

# What lies beneath? Tackling the roots of religious resistance to ending child marriage







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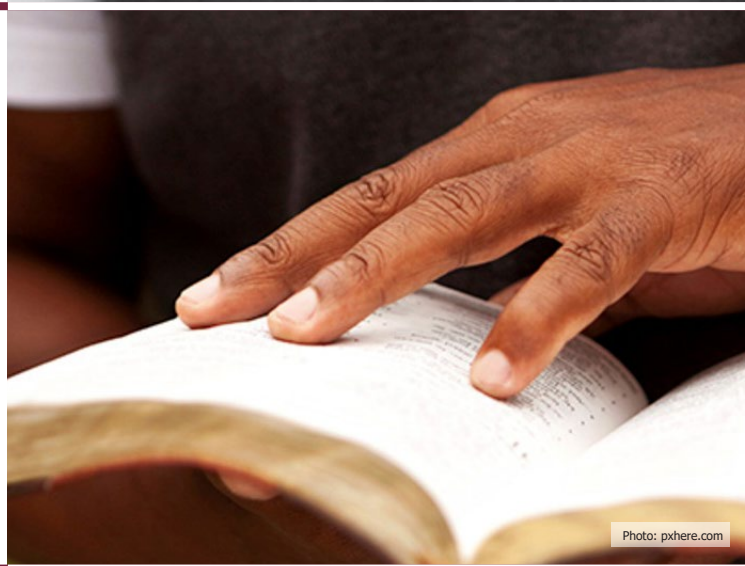
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# Executive Summary



## Introduction

Child marriage results from the interplay of a variety of factors and happens across countries, cultures, ethnicities and religions. There is no single religion that is solely associated with child marriage. But as religious leaders often hold considerable power and authority in their communities, engaging them can be an important part of the range of approaches needed to change attitudes and behaviours related to child marriage.

*Girls Not Brides* is a global partnership of more than 1000 civil society organisations from over 95 countries committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their potential. Many of these member organisations have been engaging with religious leaders in their efforts to end child marriage. Some leaders have taken action to address child marriage and have been powerful agents of change. However, others have been obstacles to progress and practitioners have faced many challenges in engaging with them.

To support its members in overcoming these challenges, *Girls Not Brides* commissioned the *Unit for Religion and Development Research* (URDR) at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, to conduct a study focused on the role of resistant religious leaders in efforts to end child marriage. This report synthesises the study findings. It should however be treated with care, lest its framing reinforce negative stereotypes about the role of religious leaders in perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination. The focus on resistant religious leaders does not suggest that all religious leaders are resistant to ending child marriage, nor that religions indiscriminately promote child marriage.

## Methodology

While acknowledging the complexity and diversity of religious contexts across the world, this study focuses on the three majority religions (Christianity, Hinduism and Islam) selected from within the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage. It identifies common trends and general best practices that apply to many different settings, while at the same time emphasising that interventions need to be highly sensitive and responsive to context.

The study included a literature review and 15 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted virtually with practitioners who have experience of engaging with Christian, Muslim and/or Hindu religious leaders on child marriage. The literature review focused on the responses of and engagement with religious leaders in relation to child marriage, particularly religious leaders opposing efforts to end child marriage. Based on the review, the KII guides were developed. Potential KII participants were identified by the *Girls Not Brides* secretariat, as well as by the URDR researchers, with final selection done by the URDR team.

There were some limitations to this study, most related to the fact that the number of informants was small. A number of measures were put in place to overcome the impact of these. Ethical clearance was obtained from Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Throughout the report concrete examples are given, to illustrate the points being made. Highlighted text boxes offer case studies, while appendixes identify further sources and illustrations.

## Key recommendations

Working with religious leaders first requires identifying how and why religious resistance is happening within specific contexts, as a critical first step for developing effective strategies. This includes determining which forms of resistance are displayed and then digging down into a deeper understanding of the roots of this resistance. The typology of resistance and the seven roots of resistance discussed in the report can guide this exploration.

This resistance analysis leads to a series of strategic decisions to be made by the organisation within its context. There is no 'one size fits all' model, and decisions need to be based on specific religious leader resistance. However, all organisations must do *background research*, carefully *select religious leaders* they might engage with and ensure *monitoring and evaluation* that feeds back into programme learning, as three key steps. Five strategies emerged from the study that can help guide effective implementation. However, this is not a 'how to' guide. It insists on the importance of organisations first analysing specific drivers of resistance to develop tailored strategies in response.

## Analysing Religious Resistance

Not all religious leaders resist efforts to end child marriage. On the contrary, some are critical allies for change. However, this research focuses on resistant religious leaders, in an effort to better understand how to engage with them and overcome resistance. It identified six ways in which religious leaders are often resisting, as well as seven reasons why they are doing so, and encourages practitioners to analyse these first to inform their engagement.

Resistant religious leaders are resisting through vocal dissent or backlash, through various forms of silent or hidden resistance, through their actions, by scapegoating those that oppose child marriage, through spiritual or ethical ways, and/or by offering resistance to issues indirectly related to child marriage.

- At the heart of these forms of resistance, lie seven key drivers or roots of religious resistance. First, *marriage is seen as a religious ritual*. The role of arranging and performing marriages forms part of many religious leaders' visibility, value and identity within communities. While increased political and legal regulation for marriage has emerged, this is contested by some religious leaders. This can play out in varied forms of resistance by religious leaders, seen as a loss of status, money and influence – including resistance to efforts to end child marriage.
- Second, many religious leaders are *not aware of the negative consequences of child marriage*. This lack of awareness may underpin their ongoing willingness to perform child marriage ceremonies.
- Third, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism all have stories and texts that have been interpreted in different ways and used to *support forms of child marriage*. Some religious leaders thus resist efforts to end child marriage as they believe their religion requires it.
- Fourth, with all three religions and in all regions studied, religious leader resistance is shaped by a *religiously-driven fear and condemnation of premarital sex, contraception and pregnancy outside of marriage*. This leads to religious leaders endorsing or allowing child marriage as the 'solution' to this situation, especially in the case of the girl-child.
- Fifth, *child marriage upholds and manifests patriarchal power* – which many religious leaders resist losing. Marriage and family are a key area where patriarchal religion has a history of ordaining men as having authority. Child marriage re-enforces these patriarchal beliefs, such as the unquestioned social power of the father who, in many countries, makes the final decision about when and who to marry his daughters to. Religious beliefs can be used to reinforce inequitable gender norms as God-ordained and therefore unchallengeable.
- Sixth, in the light of the sexual taboos and patriarchy often underpinned by religion and perpetuated by religious leaders, child marriage can be framed as a form of parental protection. This protection approach can intensify in fragile, high risk or conflict-ridden spaces, where parental fears for their children's safety escalate.
- Seventh, with the rise of *religious fundamentalism*, religion is often used as a dominant identity marker. Social change is then presented as an attack on religion, and social issues become proxies for an 'anti-religious agenda' that seeks to control multiple issues.

It should be noted that resistance takes many different forms and that all resistant religious leaders are not resisting for the same reasons, especially not in different parts of the world.



## Key steps when working with resistant religious leaders

As a result of the complexity of understanding of religious resistance, three key steps are identified that need to be done by all organisations considering engaging with resistant religious leaders. First, before implementing, it is crucial to do *background research* to first understand the specific religious leaders and their communities. Such formative research can vary in how extensive it is but should lead to an understanding not only of the community, but also of the attitudes and beliefs of the religious leaders that the intervention will engage. A resistance analysis to identify the religious roots of resistance to ending child marriage is critical to developing targeted strategies to address these drivers, rather than importing pre-decided strategies. As a result of these findings and decisions, *careful selection must be done of the religious leaders* that will be engaged. Answering a number of questions can help an organisation identify these leaders. Robust stakeholder and social network analyses can inform who are the more 'progressive' or 'conservative' leaders, as well as understanding the influence and size of their networks. In the current global climate, politics and religion are often closely connected. Any engagement with religious leaders needs to make strategic choices in terms of how it responds to this complex alignment between politics and religion. Third, *limited monitoring and evaluation* exists in this area and is urgently needed. This starts with formative research, which can help develop a theory of change used to identify causal pathways for change that are tied to root cause analysis and help identify indicators to measure this change. Creative experimental and participatory methods are needed to measure longer term outcomes and impact around social norm change, not just activities and outputs.

## Five strategies for working with religious leaders on child marriage

Based on the forms and drivers of religious resistance to ending child marriage, a number of strategic areas require engagement if an organisation wishes to work with religious leaders on child marriage. However, specific forms and roots of resistance do not always require the same strategies, and an organisation has to carefully study its context to determine how it will engage with these strategic areas. In other words, there is no simple 'if x, then y' recipe that can be followed by all organisations. However, based on a review of the literature and analysis of interviews with practitioners, this study identified five strategies that were particularly useful across different contexts.

**1** Firstly, one has to *respect religious leader agency*. There has to be genuine respect for religious leaders, their religion and the reasons for their position, and they need to be approached without judgement. Telling them that they are wrong is extremely likely to reinforce resistance and provoke backlash. When engaging with religious leaders, various 'entry' topics can be used, depending on the context. The goal is to facilitate discussion and over time to influence and change perceptions and practices.

**2** Second, the *framing of the approach* is key and must be carefully thought through in advance, with an integrated approach to child marriage preferred to viewing it as a stand-alone issue. Positive framing of the issue, organisation and interventions is recommended as it allows receptive religious leaders to embrace a positive championing identity. It is helpful to offer creative ways for religious leaders to identify themselves as potential assets, rather than focusing on the fact of their existing negative resistance. The interlocutors who engage with resistant religious leaders can impact the effectiveness of the interventions.

**3** Third, the aim should not be to convince all religious leaders of the value of ending child marriage, but to convince enough for momentum to swing in favour of ending child marriage; to *build critical mass* behind the idea of ending child marriage, using existing avenues of engagement and also building on existing progressive religious leaders if they exist. If one is new to engaging with religious leaders, partnering with other institutions or initiatives that have good experience of engagement with religious leaders can be helpful. Another way is to engage via existing religious structures. Language needs to be culturally and religiously appropriate and enable religious communities to make public commitments that they own and can be internally accountable for.



**4** Fourth, *engaging with sacred scripture* is important, both to counter interpretations that promote child marriage or may indirectly support it, but also to promote interpretations that can be used to oppose child marriage. A dual approach, combining theological engagement with public health information, has proven to be effective in many contexts. Appendix A provides a number of toolkits, some specifically focused on child marriage, that give detailed examples of engaging theologically.

