



Engaging Religious
and Traditional Leaders
for Gender Equality

V4C Stories of Learning

June 2017



From the outset of the programme, V4C has been working with a group of 'key influencers' – including religious and traditional leaders and institutions – that it regards as critical to achieving changes in attitudes towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Through participatory training on gender and religion, V4C has enabled religious and traditional leaders to deepen their knowledge and understanding of gender and become 'champions' for gender justice.



Why work with religious and traditional leaders?

Voices for Change (V4C) seeks to improve the lives and life chances of adolescent girls and women in Nigeria by strengthening the enabling environment to overcome gender inequality. As part of this work, V4C has engaged with religious and traditional leaders, with the aim of influencing their attitudes towards men's power over women, gender equality and women's empowerment, and harnessing this influence to challenge and change social norms and behaviours within their own networks and communities. Most of the religious and traditional leaders engaged have been men, but midway through the programme V4C also began to engage women influential leaders that included religious leaders (for example Catholic nuns, Protestant pastors, lay leaders, Amira) and key women community and political leaders.

Traditional leaders can refer to community leaders and chiefs, such as Emirs (traditional rulers in predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria who direct the district heads and ward head), Oba (traditional rulers in the Benin kingdom in the south), traditional rulers of local government areas (LGAs), and village heads.

Religious leaders in Nigeria are a diverse group of people, which includes faith-based leaders of the Islamic and Christian faith. Muslim leaders include Imams (faith and opinion leaders), Islamic scholars – Sheikhs or Ulama (learned legal and religious scholars), and Amirs or Amiras (presidents of Muslim organisations). Christian leaders include church leaders such as bishops, priests, nuns and pastors, and theologians.

Working with religious and traditional leaders is critical to changing social norms on gender in Nigeria because:

- They are considered to embody moral values, which enables them to influence personal and family domains and attitudes and behaviours. The centrality of religion in Nigeria enables religious leaders and institutions to exercise considerable influence.
- Faith-based organisations are considered to have more legitimacy, respect and influence than secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They tend to be more established in, and have closer links with, communities and, it is argued, are not greeted with suspicion when looking to influence values and social rules (e.g. those governing family life, reproductive choices, etc.) through religious and educational activities.
- They have access to extensive networks and communications channels, and thus play an important role in disseminating messages; shaping public opinion; mobilising volunteers, financial and advocacy support; and influencing government policy.
- They are key civil society actors, and are often active in providing services – in education, health and welfare support – to communities in general, as well as to vulnerable groups that government and development agencies cannot or do not reach.
- They are grounded in philosophical and theological frameworks, which allows them to focus their discourse on issues within spiritual commitments to peace, justice and social equality. Both Islam and Christianity, for example, emphasise the importance of social justice, and society's responsibility towards the poorest and most vulnerable groups.

Key principles

Engagement with religious and traditional leaders has been informed by the following three key principles:

Transforming the self: Engaging religious and traditional leaders requires enabling them to focus, initially, on the self to critically reflect on and analyse ingrained patriarchal attitudes and behaviours, and make changes in their own lives that mirror their commitment to gender justice. To do this, V4C organised training workshops for carefully selected religious and traditional leaders with already established networks (congregations) who then proceeded to diffuse gender justice messages to diverse audiences over broad geographic locations. In many cases, RTLs, with V4C support, widened their influence even more, challenging discriminatory social and gender norms via multi-media platforms (TV, radio, internet) and by promoting greater awareness of gender justice within religious and faith-based organisations and amongst the leadership of these.

Building alliances to trigger change: Many citizen-based organisations in Nigeria already have experience of engaging religious and traditional leaders on social issues, and V4C built collaborative and learning relationships with some of these stakeholders to develop strategies for engaging religious and traditional leaders on issues of gender justice.

Taking a long-term view: Changing attitudes and behaviours towards girls and women's empowerment, and in men, is a complex and long-term process, and, as such, it was necessary to identify the most strategic entry points where V4C could achieve the greatest leverage. The integration of gender justice issues by religious and traditional leaders into their outreach practices (sermons, etc.) enables them to inspire change that, within their congregations and beyond, takes on a life of its own, with long-lasting, far-reaching potential that is not dependent on external support. To strengthen that, however, V4C provided platforms for religious and traditional leaders to come together periodically to share their own journeys of change and develop individual and collective action plans for promoting gender justice from a religious perspective, as part of a wider social movement for gender justice.

Creating a suitable space for reflection and exploration

V4C initially facilitated gender and masculinity training for men religious and traditional leaders as a means of providing a space for them to examine and explore their own values with regards to gender, the social nature of gender roles and stereotypes, definitions and types of violence, and what constitutes healthy and unhealthy relationships. As the programme developed, similar training was also provided for women key influencers, through workshops run by women facilitators from V4C trained partners.

