than, for example, an explicit focus on gender rights. A public health approach should, however, be combined with challenging underlying structures of gender inequality and marginalisation. While helpful in all settings, a public health approach is particularly fruitful in inter-faith spaces, where a focus on shared concerns enables the conversation not to emphasise religious or moral differences.

3. Mobilising faith leaders as agents of change

It is easier to mobilise faith leaders when they see the norms, attitudes and behaviours that are being encouraged as supported by the principles of their faith.

First of all you have to win [faith leaders'] respect, they must respect (...) what you are organising. And then they must understand your motive... So when they know you are helping their faith to do the best they can, [to] do as God want them to do, then things will become easier for you. To the contrary, if they think you have come to hinder their faith, then you are going to have it tough (Joseph, faith partnerships advisor, based in West Africa, June 23, 2017).

While faith leaders often have to change their own norms and attitudes first, interventions that stimulate pride in their 'champion' role appear to work well. When faith leaders are invited to become role-models for positive change while challenging practices that are damaging, it should be emphasised as an opportunity for them to expand and deepen their ministries. This can be done by acknowledging faith leaders' convening power in many social rituals, allowing them to act as agents of change in the community. It is therefore important to build their advocacy and community-engagement skills. Engaging faith leaders on different hierarchical levels will contribute to ensuring broader support.^{vi}

Mobilising faith leaders as agents of change needs to be part of a long-term engagement process. Offering them the information, resources and skills to play transformative roles in their communities, while linking them to broader networks of change agents, can only be accomplished through longer processes of collaboration. This requires commitment from faith leaders, development organisations and donors.

4. Small discussion groups

Faith leaders' involvement in small discussion groups that are externally facilitated and meet repeatedly is an effective way of structuring long-term interventions in local contexts. Especially when such groups meet over an extended period of time, it becomes a safe, transformational space for faith leaders. Noting that faith leaders include both formal and informal leaders, the following is important when creating such groups:

- Good facilitation is the key to the effectiveness of discussion groups – non-judgemental and non-directional facilitation by a facilitator well versed in religious texts and principles, as well as knowledgeable of the structural inequalities and power relations which constrain and oppress women and girls.
- Host sessions in a space where participants feel physically safe and are also safe from unexpected interruptions.
- Gender-segregated and age-segregated groups, with same-sex facilitators, have proven most effective.
- Participation should be on a volunteer basis only, as participants' willingness to engage is crucial to ensuring participation and transformation.
- Culturally-sensitive language and terminology should be used throughout.

Conclusion

Faith leaders frequently hold normative authority around existing social norms. Thus changing damaging practices in local communities cannot happen effectively without the involvement of faith leaders. Especially when addressing practices that harm women and girls, equipping and educating faith leaders to connect gender equality positively with their faith ministries can help motivate their communities to shift such practices. Sacred scripture and theology can be powerful resources in expanding and deepening their ministry to include challenging difficult issues in their community, and therefore can be effective in mobilising faith leaders to become agents of change.

Recommendations

- Engaging faith leaders is an ongoing and evolving process, and not a one-off event. Development policies and programmes should encourage and facilitate long-term engagement to foster safety and trust, as well as contextually sensitive and relevant interventions.
- Avoid instrumentalising faith leaders. Policy-makers, researchers and programmers should approach and engage faith leaders as (potential) agents of change.
- Policies should include evidence-based approaches and behaviour change interventions that allow faith leaders to engage in creative scriptural and theological reflection on practices that are harmful, and that address underlying norms and structures.
- Policies should encourage the development of context-specific creative methodologies that engage sacred texts on social issues.

The literature review, survey report, five case study reports, and synthesis report can all be found at <http://gender-based-violence.jliflc.com/http-study>

- i. Pseudonyms are used when referring to research participants.
- ii. Religion and the Adolescent Girl: A formative study in Kaduna state, 2017, Research Report, Christian Aid; Sandilands M., Jewkes R., Baguma 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.
- iii. For example: World Vision. 2017. Channels of Hope for Child Protection. Christian & Muslim Reference Index. Internal document, World Vision; Christian Aid. 2014. Of the Same Flesh: Exploring a Theology of Gender. External policy document, Christian Aid. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/of-the-same-flesh-gender-theology-report.pdf>. Accessed July 13, 2017; West, G. & Zondi-Mabezele, P. 2004. "The Bible story that became a campaign. The Tamar Campaign in South Africa (and beyond)". Ministerial Formation.
- iv. Kirmani, N. & Phillips I. 2011. 'Engaging with Islam to Promote Women's Rights: Exploring Opportunities and Challenging Assumptions'. Progress in Development Studies, 11(2): 87-99.
- v. Le Roux, E. Kramm, N., Scott, N., Sandilands, M., Loots, L., Olivier, J., Arango, D.J., & O'Sullivan, V. 2016. Getting dirty: Working with faith leaders to prevent and respond to gender based violence. The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 14(3): 22-35; Kamanga, G. 2014. Channels of Hope for Gender: Uganda

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