**5** Finally, to work with religious leaders on their fears and judgement of unmarried sex and pregnancy, one needs to find ways to *talk about sex and sexuality* as a core driver underpinning child marriage. This must include basic sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information, but also needs to engage the perspective of girls and their lived realities and the complex intersections between sex, sexuality and religious beliefs on issues such as purity. Work with religious leaders on HIV and AIDS has a history of engaging with this and can offer some useful lessons.

### Points for consideration

Engaging with religious leaders is a complex endeavour. First, the *heterogeneousness of child marriage* emerged as a crucial issue in working with religious leaders. One should not only work with a general idea of what child marriage is, but to be specific as to the reasons why it happens in a particular setting and why religion and religious leaders support it in that setting. Second there is very little being done to assist *girls that are already married*. Third, there is little literature available on *engaging religions that do not have a central, authoritative religious text*. Fourth, one must *recognise the diversity* between different religions, within a religion, and among religious leaders. Fifth, there is a need to *go beyond simplistic binaries* of either/or both around the agency/vulnerability of adolescent girls and also around a strong faith/secular division on which religious fundamentalism can then thrive.



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## List of abbreviations

AWET	Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust
BRAC	Building Resources Across Communities
CoH	Channels of Hope
CEFM	Child Early and Forced Marriage
EIC	Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
FHI	Family Health International
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HIV&AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus & Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
IRW	Islamic Relief Worldwide
KII	Key Informant Interviews
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIRN	National Inter-Religious Network (Nepal)
SIS	Sisters in Islam
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
URDR	Unit for Religion and Development Research
VAW	Violence against Women
V4C	Voices4Change
WVI	World Vision International



# 1

## Introduction



Religious leaders<sup>1</sup> are often gatekeepers to religious communities. They hold considerable power and authority and influence their constituency's beliefs and behaviours (Le Roux et al, 2016). They are also key role-players in formalising and celebrating major life events, such as births and deaths, but also marriages. Thus, they are uniquely positioned in relation to efforts to sustain or to end child marriage.<sup>2</sup> Religion<sup>3</sup> is often strategically used to defend child marriage, but evidence shows that religious leaders can also be strong allies in ending child marriage (Greene et al, 2015). Unpacking and understanding the complex links between religion and child marriage, and why some religious leaders may push back on efforts to end child marriage (while others are vocal proponents for change), could help accelerate progress on this issue.

*Girls Not Brides* is a global partnership of more than 1000 civil society organisations committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their potential. Recognising that more than 80% of the world's population profess a religious belief (Pew Research Center, 2012), many *Girls Not Brides* members are engaging with religion and religious leaders in their efforts to end child marriage. Seeing both the successes and challenges of engaging with religious leaders on child marriage and seeking to

assist members in their efforts to work with religious leaders, *Girls Not Brides* commissioned the *Unit for Religion and Development Research* (URDR) at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, to conduct qualitative research with a specific focus on engaging with resistant religious leaders.

This study reflected on engagement with religious leaders from Christianity, Islam and Hinduism – the majority religion in the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage. While many religious leaders have been powerful supporters of change, the particular focus of this study has been on resistant religious leaders as these resistant voices are often the loudest ones, and therefore learning how to engage them constructively is a priority.

What has been learnt through the literature review and interviews has been synthesised, with the aim of identifying commonalities and general best practices that can apply to many different settings. The risk of such a synthesis, however, is that it can create the impression that all religions and religious leaders are the same. But this is not the case: we find inter- and intrareligious diversity, impacted by an interplay of religion, region, political situation, and the type and positions of religious leaders. What can be appropriate in one setting may be rejected in another. That is why it is of the utmost importance, first, to better understand the context in which one is working. Furthermore, it is important to note that this report should be treated with care, lest it reinforce negative stereotypes about the role of religion and religious leaders in perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination. The focus on resistant religious leader should not be construed as inferring that all religious leaders are resistant, nor that all religions indiscriminately promote child marriage.

<sup>1</sup> Religious leaders are people in roles of authority within a specific religious community or tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Child marriage is any formal marriage or informal union where one or both of the parties are under 18 years of age (*Girls Not Brides*, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars prefer the term 'religion' rather than 'faith' (cf. Tomalin, 2015; Fountain, 2015), because the latter is seen as too focused on inward religiosity (cf. Asad, 2001). Others prefer 'faith' (Clarke, 2007; Hefferan, 2007), because religion is seen as too often associated only with organised religion (Marshall 2015). For this study 'religion' is used, to be inclusive of both organised religion and more informal belief systems.

## 1.1 Methodology

The aim of the research project was to investigate and propose strategies and tools for addressing child marriage with and through religious leaders, prioritising tools for engaging with resistant religious leaders. It combined a review of relevant literature (both academic and grey) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with individuals with extensive, in-depth practitioner experience of engaging with religious leaders on child marriage. What was learnt through the triangulation of these two data sets was workshopped with the *Girls Not Brides* secretariat and members in several webinars, meetings, and review processes.

The project included perspectives and strategies relevant to three major world religions, namely Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It also intentionally identified literature and participants from countries and regions most affected by child marriage. It should be noted that the priority remained to engage with literature and KII participants that have insight into the *practicalities* of engaging with religion and religious leaders around child marriage.

International ethical clearance for this study was received from the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee: Humanities (project number REC-2018-6675).

### Literature review

The review focused on literature relevant to the responses of and engagement with religious leaders specifically in relation to child marriage, particularly religious leaders opposing efforts to end child marriage.

Two databases were used in searches for academic literature, namely Jstor and Ebscohost. Taking into consideration the wide range of search terms, the searches were:

- limited to literature produced after 2000
- structured to include only relevant databases and fields<sup>4</sup>
- Boolean searches were done, using the following search terms:

- “Religious leaders” and “child marriage”
- “Faith leaders” and “child marriage”
- “Religion” and “child marriage”
- “Faith” and “child marriage”
- “Religious leaders” and “early marriage”
- “Faith leaders” and “early marriage”
- “Religion” and “early marriage”
- “Faith” and “early marriage”

- With Ebscohost, all hits were checked; with Jstor, the first 200 hits were checked

Grey literature was sourced using *Girls Not Brides* and URDR databases. A Google search was also done. The search was:

- limited to literature produced after 2000
- structured to include only relevant databases and fields
- Boolean searches were done, using the same search terms as with the Jstor and Ebscohost searches
- After controlling for Girls Not Brides reports (often top hits) and duplication, the first 50 hits were reviewed.

The searches on Ebscohost, Jstor and Google found little literature on Hindu religious leaders. Therefore, focused Boolean searches were done, using Google Scholar and Google, to source Hindu-specific literature:

- using the following search terms:
  - “Child marriage” and “Hindu”
  - “Child marriage” and “Hindu leaders”
  - “Child marriage” and “Hindu faith leaders”
  - “Hindu” and “early marriage”
  - “Hindu leaders” and “early marriage”
  - “Hindu faith leaders” and “early marriage”
- After controlling for all Girls Not Brides reports, the first 50 hits were reviewed.

The literature was reviewed by the URDR team and coded thematically, with three rounds of coding. Coding was done using Atlas.ti.

<sup>4</sup> With Ebscohost the databases were Academic search Premiere, Africa wide information, ATLA, CINAHL, E-journals, Healthsource, Health source, MEDLINE. With Jstor the selected subjects were sociology, social work, slavic studies, religion, public policy and administration, public health, psychology, population studies, political science, peace & conflict studies, law, Latin American studies, Jewish studies, international relations, history, health sciences, health policy, feminist & women’s studies, education, economics, development, criminology & criminal science, communication studies, classical studies, British studies, Asian studies, Anthropology, American studies, American Indian studies, African studies, African American studies.





## Key informant interviews

KII guides were developed based on the literature review. Potential KII participants were identified by the *Girls Not Brides* secretariat, as well as by the URDR researchers. The interviews were conducted via Skype, with 15 expert practitioners from various world regions and experience with working with Christian, Muslim and/or Hindu religious leaders on child marriage. Some of these expert practitioners are also religious leaders and could therefore reflect on the issue with a unique insider/outsider positioning.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically using two rounds of coding with Atlas.ti.



A full list of the KII participants, their organisations and the countries they work in is included in Appendix D.

## 1.2 Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study.

First, it is a small study. Ideally, interviews would have been done with practitioners working in a wider array of countries, with different organisations doing this work in the same country, and also with religious leaders who are involved in their programming. Efforts were made to overcome this limitation by intentionally selecting participants from countries from various world regions and who engage with different religions. Also, different kinds of organisations were intentionally selected (e.g. faith-based, women's, community development, etc.), to ensure more diversity. Furthermore, literature was sourced that focused on even more countries.

Due to the limited timeframe of the study, only English-speaking participants could be interviewed and only English literature was reviewed. This limitation was partly overcome by the *Girls Not Brides* secretariat assisting in translating key documents. Furthermore, a session at the *Girls Not Brides* Global Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, presented by one of the URDR researchers, was devoted to

discussing the findings of the research and gathering partners' input. This session was also interpreted so as to include Francophone members.

There appears to be limited monitoring and evaluation being done of work conducted with religious leaders on child marriage, that focus on the key drivers of religious resistance to ending child marriage. Lessons learned from work to address other issues show some emerging expertise that urgently needs to be applied to this context. It appears that, with many organisations, their monitoring and evaluation tracks the number of activities implemented rather than measuring the impact of interventions on shifting attitudes and behaviours that reinforce discrimination against women and girls. This study emphasises the need to fill this gap and identify the root causes of religious leader resistance to ending child marriage, and to measure longer term how interventions are effectively impacting these attitudes and behaviours.

Few of the organisations represented in the interviews have programming that focuses exclusively on religious leaders and child marriage. However, as the research has shown that this is a best practice – and that such integrated programming is preferred – this is not seen as a limitation. The importance of integrated programming is discussed later in the report.

There appears to be limited engagement by organisations with the religious leaders of less formal religious networks and institutions. Interventions tend to frequently be focused on religious leaders from established religious institutions, e.g. the local Imam or Hindu priest, or with an established denomination, e.g. the Catholic Church. However, especially in Christianity, there has been an upsurge of independent religious groups that do not belong to any formal religious network or hierarchical structure. Yet they often have big congregations and enormous influence in the community. To (at least partially) overcome this limitation, a practitioner that engages with this specific demographic was interviewed and grey literature from her organisation was reviewed.

## 2

## Why and how are some religious leaders resistant to ending child marriage?

Any organisation considering engaging with religious leaders resistant to ending child marriage need to identify how resistance plays out in their specific context, in order to better understand how to engage with it. This resistance can take many different forms in different parts of the world. This section briefly explores a six-fold typology to help organisations think through how resistance manifests in their contexts.