As a point of entry, to facilitate access to key influential religious and traditional leaders and minimise the risk of backlash, V4C met with selected leaders of faith-based institutions (Christian and Muslim). At the same time, pre-training mapping exercises identified religious and traditional leaders already recognised as key influencers in their respective communities, with a record of advocating for positive social change and known to have a strong influence on their followers – regardless of their views on gender (which could not be easily determined before meeting them for the first time). In many cases, the ‘usual suspects’, i.e. those high up in the religious hierarchies, were not chosen to participate in the training workshops and priority was given to religious and traditional leaders lower down the chain, because of the social activism they were already engaged in and their wide-reaching influence.

The trainings were designed so that participating religious and traditional leaders could:

- Increase their understanding of the social construction of masculinities and femininities and how the use of power by men over women influences the lives of individuals, relationships, families and communities within their congregations.
- Clarify how some cultural traditions and religious values and practices can play a key role in determining attitudes and behaviours in men that cause harm and lead to violence.
- Plan individual and collective actions to promote gender justice through, for example, sermons, workshops, seminars and radio and TV interventions.
- Explore the critical role and potential of religion in fostering gender justice in a society like Nigeria where equal opportunities and rights remain elusive for a high percentage of girls and women.
- Increase inter-faith dialogue on gender justice issues through working together and learning more about similarities in Islam and Christianity.

By using a gender transformative approach and participatory methodologies that promoted shared reflection, critical analysis and in-depth questioning, religious and traditional leaders could deepen their knowledge, revise their attitudes, values and behaviours, and arrive at a better understanding of gender issues.

While the overall response to open dialogue and discussion at these workshops was very positive, there was some initial defensiveness and resistance. This was due, in part, to suspicion of one another and a fear of being seen as inferior or less knowledgeable than others. The transformative approach adopted, however, enabled participants to recognise the benefits of change for their own personal growth, allowing barriers to be broken down and levels of authenticity and openness to be established early on in the workshops.

Some religious and traditional leaders in the workshops already had views generally supportive of gender justice; others experienced rapid change in their attitudes and opinions as a result of the reflections and analysis that took place in the workshops. Others, while open to discussion and exchange of ideas, took longer to process new ideas, and perhaps remained sceptical. Evidence from the pre- and post-training surveys carried out shows shifts in the attitudes of many of the religious and traditional leaders; some, however, reported after the workshops that they were still 'unclear' about some of the issues.

Key activities, of a participatory nature, used in the workshops included:

- Understanding gender: This activity enabled religious and traditional leaders to comprehend the key concepts of sex, gender and gender equality and how the social construction of these led to discrimination and violence by men against women.
- Values clarification: This topic examined religious and traditional leaders' own values and beliefs with regards to gender-related issues, allowing them to develop critical consciousness vis-à-vis gender norms and stereotypes.
- Act like a man: This activity looked at gender roles and the pressures (internal and external) that men (and women) face to conform to rigid models of being men and women in society and how these reproduce power dynamics that lead to discrimination and violence.
- Panel discussion on gender, masculinities and religion: Conducted by progressive Christian and Muslim scholars, these discussions covered such questions as:
 - Does religion matter in the quest for gender justice?
 - What are the connections between religion and gender injustice?
 - What does your religion say about the creation of men and women? And how does this influence religious norms around gender relations?
 - How does religion promote gender justice or sustain gender injustices?
 - How do we build on the positive and counter the negatives?



In recognition of the need to maintain and build on the relationships forged at these workshops, V4C provided follow-up support in the shape of quarterly review sessions where religious and traditional leaders could continue to share and learn from each other, broker meetings to help secure high-level endorsement and challenge and inspire other key influencers to take action. Additionally, these regular follow-up meetings enabled the programme to systematically and concisely track the actions taken by the religious and traditional leaders, estimate the numbers of people reached by them, and register the statistical information in a database. This enabled ongoing monitoring of targets and milestones and informed programmatic and budgetary decisions.

Since attending the training workshop, religious and traditional leaders have reported a wide range of positive changes, to their own awareness and behaviour, and in their ability to influence others on the issue. Many religious and traditional leaders speak of

being profoundly moved, of understanding gender concepts for the first time, seeing gender relations in a new way, and seeing the relationship between culture and religion in a different light. Many of the religious and traditional leaders report that that they not only acquired new knowledge, but they also felt moved to act – in their personal lives and through their religious teachings.

Over two-thirds of the 403 religious and traditional leaders who took part in the workshops have taken actions against discriminatory beliefs that prevent young women from realising their potential, sharing their gender justice messages directly with more than 400,000 people through a combination of sermons, conferences and workshops. Many more have been reached indirectly through the participation of religious and traditional leaders in radio, TV and social media.