See Appendix A for a Resistance Wheel tool to help organisations to think through this six-fold typology

### 2.1 The six ways that religious leaders are resisting

First, some religious leaders are resisting through **vocal dissent or backlash** to the reform of laws to end child marriage or remove legal loopholes. For example, in Bangladesh certain religious leaders have a history of protesting against progressive national laws that ban child marriage (Huda 2018; Rafi and Chowdbury, 2000). Similar reactions are seen in many other countries, including Trinidad and Tobago and Indonesia (Joseph, 2016; Habsjah, 2017). Senior political leaders around the world have also cited religion as a justification for not changing laws applicable to child marriage (Greene et al, 2015). In the USA, a senator conditionally vetoed a proposed 2015 Bill to ban child marriage with no exceptions by saying it “would violate the cultures and traditions of some communities in New Jersey based on religious traditions” (Buncombe 2018:2). These defensive reactions to social change form part of a backlash to liberal law reforms, fuelled by rising religious fundamentalisms (Imam, 2018), and can be made worse by a polarised and sensationalised use of media that reinforces the idea that secular law reforms and religious traditions are enemies.



Resistance can also be **silent or hidden**. Some religious leaders do this by, for example, not sharing what they learnt at workshops with their followers, by agreeing to come to meetings but then not turning up, or through verbal assent in public followed by saying something different in private to their religious followers. This can be around both child marriage and its interrelated themes, e.g. female education or gender equality.

Some religious leaders **resist through their actions**. They may continue to act in ways that directly perpetuate child marriage, by carrying out informal or customary marriage ceremonies for the community in secret, especially when the laws of the country make it illegal. Some even model this practice by being married to girls themselves. For example, in Zimbabwe, a number of independent religious leaders have many child wives and endorse both polygamy and marrying children (Progressio, 2016; Kadirire, 2016). Since, in many settings, marriage is only considered valid if a religious official completes the ceremony, this forms a direct, ongoing connection between child marriage and religious leaders.



Religious leaders also resist by **scapegoating** those that oppose child marriage. In certain contexts, resistant religious leaders form a powerful political group, especially where there is an entanglement between state/law and religion. In all three religions there are fundamentalist movements that see resistant struggle as a religious duty (Imam, 2018). Those that do not resist are then seen as blasphemous or deviant in relation to the specific religion. This was seen in research carried out by *Sisters in Islam* projects in Indonesia and Malaysia (Habsjah, 2017; Lai et al, 2018), and also has a long history in Bangladesh (Rafi et al, 2000). This creates negative consequences for the individuals concerned, acts as a deterrent to others, and reduces the credibility of those opposing child marriage. Use of specific religious tools, such as fatwas or excommunication, can be used against those seen as blasphemous (Lai et al, 2018).

Religious leaders can uphold **spiritual or ethical resistance**, as they are often authoritative guardians of spiritual knowledge within communities. They can use accepted sources of religious authority, e.g. sacred texts, traditions, afterlife and spirit beliefs, to endorse their position on child marriage and its related issues and to present gendered social concepts such as girl child maturity and paternal guardianship as unchallengeable, eternal truths. If people challenge child marriage, they are then seen as attacking the whole faith edifice. These religious tools can create fear and silence where people will not go against God, or risk losing their salvation, as Habibur from Bangladesh notes:

“

*(I)n our community people don't challenge the religious leader, they are very much conscious about, you know, after this, what happened if they don't follow the God rules.... So, that can be a fear that the people, they're a bit afraid to challenge the religious leader because now maybe there will be problems, you know, in the next life if we are not just obeying what the rules are? (Habibur, Bangladesh, 23 April 2018)*

”

In many contexts, religious leaders also offer direct **resistance to other issues indirectly related to child marriage**. For example, in Bangladesh BRAC found that religious leaders' resistance to ending child marriage was actually because of their resistance to girl child education and women's mobility. Child marriage then forms an indirect proxy for religious resistance to other issues, such as female education, sex before marriage, and child rights. While resistance to these cluster issues often have similar root causes, such as gender inequality, the research showed that there is in fact not one single root cause alone but an interlinked web of reinforcing roots (which the next section will explore in more detail).

The six modes of resistance above, while not exhaustive, offer a suggested typology of how some religious leaders resist efforts to end child marriage. These modes can combine to form a multi-faceted backlash at many levels, as this case study of *Sisters in Islam* in Malaysia illustrates:

*Sisters in Islam* (SIS) was established as a women's organisation 30 years ago in Malaysia, focusing on Islamic family law and the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act. Over the years their work has expanded, but remains focused on Islam and what it says about women's rights. They purposefully engage in the public sphere, using media platforms to highlight situations where women's rights are being violated, and using religious, health and international law to argue that such acts be recognised as violations. They have seen a number of the types of resistance discussed above combined and used against them: vocal, verbal resistance, scapegoating as religious deviants, use of conservative media, and the use of spiritual authority in a fatwa, backed up by religious law courts.

Their strong feminist, public voice has led to a fatwa being issued against SIS, stating that SIS and the organisations and individuals that subscribe to liberalism and religious liberalism are deviants. SIS is still battling the fatwa in court. Should it be upheld, SIS can be instructed to shut down all their social media sites and give up all their publications. SIS staff can also be sent for 'rehabilitation'. This has impacted the work of SIS in a large way: "We have not been able to go down to the public as effectively as we used to do. Because you know 'these are the women that are deviant, and we should not be listening to them'" (Rozana, Malaysia, 20 April 2018). They have had to change how they engage with religious leaders, fairly fundamentally changing the SIS approach: "(W)e have not been able to (go to the mosque) because we don't have access to mosques. You know, if we were to turn up to a mosque, they're like, you know, 'you're the devil, go away'" (Rozana, Malaysia, 20 April 2018). Research carried out on child marriage in Malaysia by SIS itself (Lai et al, 2018) highlights that there is a common misconception that child marriage in the country is primarily driven by poverty, while their research suggests instead that a key driver remains patriarchy underpinned by religion. This highlights that, in the Malaysian context as in many other countries, the roots of child marriage may lie deeper, in issues of power, patriarchy and sexuality, shaped indirectly by religious beliefs.

While knowing how resistance is playing out is an important step, it is not enough. The next section delves deeper, looking at the roots of resistance by exploring *why* religious leaders may be resisting.

## 2.2 The seven roots of religious resistance

Resistant religious leaders do not always oppose efforts to end child marriage for the same reason. This section identifies seven roots of religious resistance. When religious leaders resist efforts to end child marriage, identifying the specific root/s is essential to developing appropriate intervention methods and counter-strategies, to deal appropriately with the religious resistance that has been identified in the particular context.



These seven roots of religious resistance are also depicted pictorially in Appendix A

### 2.2.1 Marriage as religious ritual

For many people across religious traditions, marriage remains a socio-religious ritual, performed by a spiritual leader and witnessed by the community. While marriages are increasingly becoming state and legally regulated, marriage remains a ritual in which religion and religious leaders play a key role. This results in a unique ‘gatekeeper’ link between religion, religious leaders and practices of marriage, including child marriage. This link should not be underestimated, as without religious leaders the ceremony often cannot take place at all. While in some places there are many religious leaders (so a family can go elsewhere if one refuses), in other settings people can only be married by a specific priest, namely the one from their local village. See, for example, how *Vikalp Sasthan* in India explains the role of Hindu priests: “The Priest role is very important, because without that Priest that marriage does not happen.... This (child marriage) is (also) the monopoly of that Priest community.” (*Usha, India, 19 April 2018*).

This important role of arranging and performing marriages forms part of many religious leaders’ visibility, value and identity within communities and families. They acquire importance, power, status, but also practical benefits, such as money or gifts, by performing marriages. Marriage has historically been seen as ‘their turf’ where they have unique authority and where their words and actions have legal and social binding power. While increased political and legal regulation has emerged in most places in the modern era of nation states, this is

seen by some religious leaders as challenging an arena of life over which the religious has historically held full authority. This can play out in varied forms of resistance by religious leaders bent on retaining their power, including resistance to efforts to end child marriage. They may, for example, dismiss state claims that the age for marriage should be regulated to protect children, and argue that the indicator for being ready for marriage is biologically ordained by God and cannot be imposed by the state.

Many religious leaders see themselves as having a monopoly over marriage as a whole (including their ongoing role in internally resolving questions about the age of the persons involved), both in terms of performing the ritual, but also in terms of determining the meaning of it. For example, for some marriage is the main religious rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and marrying off an adolescent is therefore a crucial step in the adolescent’s journey to no longer be treated as a child. They then contest efforts to end child marriage not only because of the loss of influence and income, but also because they want to keep the meaning-making power currently held by religion and not hand it over to external secular powers. This moral-spiritual power to make marriage ‘sacred’ gives them huge ethical influence within communities: “(W)e celebrate and take marriage that has the blessing of religious leader as a consecrated marriage. Any marriage done outside religious leaders blessing is as if it were a marriage done in disobedience to God’s rule” (Joseph, Nigeria, 26 April 2018). Such influence on religious followers can be used in positive ways to reinforce a religious prohibition on child marriage but can also be used to legitimate it.

Marriage is also framed in many traditions as a religious duty for all its followers and can mean that religious leaders are reluctant to put any barriers in the way of people fulfilling it, regardless of their age or the law. Glorifying marriage spiritually, whilst not in itself generally harmful, then becomes a form of indirect affirmation for child marriage, with religious leaders resisting efforts to end child marriage because they genuinely do not want to risk their followers’ salvation. For example, recent research from Indonesia shows that Islamic beliefs that all people should get married can make it hard for religious leaders to resist performing child marriages: “Marriage is a rule (ibadah) in Islam and nobody should make it difficult for people to realise the practice and that everyone should get married at least once” (Habsjah, 2017, v). In practice this often is interpreted as meaning that the earlier a marriage takes place, the better, especially if it is seen as a girl’s primary destiny.



## 2.2.2 Lack of awareness of both child marriage consequences, and of laws prohibiting child marriage

Religious leaders are frequently ill-informed on basic health, gender and sexuality issues related to child marriage (e.g. the dimensions of psychological maturity for sex or the health complications that can occur with teenage pregnancy) (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). Their lack of awareness combines with the invisibility of some of the physical and social consequences of child marriage which are often hidden from public view, such as the raised risks of domestic violence, withdrawal of the girl-bride from formal education, increased poverty and increased maternal morbidity. Some of these issues can remain hidden within the household space, which is often controlled by in-laws and/or the husband. Religious leaders might thus perform child marriage ceremonies, believing that it does no harm.

Second, some religious leaders may themselves be unaware of the laws and policies within their country with regard to child marriage itself and the legal consequences for them of performing marriage registrations. As a practitioner in Ethiopia noted: “When it comes to religious leaders..., they really don’t understand. They don’t have the information. We tend to think that because they are religious leaders they know. (But that is not the case)” (Kidest, Ethiopia, 20 April 2018). Furthermore, in countries without formal birth registration, they may sometimes simply not know that a potential marriage partner is under-age.

This lack of awareness of child marriage consequences and the laws surrounding it is often easily passed on to their religious followers. There are often unspoken rules that it is unacceptable to challenge the thinking of religious leaders. Followers are taught to give unquestioning obedience, with religious leaders often seen as representatives of the Divine. This is why, for example, *Sisters in Islam* finds it so important to employ a strategy that can enable and better equip the wider public to independently engage critically with religion and religious beliefs:

“

*(W)hat we do... is to... expand... the public debate and the public voice. To speak about these things, these issues, especially in relation to Islam... (B)ecause anytime when anyone tries to talk about religion, you know, there is a big effort to say, or a backlash to say, ‘you’re not qualified, so you shouldn’t talk about this’. So, the work that we do is really to expand this public space for everyone, regardless of, you know, your belief to talk about it. (Rozana, Malaysia, 20 April 2018)*

”

## 2.2.3 Religious interpretations used to support child marriage

All ancient religious traditions and sacred texts can be interpreted in ways that endorse some social practices now agreed to be problematic, e.g. slavery. This is also true of child marriage. Christianity, Islam and Hinduism all have stories and sacred texts that have at times been interpreted as religiously legitimising forms of child marriage. Examples given by respondents as cited by the community included: The Prophet Mohammad married Aisha when she was 9; Mary, the mother of Jesus, was married as a child; and in the Brahmin caste, a belief that parents may be given a place in paradise if they marry their children off while they are still young. Other religious principles are seen to have an indirect impact on child marriage. For example, concepts of male guardianship and maturity in Islam; Christian ideas that women are ‘saved’ through marriage and childbirth; and strands of Hinduism that believe that a girl must not live in the house of her parents once she enters puberty.

Marriage is strongly upheld within all three religious traditions as part of “God’s design” for society and family. It is seen in many contexts as a religious duty on parents to have their children marry before the parents die – which may lead to anxiety if parents are old or sick. Patterns of patriarchal and parental authority are generally strong features of all ancient texts and when these are taken literally as unchanging ethical endorsements by God, strong resistance to many forms of social change can be seen. To merely dismiss these traditions and texts is seen as disrespecting not only time-honoured religious persons such as founders or saints within a tradition, but also religious leaders themselves. In many religious communities, religious leaders see their key identity and role as protecting this absolute authority of the sacred texts and tradition, and therefore can become defensive and resist any attempt that is seen by them as challenging this.



Photo: Mark Kucharski (Unsplash.com)

At the same time, while sacred texts from all three religious traditions have been used to underpin religious resistance to ending child marriage, what is viewed as spiritually authoritative by a specific religious group can vary. Religious leaders such as sheiks, living prophets or bishops can also be seen as absolute authorities, as can the religious institution, its oral traditions or unwritten scriptures (for example Vedas or Catholic dogmas). Pentecostal and Independent churches emphasise the authority of the Holy Spirit and its anointing of religious leaders. This can have an impact on child marriage. For example, a living prophet's<sup>5</sup> dreams of who is to be married, regardless of age, is seen by followers as one which must be obeyed, as research in Zimbabwe has explored (Progressio, 2016). This embodiment of total authority in the religious person or institution makes religious resistance harder to counter as there is no independent text which can be disputed or reinterpreted (Kadirire, 2016).

## 2.2.4 Fear of premarital sex and pregnancy

Across all three religions and in all regions studied, religious leader resistance is frequently shaped by a religiously-driven fear and condemnation of premarital sex and pregnancy as well as, for some, use of contraception and/or abortion (Steinhaus et al, 2016, Lai et al, 2018). This leads to religious leaders endorsing or allowing child marriage as the 'solution' to this situation, especially in the case of girls. While some religious leaders do recognise the negative consequences of child marriage, these consequences are often 'justified' because of the greater evils of premarital sex and pregnancy, as research from Ghana has emphasised (Oduro, 2017:31). See, for example, how Muslim leaders in Malaysia approach the issue:

“

*Within the Muslim society we have very, very low tolerance of what do you call it sex before marriage, ja. You know the approach is that, if you know of two people that are engaged in sexual relations you know this has got to be rectified by marrying them off in a way, I think the understanding is that you know to minimise whatever sins have already been done so that is one. (Rozana, Malaysia, 20 April 2018)*

”

<sup>5</sup> In the Zimbabwean context, leaders of the Apostolic churches are called 'Prophets', to highlight that they are seen to be anointed by God's Holy Spirit and that their words and actions have God's authority directly for their followers, rather than being mediated by a top-down formal religious hierarchy. This makes any accountability hard (cf. Progressio 2016).

As a result of this fear, religiously gendered themes of stigma, shame and honour also emerge as indirectly fuelling child marriage. Female virginity, purity and reproduction are seen as a priority in many communities, and religious purity codes, archaic laws and gendered norms are often normalised as unchallengeable. At the same time, religious leaders often avoid discussing sex and sexuality, seeing it as inappropriate for religious spaces (Steinhaus et al, 2016). Religious taboos around both sexuality and gender can converge in religious communities to underpin practices of child marriage as a prevention strategy, as this example from India shows:

“

*(T)hat's why in this age they will do the child marriage because in religious things that is right after menstrual cycle they should be married and they will go their in-laws home, because if they stay in their parent's home that is not good for their parents. Because after the menstruation cycle girls feel affection to sex and sexual issue and she feel lots of things, so she will be attracted to other opposite sex, and then they have affair and they will elope together. (Usha, India, 19 April 2018).*

”

Marriages, or in many parts of Latin America, in particular, informal customary unions<sup>6</sup>, are often seen as a legitimate solution (regardless of age) not merely from the community, but because religious leaders also make it about religious law, God and the afterlife. Religious leaders are shaped by and shape a fear that girls can 'lose their salvation' unless marriage takes place to 'sanctify' or make right the earlier sin. When sex outside marriage is seen as 'sin' and female purity is religiously glorified, child marriage is then seen as preventing sin (Taylor et al, 2015). Researchers interviewed from Brazil noted that fear of religious leader reaction emerged as a strong pressure on families to make the marriage decision:

“

*Some families told us that actually “I didn't want to marry my girl but I felt fear about my religious leaders reaction and my community's religious reaction and then I understand it better for my girl to take this marriage”...we have some interview with religious leaders and then talk with us about why it was so important for them these issues and why girls need to be married and then it is about the control of the girl's sexuality and the girl's body. (Viviana, Brazil, 3 May 2018)*

”

<sup>6</sup> In Brazil, research on child marriage (Taylor et al, 2015) shows that many girls aged 16-17 are in informal, customary unions with an older male partner. This operate as de facto marriages and are often encouraged by religious leaders, especially if the partners are expecting or have a child together. These unions are not recognised in some global child marriage statistics, making the practice even more invisible.



Female sexuality is treated very differently to male sexuality in most parts of the world and is typically associated with gendered social norms and beliefs around purity, family honour and respectability. However, religious prohibitions around sex and sexuality as a driver of child marriage for both boys and girls needs more acknowledgement. When social norms determine that expressing sexuality outside marriage is 'sinful', this shapes patterns adopted by both parents and by boys and girls to find ways to explore their emerging sexuality in socially-sanctioned ways. Child marriage or informal customary unions can then be depicted as a 'solution' by both generations and can also be reinforced by religious leaders.

### 2.2.5 Child marriage as patriarchal power

The previous section discussed the strong connection often made between pre-marital sex, girls and sin, and how this plays a key role in driving child marriage and religious resistance to ending it. At the heart of this connection is a complex entanglement of religion and patriarchy (Lai et al, 2018). This is a cross-cultural reality across many religions (Greene et al, 2015) seen across its leadership, institutions, sacred texts and traditions as well as in its root metaphors and ethical precepts. Some scholars suggest that religion can play an ongoing role in sustaining discriminatory marriage practices and the normalisation of violence against women: "The relationships between religious traditions and misogynistic ideals, which in turn sustain an often hostile environment for women, have been identified across all religious traditions" (Naik, 2011:134). These same patterns bleed down into the treatment of adolescent girls. The rise in women's rights awareness can unintentionally create a backlash where girls are then married even younger, before they have a chance to develop independence and contest the primary roles of wife and mother that they are expected to play.

The adolescent girl forms a key figure in child marriage, in all religions and locations. She is often at double risk, situated at the intersections of gender-based and child violence and discrimination (Fry & Elliott, 2017). Religion often plays a role in this. For example, in parts of Nigeria, religious teachings shape the way she is regarded in communities, with a restrictive set of duties reinforced by sacred texts that prepare her for only marriage and housework and seek to keep her virtuous and obedient (Christian Aid, 2016). In Pakistan, religious leaders suggest that one should not eat food in the house of a girl who is menstruating, while in Zimbabwe, unmarried persons cannot take part in many church rituals (Progressio, 2016). Adolescent girls' access

to sexual and reproductive health education is contested by many religious leaders as encouraging sex outside marriage, with religiously driven social stigma and shame attached to sex outside marriage. From early on girls in many contexts are groomed by religion and culture to see becoming a wife as their main destiny. Research in Brazil suggests that some girls choose marriage to escape abuse in the home, only to become trapped in a new cycle of violence with a partner, a cycle which religion indirectly contributes towards (Taylor et al, 2015). As *Promundo Brazil* explained: "The husband, the older men they tend to look for younger girls because it is always easier to control her as a partner" (Mohara, 3 May 2018).

Religious attitudes on marriage, households, gender and sexuality are deeply embedded within historic patterns of patriarchy. Marriage and family are a key area in life where patriarchal religion has a history of ordaining men as holding legitimate authority over households and owning the women and children within these households. Marriage, gender roles and parenthood in ancient texts are often framed by a protection narrative, where fathers hold an unchallenged role as the head of the family and its natural protector and decision maker. This view sees both women and children as property and less important than men. Religious texts and traditions are used to reinforce this, for example by promoting the idea that women were created for men and as the sexual property of a man (Anderson, 2005). Without a critical unpacking of the original and current context of all religious traditions and texts, religion will reinforce patriarchal patterns and distort female sexuality, as was noted in Brazil:

“

*(T)he family and the church realise that the girl starts her sexual life and it is a problem and then when they realise that the girl can be pregnant or when she is pregnant and then marriage is the solution...the solution is the presence of the man in her life and so if she is pregnant she needs a husband and if she starts her sexual life then she needs a husband. It is about this idea that the man is the solution and they need to control their bodies. (Viviana, Brazil, 3 May 2018)*

”

Child marriage can be seen as patriarchal power in action: depicting girls in particular as economic property; placing responsibility on fathers for arranging marriages; viewing girls' bodies and sexual practices as the terrain for wider family honour and/or shame and stigma; the glorification of female virginity and purity; and the reinforcement of gendered roles and domination patterns within

marriage and the household. In all these patterns, religion and its beliefs, stories, laws and commands can be interpreted in ways that underpin and reinforce these inequitable gender norms as natural and God-ordained. However, the presence of both male and female allies for gender justice, from within all religious traditions, suggests that this linking of patriarchy and religion is not inevitable (Le Roux & Bowers-Du Toit, 2017; Le Roux et al, 2016; Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). It can be challenged and reinterpreted from within the different religious traditions themselves – an important strategy to counter this particular root of resistance. This has been seen (for example) in Indonesia, where female theological scholars have, based on a reinterpretation of religious texts, issued a fatwa against child marriage (Habsjar, 2017).