Key lessons from the experience

- Engaging religious and traditional leaders has upfront advantages since they already have existing structures, platforms and social networks through which they influence others (in places of worship).
- Actions taken by religious and traditional leaders across the four V4C states differ in relation to cultural contexts. For example, Kano religious and traditional leaders are more likely to take action in their place of worship, or use radio, than take action on social media platforms, whereas Lagos religious and traditional leaders are comfortable to take action both in their place of worship, on TV and on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.
- While the influential voice of gender-aware religious and traditional leaders in society is an important contribution to establishing gender justice and creating an enabling environment for young women's development, V4C research showed that religious leaders themselves were generally not as influential over young people as, for example, their mothers, fathers and extended family networks. The gender justice messages transmitted by religious leaders, however, were a source of encouragement and enlightenment for many young people directly targeted by other V4C interventions during their processes of personal transformation, especially when they experienced conflict between their new-found commitment to gender justice and the traditional religious beliefs they had been taught growing up. The influential voice of religious leaders speaking out in favour of gender justice and relating it to religious values enabled many young women and men to reconcile these apparent contradictions, and not have to choose between one and the other.
- Organising review meetings/lesson-sharing with religious and traditional leaders motivates them to keep going and inspires other religious and traditional leaders to take actions around girls and women's rights in their communities.

Recommendations

Engage religious and traditional leaders using a gender transformational approach

and experiential, peer-to-peer learning methodology that allows participants to reflect on their own life experiences, listening to and learning from each other, and analysing the role of culture and religion on the development of their own attitudes and behaviour. By experiencing a sense of inner change and personal development, they can convincingly influence and inspire others on gender issues.

Use language that is familiar and comfortable – many religious and traditional leaders (particularly men) and their peers don't respond well, for example, to the use of the term 'gender equality' which they see as a threat and potentially contrary to sacred texts in the Quran or Bible. But they do relate to the concept of 'gender justice', which is akin to the spiritual values of justice and peace. Shifting the language gets them on board, enabling a 'fusion of values' and the recognition of common areas of interest between religious and gender discourses.

Adopt an inter-faith, ecumenical approach that brings diverse religious and traditional leaders together, enabling the joint exploration of the critical role of religion in fostering gender justice, identifying synergies and recognising differences. It helps too, to dispel myths and stereotypes that both Muslims and Christians (and denominations within each religion) have of each other, deepen understanding of the relationship between culture(s) and religion(s), and open platforms for dialogue and collaboration.

Training workshops for religious and traditional leaders on gender and religion need facilitators that are experienced and skilled in the application of participatory learning/gender transformational methodologies. It is also important, however, to count on specialised theological inputs from respected religious scholars (Christian and Muslim together) that give credibility and depth to the workshops and who can be part of the training team that plans and runs the workshops.

Develop monitoring and evaluation procedures that minimise bureaucracy for the religious and traditional leaders (they are busy people!) but that enable them to come together periodically to share experiences, support and learn from each other. This can be done through the application of simple self-reporting tools during regular review meetings, to track and register numbers and types of activities they have carried out and estimate numbers of people reached (disaggregated by gender). This information is then registered by programme staff in a database that is added to after each review meeting.



Notes





About V4C

Voices for Change (V4C) is a £29 million programme funded by UK Aid, working to strengthen the enabling environment for gender equality in Nigeria. The programme targets young women and men aged 16-25 years old. It operates in four states in Nigeria: Enugu, Kaduna, Kano and Lagos and for some activities, at Federal level. V4C is a unique example of a programme applying social norms theory at scale and is addressing the structural barriers to gender equality, in particular, discriminatory and harmful attitudes, behaviours and social norms. The three normative areas that V4C seeks to change are women's voice and leadership, women's role in decision making and violence against women and girls.

V4C recognises that for young women to be better supported, change needs to happen at scale – not only at the individual level but also within wider society.

At the individual level, V4C works with adolescent women and girls to provide them with the skills, knowledge and confidence to challenge, together with men, boys, religious leaders, traditional leaders and networks of men and women, discriminatory social norms to create change in their colleges, homes, workplaces and communities;

At the community level, V4C works with those men and boys, religious and traditional leaders, and networks of women and girls to create a critical mass of support for gender equality, accelerating change and shifting negative norms;

At the social-structural level, V4C works to change discriminatory laws, create better policies, and direct assets towards women and girls, sending a message about changed social norms through political and legal structures.

Conceived as the pilot stage of a twenty-year vision, V4C began implementation in October 2013 and will end in September 2017.

This paper is one in a series of V4C Stories of Learning that have been written to share knowledge and learning on the range of strategies used by the programme.

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