## 2.2.6 Child marriage as parental protection

In the light of the sexual taboos and patriarchy often underpinned by religion and perpetuated by religious leaders, child marriage is frequently framed by many religious leaders as a form of protection (Greene et al, 2015; Habsjah, 2017; Bedeke, 2017). It underpins prevention strategies to marry girls off young before they have the chance to ‘get into trouble’ sexually. A prevention narrative, when endorsed by religious leaders, works to minimise this potential ‘trouble’, enabling child marriage to be seen as an acceptable solution to fears of sinful behaviour (Le Roux et al, 2017). As Mohammad from Lebanon points out, protection is understood differently for girls and boys:

“

*This marriage can be like a protection for the girl and for the boy. For the girl it can be protection from the romance of people and it can protect her from the community and for the boy it can like kind of be protection for him to do something haram (forbidden). (Mohammad, Lebanon, 30 April 2018)*

”

Parents feel a religious responsibility to protect their children and provide for their future. Some religious leaders facilitate child marriage in support of paternal responsibility and ideas of settling down (Taylor et al, 2017). However, when children are viewed as the property of their parents, child marriage can turn into an exercise of parental power over children. This idea of children as property is reinforced by a hierarchical understanding of the family which religions can often legitimate (Anderson, 2005), as can be seen by the ongoing debates around corporal punishment in the home (Palm, 2018). With child marriage, religiously informed concepts of maturity, male guardianship and paternal responsibilities come into play and

parents may not want to lose this power or may feel unable to let go of this responsibility by allowing their daughter to decide who to marry (Greene et al, 2015). Parental power also acts in indirect ways. If parents may refuse to allow a girl to stay at home once she reaches puberty (as in parts of India), or demand that she leaves their home if she gets pregnant (as in parts of Brazil), marriage may seem like the only option to prevent her becoming homeless.

Parents often seek advice and blessing from local religious leaders with regard to decisions about their children. These religious leaders may also be influenced by pragmatic needs and a desire to keep their influence among the community members on whom they (usually) rely financially. In this way

there can be reciprocal pressure: parents expecting that religious leaders perform child marriage ceremonies, and religious leaders expecting parents to fulfil their parental responsibility to marry their children well. Finally, the protection discourse used by religious leaders appears to draw on ideas of the ‘best interests of child’. It is underpinned by socio-religious concepts of honour, stigma and the fear that an impure or older girl will not find a good husband: “(So) it is a belief to rather send off a child to get married when they are still pure, than for you to let them sleep around, (or) who will marry them in the end?” (Hope, Zimbabwe, April 2018).

Marriage can also be shaped by intergenerational family conflicts. In such settings it is a ritual that (for example) allows the adolescent girl to escape the limitations and restrictions that her parents place on her. In many cultures, marriage is seen as a social transition away from childhood and can be perceived by the girls themselves as a way of enhancing their freedom or escaping abuse at home. Within such a constrained reality, girls choose marriage. This highlights the need to explore in more depth the occurrence of self-initiated child marriages as a form of asserting independence against parental authority.

Insecure settings, such as conflict, humanitarian or refugee contexts, can increase parental anxiety around the current and future safety of their children. For example, *Terre des Hommes* in Lebanon notes how refugee populations fear for the safety of their young daughters in refugee camps, while partners in Malaysia have noted how the perceived risks (such as increased sexual violence) of living in urban contexts are making parents more anxious about their daughters. In such settings parents may turn to child marriage as a way of protecting their daughters. In the refugee camps in Lebanon this has been observed, with religious leaders increasingly performing child marriages (Bartelink et al, 2017).



A report addressing child marriage notes the complex intergenerational power play that can take place between the generations, and suggests that marriage itself can be seen as an economic transaction that may benefit different family members:

“

*Parents were uncomfortable with the shifting balance of power in which girls would establish their own sexual relationships and benefit directly from any resulting transaction. Parents would stand to lose in such a transaction. Parents justify these marriages in order to regulate young people's sexuality and maintain their reputation.*  
(Greene et al, 2015b: 15)

”

Parents are often directly impacted by the economic implications of child marriage. Ritualised systems of paying damages (for getting a girl pregnant outside of marriage), bride price (found across Sub-Saharan Africa) and dowry (more common in South Asia) all reinforce girl children as the property of parents and/or in-laws. In turn it can also drive child marriage. For example, in India it is cheaper to marry off young girls, for they require a smaller dowry. A parental duty to ensure children marry well, often underpinned by sacred texts, can shape desires to marry her early (before she is overlooked for younger candidates) to an older male financial provider. Girls can be seen as unworthy of economic investment (such as further schooling), as they will marry and leave that family unit to become part of another family. This reluctance to pay for school also leads to vulnerability to child marriage.

### 2.2.7 Religious fundamentalism

The recent rise of religious fundamentalism around the globe illustrates how religion can be used as a dominant identity indicator, behind which many other identities may hide (Imam, 2018; Habsjah, 2017). Religious tradition is then seen as something fixed and unchanging rather than as fluid and contextual, and used to challenge or reject what is seen as 'modern'. This can be an appealing notion for communities experiencing rapid social change.

In both Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, reasserting traditions such as child marriage has been tied to wider ideas of decolonisation. Ideas perceived as western or as historically imposed by colonial practice or laws, are being challenged and rejected. At the same time, there is a selective reclaiming of traditional patterns of pre-colonial society. This can include returning to religious patterns that are highly patriarchal (Lai et al, 2018).

One religious narrative is often held up as the 'truth' in ways that may align, deepen and politicise existing religious fractures within countries (Greene et al, 2015). Social change is then presented as an attack on religion as a whole, and social issues become proxies for an 'anti-religious agenda' that seeks to control multiple issues (e.g. fertility).

Religious fundamentalism also politicises and misuses religion as a weapon with which to challenge selected aspects of modernity, especially gender and sexuality. It labels certain things as being about religion, when it is actually about something else. Gender roles, sexuality patterns, access to contraception, female mobility, economic empowerment and girl child education are then attacked using religious arguments and language. Religion is used to obscure the true power struggle, which may be about access to resources, control of women's bodies, or political capital. For example, a senior political senator in Nigeria who married a 13-year-old girl in 2013, when challenged, accused his challengers of being 'un-Islamic' and looking down on his faith (Greene et al, 2015). Within this setting, child marriage takes on a strong symbolic value, linked to notions of family honour, purity, marriage decisions and gender and sexuality norms. It is positioned as reinforcing values of honour and family respect and is co-opted into processes of fundamentalism (Habsjah 2017; Lai et al, 2018). Efforts to end child marriage are portrayed as an attack on all religious values and traditional ways of living, and religion and culture are then seen as the unchanging enemies of secular modernity, rather than as flexible allies that can find common ground to work together.



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### 3

## Key steps when working with resistant religious leaders

Irrespective of the types or drivers of resistance that are present within a specific context, certain key steps must take place when responding to religious resistance to ending child marriage. This section identifies three such overarching steps. These should be taken regardless of the specific strategies then adopted by organisations. Note though, that these are not necessarily chronological steps but that they are interconnected.

### 3.1 Do background research

Before planning and implementing an intervention focused on religious leaders, it is important to first understand the religious leaders and their communities. Such background research can vary in how extensive it is but should lead to an understanding not only of the community, but also of the attitudes and beliefs of the religious leaders that the intervention will be engaging with. This is what *Vikalp Sansthan* does before starting any religious leader-focused intervention in a community:

“

*(W)e will first... try to know about all knowledge... Where the Priest is living and get our information about his style, his age, his working styles, what he is doing now, where he is living. All information, knowledge we gather about him. And also gather information about his [sic] what is he doing and what is his attitude. This is very important to know what is his attitude, and what is the action about the woman and girls and what is the situation of his family girls and woman... So, that information, all we gather, so that is where that information help us to talk with him about easily because if he counter anything then we have that information, so we will also counter and then talk with him. (Usha, India, 19 April 2018)*

”



Photo: Flickr.com Tushar Dayal

Doing detailed background research helps in various ways. It is crucial in identifying religious leaders that will potentially be more receptive to messaging on ending child marriage, as well as those who will potentially be more resistant. Furthermore, it can assist in the development of appropriate tools and strategies for engaging with the specific religious leaders. Doing such background research can even serve as a catalyst for some religious leaders to become interested in the issue of child marriage. This is what *Norwegian Church Aid* found when they first did a short information session, combined with a short survey, with a group of the highest level of religious leaders at their existing annual meeting. They combined basic information about a sensitive issue, such as child marriage, with a short anonymous questionnaire surveying what religious leaders think their churches should be doing about the issue. They found that the combination of information and survey helped religious leaders to realise the severity of the issue, as well as their churches' role in addressing it:

“

*(T)heir reflection was 'where have we been..., where was our facts, what did we really preach?'... (T)hey were challenged to reflect on, because all of them say that they serve the holistic ministry, so it was really, they were challenged, and we collected the data. We then made, I mean, we made analysis and then the leadership of that assembly... invited (us) to present more on the details to the board. So, then the leadership come to the result they want to engage their scholars... to dig into the issue. (Kidest, Ethiopia, 20 April 2018)*

”

Background research is not only about understanding the particular religious leaders that will be targeted.



It can also be an opportunity to understand the wider religious system, which can offer crucial information for designing interventions. For example, if one learns that the church denomination dictates that the most senior religious leaders makes all decisions on religious dogma and practice, and that this is followed by all of the other religious leaders, it clearly shows that an intervention will have to target the top leadership. This was found in Ethiopia (Bekere, 2017). Likewise, detailed formative research was carried out around religion and its interface with the adolescent girl in a number of states within Nigeria (Christian Aid, 2016).

This background research also needs to identify the specific forms of religious resistance present, and the roots of this resistance. Specific documented examples of such background research can be seen in recent research reports produced in Malaysia (Lai et al, 2018) and Indonesia (Habsjah, 2017). Working with religious leaders first requires identifying how, what, which and why religious resistance is happening within specific contexts. Earlier on, this report identified a six-fold typology of resistance: verbal, silent, action, scapegoating, spiritual and indirect resistance. Using this typology may help each organisation to first map and better understand how religious resistance is playing out in a specific context.

Second, digging down into a deeper understanding of the roots of this resistance is needed. Seven overlapping drivers (or underlying roots) were identified as shaping attitudes and practices seen to often fuel religious resistance. This can help make sense of the logics of religious resistance, a critical step for then developing tailored strategies.

- Marriage as religious ritual (“it’s our space, so hands off”)
- Lack of awareness of child marriage consequences (“it doesn’t harm anyone, does it?”)
- Child marriage seen as explicitly ordained by religion (“God says it’s okay”)
- Fear of premarital sex and pregnancy (“how do we prevent or resolve this shame?”)
- Patriarchal power (“being wives and mothers is girls’ destiny anyway”)
- Parental Protection (“because I said so and you belong/don’t belong to me”)
- Religious fundamentalism (“those trying to end child marriage want to destroy our religion”)

Background research, which includes resistance analysis, should guide the development of strategies. There is no ‘one size fits all’ model, and

these decisions should be based on the specific context of religious leader resistance.

### 3.2 Intentional selection of religious leaders

When identifying which types and which religious leaders to work with, it is important to consider why one wishes to engage resistant religious leaders in particular and what it is that one hopes to achieve through doing so.

A critical threshold question is whether a particular organisation should be working directly with religious leaders at all. This requires the organisation to look at how it is, or will be, perceived by religious leaders. The decision must first be made, and not just assumed, whether working with religious leaders is the right approach for the organisation.

There may also be situations of religious fundamentalism or conflict where engaging resistant religious leaders in particular may not be advisable for some organisations. They may decide to only work with progressive religious leaders or to work indirectly through other religious actors to informally equip them to engage resistant leaders.

In the current global climate, politics and religion are often closely connected. As discussed earlier, religion is often used as a front for other agendas, with religious fundamentalism on the rise in both the Global North and South. This means that any engagement with religious leaders need to make careful, strategic choices in terms of how it responds to this alignment between politics and religion. This decision will be different in different contexts – but irrespective of the context these are choices that must be made strategically and purposefully<sup>7</sup>.

For example, in parts of Northern Nigeria, where religion and inter- and intrareligious differences are often the scapegoat for violent conflict, a religious leader that chooses to go against dominant religious views on child marriage can be seen as compromised – which can have implications for his safety. In such a setting, where religion has become such a political issue, it can become an all-or-nothing, ‘if you are not for us, you are against us’ identity indicator. It can then be very difficult for a single religious leader to publicly oppose child marriage, even if he is convinced that it is wrong, for then he<sup>8</sup> may be perceived as distancing himself from his religion.

<sup>7</sup> See the bibliography for links to some resources that give examples of stakeholder mapping around religion and religious leaders and child marriage from within a specific context (Lai, 2018; Habsjah, 2018; Christian Aid, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Male pronouns are used when referring to religious leaders, as the majority of religious leaders are male. The overwhelming majority of case studies and examples of resistant religious leaders offered by practitioners, are of male religious leaders.

Despite these challenges, some effective work has been piloted with religious leaders on tackling harmful gender norms (Marshall et al, 2016; Voices4Change, 2016b).

Politics can potentially impact engagement with religious leaders on child marriage in different ways. For example, in unstable or fragile settings there is often a rise in child marriage, due to a parental

protection strategy (Bartelink et al, 2017), while a rise in religious fundamentalism is often accompanied by increasing attempts by religious leaders to overturn legislation that ensure women and children's rights. This highlights the importance of understanding the political climate in which work with religious leaders is being done and being strategic in how it is addressed.

The *Peace Foundation* in Pakistan is not working with any religious leaders that are aligned with a political party. Nor do they engage with religious political parties. They have decided to avoid such affiliations, for in their experience such religious leaders tend to hijack events and activities for their political agenda. Furthermore, in their experience such religious leaders are not good champions for ending child marriage, for community members are unsure whether they are representing a political or religious agenda. *Sisters in Islam* in Malaysia, on the other hand, have started to purposefully engage with certain Islamic political parties. Identifying parties with a moderate, progressive stance, they engage with the party leaders, most of whom are religious leaders that have received religious training.

The question has to be carefully engaged as to which religious leaders should be engaged with and why in a given context. In certain settings, it can be obvious which religious leaders an intervention should most critically engage with. For example, in Hindu communities the village priests are the ones who usually determine the wedding date and they are also the only ones who perform marriage ceremonies for Hindu community members. Therefore, these local level priests are an obvious intervention target.

However, it is often valuable not to only engage with the 'obvious' religious leaders. For example, informal religious leaders, such as women or youth group leaders, often have extensive influence in the community. It is important to take the particular context into account and, based on it, identify the religious leaders that should be engaged.

There are a number of questions that can be asked to help understand which religious leaders might be more strategic to engage with. For example, the decisions made will need to take into consideration:

- Who has the greatest reach within the community?
- Who has the greatest trust?
- Who is a potential blocker that can prevent intervention?
- Who has the more progressive/moderate views and could influence others?

'Religious leader' is not a homogenous category, and it is necessary to explore the pros and cons of engaging with several types of leaders. For example:

- Formal and/or informal religious leadership?
- Male and/or female religious leaders?
- Adult and/or youth religious leaders?
- Religious leaders involved in politics, or avoid all politically-involved leaders?
- Top, mid-level and/or grassroots religious leaders?
- Engagement with religious training spaces/institutions?
- Work directly with religious community members?
- Work with individual religious leaders, or with the religious institution as a whole?
- Interfaith or with a single religious group?
- Avoid or include religious fundamentalists?
- Religious leaders of all the different castes?

Part of this process is also considering how engagement will reflect back on the organisation. For example, in some settings engaging with certain religious leaders could be interpreted by the community as support for a particular political stance. It might then be wiser to engage with such religious leaders through a proxy.

One should keep in mind that engagement with women religious leaders will in most cases have to be intentional. Within the majority of existing religious structures, men are the ones in charge. Only engaging with the existing, formal religious hierarchy often unintentionally reinforces the patriarchal bias within many religious communities. Therefore, it is advised to intentionally seek out engagement with women leaders. Not only does this upset the patriarchal system (which is a major driver of child marriage), but women leaders also tend to



have unique and extensive access to women in the community. The *Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust* is prioritising such engagement with female religious leaders and women that are part of the faith community, to the extent that it is a way of working in a religious community even when a religious leader continues to support child marriage:

“

*So, as our work, we have been engaging with the women because we believe that women are the ones that spend most of the time with the girl child and the children in general. The women are the ones that make up the biggest population in the Apostolic community, we engage with those women... So, now even if the Holy Spirit tells, if a prophet says the Holy Spirit has said this child has to go and get married, a mother who is empowered will stand up to say, my child is not going. (Hope, Zimbabwe, 20 April 2018)*

”

With female religious leaders often less visible, one has to be intentional in identifying and engaging with them. At the same time, it is important to realise that some women leaders can be the ones upholding child marriage practices – so it is not as simple as vilifying all male religious leaders and championing all female religious leaders.

In reflecting on religious leaders that have been receptive to messaging on ending child marriage, a number of practitioners emphasised the importance of engaging with younger religious leaders. Both religious leaders who are youth, but also religious leaders who work with youth, are important to engage with. Across all three religions, the younger pastors, imams and priests are identified as being more open to ending child marriage and to engaging in efforts to end child marriage. They are seen to be more connected with and understanding of the modern, global world and the challenges that youth are facing. Religious leaders who have had more extensive education – although it is not always clear whether this is religious education or education in general – are also seen as being more supportive of messaging on ending child marriage.

In deciding how to target religious leaders, various strategies can be used at different levels of the religious hierarchy. Some organisations choose one-on-one engagement first with an individual religious leader (seen in India with *Vikalp Sansthan*), while others take an institutional top-down approach from the start (seen in Ethiopia with *Norwegian Church Aid*). These then require a diffusion plan to cascade it down or out. At times it can also work to take a

bottom-up approach to mobilise other faith actors in larger numbers to challenge religious leaders from within (seen in Zimbabwe with *AWET*). Identifying common ground on which to build is critical for working-with and not against religious leaders.

### 3.3 Monitor and evaluate the outcomes of strategies

The research found limited rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) around child marriage, especially on the specific interactions between religious leaders and child marriage. Few organisations, particularly those based in the community who undertake much of the work with religious leaders, have robust ways to measure how their programmes have impacted the key drivers of religious resistance to ending child marriage. There is an urgent need to find ways to document what is working/not working and to go beyond merely measuring short-term activities and immediate outputs (e.g. numbers trained or post-workshop evaluations). Monitoring and evaluation should also look at sustainable impact, long-term outcomes and the need to build a broad evidence base across multiple faith communities. Formative research is also a prerequisite for effective M&E, but few small faith-based organisations have the capacity or funds to be able to undertake this without support.

While child marriage programming is still relatively recent and includes many small-scale projects that are often not evaluated, there has been a rise in interest over the last five years looking more systematically at documenting the evidence for what works around child marriage overall (Jones, 2016; Freccero & Whiting, 2018; Karim et al, 2016). These have identified some promising practices, for example the establishment of local monitoring and follow up mechanisms for religious leaders in particular (Bedake, 2016). Some interventions are exploring innovative and participatory ways to understand and measure longitudinal attitudinal and social norms change and its concrete implications for practice (Karim et al, 2016; Milward & Nelson, 2017; Cislighi & Heise, 2016; Stefanik & Hwang, 2017). Some emerging lessons can be suggested that could apply to interventions with resistant religious leaders.

- *Link M&E to root cause analysis.*

Appropriate methodologies for and indicators of change must be developed by the implementing organisation, based on an initial root cause analysis. This enables the development of approaches that tackle the core religious drivers

underpinning child marriage and the specific resistance to ending it. This allows for the monitoring and evaluation of underlying issues, such as fear of sexuality seen to contribute to religious resistance to ending child marriage. For example, *World Vision's* Channels of Hope programming uses a "root cause analysis" in relation to their work engaging religious leaders on issues such as gender, HIV and AIDS, and child health. They have realised the need to first be specific in identifying the beliefs that are problematic at baseline level, to then inform what actions are desired and what indicators will be measured, if their programming is to catalyse religious leaders into positive action that can be measured (CoH Project Model, 2016). They use Development Programme Approach (DPA) tools to identify and address underlying world views, including spiritual and cultural components, and provide information that can promote child wellbeing (2016: 12). This report has identified some typical worldviews about sex, parenting and gender that indirectly underpin child marriage which could form the basis for the development of indicators to be measured on these areas.

- *See religious leaders as potential assets and a critical part of mapping and evaluating pathways for change.*

Monitoring and evaluation around a stigmatised practice, such as child marriage, can reinforce a model that focuses only on the negative, pushing religious leaders into resistance by positioning them as a liability. This can lead to hiding of the practice which makes already married girls more hidden and vulnerable. It is important to find rigorous ways to measure positive incremental changes in the social norms underpinning practices of child marriage (Cislaghi & Heise, 2016; Stefanik & Hwang, 2017). An approach to M&E which sees religious leaders as potential assets enables them to suggest, play and document their participatory role in building a rising wave of change, shaped around a shared positive vision of adolescent girl flourishing (Christian Aid, 2016; Marshall et al, 2016). It requires identifying causal pathways for the various desired changes, including measuring the take up of alternative pathways, and measuring indicators such as the number of girls remaining in school. This is an important area for further development around religious leaders and their domains of influence at individual, community and institutional levels, to monitor and evaluate their positive contribution. It requires a commitment to engaging religious leaders in the pre-programme design work,

piloting innovative ways for them to contribute to better understanding of how change happens (Milward & Nelson, 2017), and tracking desired alternative behavioural outcomes. For example, *Norwegian Church Aid* in Ethiopia highlight the importance of accountability by putting in place internal church mechanisms of monitoring the teaching and behaviours of religious leaders on child marriage, with disciplinary actions for those officiating at such marriages, as well as appreciation mechanisms for faith leaders who become role models for change in this area. This use of internal religious systems builds ownership and enables learning across multiple levels of religious leadership, as well as fostering sustainable replicability (Bekere, 2016: 48), and checked by independent assessment too.

- *Integrate child marriage M&E indicators into broader programming of faith-based initiatives.*

Monitoring and evaluating "child marriage" as a separate 'silo' issue is often problematic, especially when integrated programming is recommended. It needs to be integrated into broader programming and into existing modes of assessment (Freccero & Whiting, 2018). Child marriage is a complex cluster term with many dimensions. Its drivers cross over multiple themes (health, social protection, birth registration) and domains (individual, family, community), and it is shaped by macro contexts of fragility. It is a hidden practice, making it hard to gather direct information meaningfully. Identifying positive proxy indicators at baseline, such as girls in school, age at first pregnancy, may be a more reliable way to measure sustained shifts around attitudes towards child marriage as was seen in Nigeria (Christian Aid, 2016a). Increasingly organisations recommend a social norms approach if its core drivers are to be addressed. Identifying indicators that can measure change in the roots of religious support for child marriage may be important. For example, some respondents pointed out that measuring religious leaders' ability to reinterpret core sacred texts around marriage differently was an indicator of a shift in one root driver that was influential on the community. *CARE'S* SNAP framework also uses vignettes to assess social norm shifts using questions such as 'what negative social sanctions are anticipated if someone deviates from the norm?' (Stefanik & Hwang, 2017: 12).



- *Involve religious leaders, as well as other key actors in participatory methodologies.*

Using structured participatory methods can help measure how interventions may be impacting religious leaders' attitudes and behaviours regarding child marriage. The "outcome harvesting"<sup>9</sup> method for example, consists in looking at an "outcome" - most often a change in a range of or specific behaviours – and involving those who influenced that change to work backwards and identify what contributed to it (Marshall et al, 2016:7-8, FHI 360 et al, 2018: 52). *Voices4Change* in Nigeria identify this as an effective way of gathering a better understanding of the social norm changes taking place with religious leaders and other key influencers. This approach is helpful to measure changes around a complex practice like child marriage which is influenced by so many factors. Indeed, this method does not only focus on measuring changes originally intended by project activities. It allows it to open up and also look at potential unintended and even negative changes an intervention might have contributed to. Participatory approaches can also help with formative research and could be used to support analysis of different potential forms of religious resistance to ending child marriage. Participatory mappings are indeed a useful way to build a baseline against which progress can be measured. One example of the need to first understand the contextual causes of child marriage before designing an intervention and how to measure its impact is *CARE's* Tipping

Point research in Bangladesh and Nepal. *CARE* closely worked with local staff and community-based mobilisers and used a range of participatory methods with informants to collect data in different project locations (Karim et al, 2016). This emphasises a community participatory approach involving boys and girls themselves in developing M&E strategies for child marriage.

- *Ensure learning from M&E feeds back into programme strategies.*

Monitoring and evaluation processes must also offer tools for programme learning and local accountability to be meaningful and not be merely tailored to outside donor priorities. An evidence base still needs development around what works to address the resistance of some religious leaders to ending child marriage. If fed back into the learning cycle, these processes can help reinforce the evidence base by documenting impact of strategies and allowing adaption of programmes in real time. Understanding what does not work is also important and lessons from failures need honest documentation and not just penalisation. A flexible theory of change that is continually rethought and open to unexpected outcomes is required, owned by grassroots organisations and not merely imposed from above or outside. Ensuring that religious leaders are both involved and accountable from start to finish is part of this (Milward & Nelson, 2017).

*Voices4Change* in Nigeria has pioneered new approaches to tackle the social norms underpinning gender inequality drawing from lessons in other sectors. It uses experimental interventions to develop an evidence base around tackling gendered social norms. It has an emphasis on engaging religious leaders as part of a wider community approach and it carried out detailed baseline research to better understand the religious context and religious attitudes in relation to both the adolescent girl and to masculinity. This provided specific information as to the unique role that religion and religious leaders played on these issues. These pre-training mapping exercises also located and characterised faith-based organisations and their areas of intervention in social issues in Nigeria. In collaboration with partner organisations in each state, they 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). This shows that creating a baseline of knowledge for ongoing M&E is seen as the starting point. It becomes an essential part of building programme ownership from the start, seen as critical for long-term sustainability.

Their documented pilot process offers insights on "how change happens" (Milward & Nelson, 2017; V4C, 2016b) that could inform other interventions. A key change observed was that religious leaders trained were "more gender aware and were taking action in the spaces that they influence" (Marshall et al, 2016:31). Data was obtained from both those experiencing the change and those observing the changes from outside. Their focus on transforming social norms has demonstrated some success over five years in shifting harmful gender norms including working with religious leaders (Marshall et al, 2016) and also produced documents on formative research with religious leaders, using religious texts in relation to gender norms and M&E (*Voices4Change*, 2016a, 2016b). However, its original vision was for a 20-year intervention.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on this methodology, see the following website by Ricardo Wilson-Grau, who developed this method. <http://outcomeharvesting.net/welcome/>



For toolkits that offer some guidance on meaningful indicators with religious leaders, see Appendix B

## 4

### Strategies for working with religious leaders on child marriage



Specific forms and roots of resistance do not always require the same strategies for resolving them. In other words, there is no simple ‘if x, then y’ recipe that can be followed by all organisations. Contextual factors play such a central role that each organisation has to carefully study its context in order to determine the strategies it should employ. Different strategies have been used by different organisations, but some common ones are outlined in this section.

Keeping in mind the particular forms of religious resistance that practitioners are experiencing, as well as the root drivers of such religious resistance discussed in Section 2, a core insight emerging from this research is that developing appropriate and effective strategies within a specific context requires first paying close attention to how and why some religious leaders are resisting. It remains an organisation’s responsibility to make the connections between types, roots, strategies and practical tips, *in their specific context*. However, there are certain strategies that emerged across many of the practitioners interviewed for organisations who to work with religious leaders on child marriage – and these are discussed below.

#### 4.1 Recognise and respect religious leader agency

The nature of an organisation’s engagement with religious leaders is often a reflection of how it perceives and values religious leaders. There has to be genuine respect for religious leaders, their religion and their position within their communities, for it is crucial to the impact and effectiveness of an intervention, irrespective of its aims. This includes having at least a basic understanding of the tenets of their religion(s), as well as sensitivity to how their religious beliefs can influence every aspect of their lives.

Genuine respect is reflected in an approach that is non-judgemental. Working with religious leaders requires one to be open to listening and trying to understand their perspectives and motivations. Religious leaders become more resistant to efforts to end child marriage if they feel blamed and shamed – and they will remain so as long as they feel they are judged and condemned. The *Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust* in Zimbabwe sees non-judgement as crucial in their work with religious leaders:

“

*I think the most important thing is whenever you approach someone, ...do not go to them and act as if you are accusing them of doing something wrong. Yes, the most important thing is to open, to engage with someone you sit down, you talk, you hear their side of the story... Hear where they are coming from, the reasons why they do certain things and hear from them of what benefit are those things, and then maybe just discuss the advantages and disadvantages of what it is that they are doing. (Hope, Zimbabwe, 20 April 2018)*

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Respecting religious leaders includes seeing them not (only) as targets of interventions, but as co-creators of the interventions. Thus, one should enable religious leaders to hold a role in planning the content and structure of interventions engaging religious leaders and targeting religious communities. Their input and contribution should be included every step of the way: in identifying the community issues that should be addressed, in designing interventions, and evaluating its impact. For religious leaders to not resist efforts to end child marriage, they must themselves be part of identifying child marriage as a problem and in identifying its solutions. Religious leaders, like most people, become resistant if they think/feel an



external agenda is merely being imposed on them. As key gatekeepers into communities and around most marriage rituals, programme content need to be discussed with religious leaders to ensure that the steps of engagement with religious leaders and with the community is appropriate and at the right pace. *Terre des Hommes* in Lebanon prioritises such engagement with religious leaders:

“

*(W)e need to engage them at the beginning and they need to see they can raise what they want. We can highlight where we need to focus but use constructive and acceptable words that make them feel that we didn't impose. It's according to the needs of the community. And second, we need to sit with them and actually learn which is more relevant to them. Because they work voluntary with us and they are not employee, and so they are from the community and we need to do an action of plan and we need to do for them capacity building according to their need. (Fatmeh, Lebanon, 30 April 2018)*

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What both academic and grey literature, as well as interviews with practitioners, have emphasised, is the need to allow time for trust to develop. In order to work with religious leaders on a sensitive issue such as child marriage, there needs to be trust between religious leaders and the organisation working to end child marriage. Working with religious leaders on child marriage is necessarily a long-term endeavour, because trust takes time to develop. This trust can be developed through first implementing other (less controversial) programming within the community, or through the implementation of child marriage programming over a protracted period of time. For example, the process of engaging religious leaders theologically in Ethiopia by the *Interfaith Council* took up to two years for each group they worked with. Rushing this process can lead to a backlash – in one instance where the government requested it be implemented faster, religious leaders resisted the process and it encountered serious set backs as a result.

*Vikalp Sansthan* in India, in their engagement with religious leaders, take a considerable amount of time and effort. First, they have a series of individual one-on-one meetings with a religious leader over a lengthy period of time, where general community issues are discussed. Child marriage is introduced by talking about specific people and events in the community (for example, a young girl who married and died two years later while giving birth), then by asking for the religious leader's opinions and discussing it with him. Only when the religious leader shows a measure of receptiveness to talking about child marriage and the attempts to end it, would he be invited to a small group meeting with other religious leaders. Once again, only after a number of small group meetings and after showing responsiveness, will he be invited to a public event. *Vikalp Sansthan* has no set timeline attached to this process, and is guided in the process by the religious leader himself.

It has been emphasised repeatedly that one cannot approach religious leaders by simply telling them that they are wrong and child marriage must end. Rather, an effective entry point is by raising awareness about the consequences of child marriage and discussing both its pros and cons with them. Much of the support for child marriage is still due to perceptions about the benefits of the practice, and inadequate sexual and reproductive health and rights knowledge. However, on its own this is not enough. A dual approach that combines this information on child marriage consequences with a theological approach linked to religious principles and scriptures (explored in section 4.4) consistently emerges as the most effective on a range of harmful practices (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). Drawing on what has been done by various practitioners, there are a number of topics around child marriage with which to engage with religious leaders and facilitate discussion. These include health consequences, child rights and social

consequences, legal realities, reflection on the multiple identities of religious leaders (for example as fathers), the best interests of the child, identification and reinterpretation of sacred texts used to justify the practice, and the brainstorming of ideas for possible alternative practices.

Again, it is important to take the context into account. Some of these topics might be sensitive and controversial in some settings, but acceptable in others. The goal is to facilitate discussion and over time change perceptions and practices. One way to achieve this is to not focus on what should be stopped, but on possible alternatives.

As is clear from some of these discussion topics, one way of getting religious leaders to buy into the agenda of ending child marriage, is by helping them connect with their other identity markers. A religious leader is never *only* a religious leader. He can have many other identities too: a father, a patriot, a teacher, a

politician, etc. In some cases, connecting with one of these other identities can be a way of helping him to understand why ending child marriage is important. For example, talking with a religious leader who is also a doting father of two young daughters, about what he wants for his daughters and how he would feel if they had to get married at 12, is one way of having him realise the severity of the practice.

However, not all differences in opinion can be resolved this way. There will be times where there are fairly fundamental differences of opinion. Practitioners advise that such situations should be handled by focusing on commonalities, rather than differences. One way is to identify a common agenda, such as child protection or girl child education, which all parties are willing to rally behind. While they may differ on why they support it, and while they may differ on their exact stance on child marriage, there is nevertheless a common agenda that can enable much positive change in the community:

“

*(N)ot to concentrate on the disagree points or the contradiction but to concentrate on the agree points. And to be clear and to involve them and to have the participation from the point of child protection. Because according to them they are part of community protection and children they are part of this community. (Mohammad, Lebanon, 30 April 2018)*

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Those organisations that do dialogues and training workshops with religious leaders also emphasise the importance of taking enough time for these workshops. For example, *Malawi Interfaith Action* do a 5-day training; *Tostan* in Senegal do a 5-10 day training; the *Global Peace Foundation* in Nigeria train for three days; while the *Peace Foundation* in Pakistan take 6-7 days. Of course, engagement with religious leaders cannot be limited to once-off workshops but should be part of an on-going, multi-year process of discussion, mentoring and support. This involves finding authentic ways for participants to connect human rights and religious principles through values alignment.

*Tostan* works predominantly in Muslim-majority countries and communities, such as Senegal. They have always prioritised engagement with religious leaders, recognising their influence in the community. At the start of their work in a new community – which runs for a minimum of three years and requires the facilitators to live in the community – one of their very first steps is to meet with the village chief and religious leader and go with them through all of the training material that will be used. This is done to ensure that nothing is interpreted as going against the fundamental principles of Islam. For example, as part of discussions on family planning, they show pictures of the male and female sexual and reproductive organs. In one community, the religious leaders requested that these pictures only be shown in small, single-sex groups – and *Tostan* complied.

This sensitivity to religious beliefs is what Molly Melching sees as one of the keys of *Tostan*’s success in their community-based work. They never address child marriage, or any practice for that matter, by stating it should stop.

*(Y)ou (are) not judging them or blaming them about this. And you are not coming in to tell them ‘you are doing these awful things’, but rather to understand that ‘you did this to protect your children and to protect their reputation and to make sure they are respected and they have a happy life’. And this is what well-being meant to them at that time.*

In their decades of work, *Tostan* has always engaged with religious leaders, seeing them as an influential part of the community. However, with time they realised that they need to work with religious leaders as a group – and not just with individual religious leaders – so that there is consensus amongst the religious leaders in the community. This led to 2-3 day seminars with religious leaders, which they then realised has a very powerful effect, so much so that religious leaders were requesting more training. *Tostan* has now, at the request of various organisations, been doing 5-10 day religious leader trainings all over Africa. These trainings are effective because of the way they approach religious leaders:

*(The) approach is so different from other approaches and it’s really unique, it is what we call implicit rather than explicit. It is non-judgemental. It is really working with an understanding of approaching people with respect and understanding people do things not because they are bad people, but because they may have inherited certain practices that they have never had an opportunity to question. And when you bring them together and to think together and to analyse together and reflect together, and you do alignment of human rights with religious values, all religions. You will see that this is what Tostan does. (Molly, Senegal, 2 May 2018)*



## 4.2 Select appropriate framing

In order to minimise resistance when working with religious leaders on child marriage, both practitioners and literature emphasise the importance of an integrated, holistic approach. In other words, it may not be the most effective approach to address child marriage as a stand-alone issue. It can be addressed as part of a more integrated approach where various community issues (identified by the community itself) are discussed and addressed. See, for example, *Promundo* in Brazil using an intersectional violence approach; the *Malawi Interfaith Association* using HIV&AIDS as an entry point; *Urmul Trust* in India focusing on integrated rural development; and the *Global Peace Foundation* in Nigeria using an interfaith peace lens. Choosing the appropriate integrated framing will depend on the specific setting, especially if an organisation is considering a gender equality and rights framing. For example, *Tostan* found that in Senegal a ‘women’s rights’ framing was resisted by communities, whereas ‘human rights’ was not; in Brazil *Plan International* found that it is better to avoid all mention of ‘gender’ and ‘gender equality’, while a ‘ending violence’ framing was accepted. Thus, while gender inequality might be a root cause of child marriage, it is not always appropriate to lead with this framing.

Such an integrated approach allows time for trust to develop, highlighted earlier as key to interventions aimed at ending child marriage. By first working on less sensitive, controversial issues, an organisation can develop a relationship and trust with religious leaders. *Urmul Trust* in India, for example, has for many years run girls’ education camps. In working with religious leaders to accept the importance of girl child education, they built a reputation for care and sensitivity. When they started approaching religious leaders to talk about child marriage, they build on this existing relationship and trust:

“

*Initially when we want to convince them, we met personally, one on one and we showed them our work... what we are doing, and why we are doing (it). And it (was) not about the child marriage, we initially started with the health care, we started with the education. So (they say) ‘oh you are very well, very good work, it is good for the humanity’. So then finally we come to the child marriage. (Arvind, India, 23 April 2018)*

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The framing paradigm used for working with resistant religious leaders can often influence its success. Starting with the idea of religious resistance is often based on a model which has decided to see religious leaders as part of the problem. Such an approach

should be treated with caution. It can easily promote an approach which sees religion and religious leaders overall as a liability or a problem. This typically leads to defensiveness and backlash by religious leaders and to attitudes of judgement by an organisation’s staff. Treating all religious leaders as if they were the same, or indeed creating a single category of ‘resistant religious leaders’, can itself reinforce the negative stereotypes which this research seeks to avoid. This report, by focusing on this group, needs to therefore be treated with care. Instead an asset-based approach is recommended in working with religious leaders. Promising interventions suggest the need for both the intervention and the identity it offers possible champions, to be positive.

When working on sensitive issues in particular, interventions should be framed positively (e.g. “encouraging positive fatherhood”), rather than negatively (e.g. “ending harmful traditional practices”). This allows receptive religious leaders to embrace a positive championing identity, rather than a ‘deviant’ identity where they see themselves as counter-cultural. Positive framing can be initially found in common goals, especially goals with a practical focus (such as increasing girl child education, economic livelihoods, or universal health care (Palm et al, 2017), rather than only on more abstract or ideological goals (e.g. ensuring gender equality, or women’s empowerment) This is especially helpful when religious leaders are still viewing all efforts to end child marriage suspiciously. Positive framing around common goals provides an ‘in’ to settings where child marriage is still too sensitive, although it should be noted that what is seen as ‘positive’ will be different in different contexts. For example, in some countries promoting girl child education is seen as highly controversial, while in other settings it is a cause that everyone supports.

It should be noted that framing is also of relevance to the organisation as a whole. The practitioners interviewed for this study belong to a range of different types of organisations: community development organisations, women’s empowerment organisations, faith-based organisations, etc. This framing impacts how the organisation’s interventions are received. For example, if a Christian faith-based organisation starts to implement a child marriage intervention in a Muslim-majority setting, messaging is easily dismissed as being ‘anti-Islamic’ or ‘not of the faith’. Therefore, it is important to carefully consider the framing of the organisation that is implementing child marriage interventions. To have impact in local communities, it can be necessary to partner with an organisation that has legitimacy in the local community – which is usually an organisation that is local and/or of the same faith.

The partnership between *World Vision International (WVI)* and *Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW)* around the *Channels of Hope* methodology illustrates the importance of such partnering. Here IRW is taking responsibility for developing the Islamic version of Channels of Hope (a WVI methodology targeting faith leaders and used to address a range of development issues), which will be used in Muslim communities. As IRW, and not WVI, are the experts on Islamic faith and its sacred scriptures, both organisations saw this as necessary (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). This faith-to-faith partnership is based on recognition of the importance of adapting interventions to a particular context, and of direct theological engagement being done by those with the authority and knowledge to do so (Palm et al, 2017).

The specific individuals selected to engage with resistant religious leaders can impact the effectiveness of intervention efforts. Choosing such interlocutors should be based on who the organisation has available, but also by who religious leaders will be willing to engage with.

Many organisations were forced to have at least the initial engagement with religious leaders done by men, for, as the overwhelming majority of religious leaders are male, they are less receptive to engagement from women. It should be noted this was done in very conservative contexts where this was the only possible entry point. Especially on an issue such as child marriage, a woman who approaches them can be dismissed as carrying a feminist flag that might be seen as incompatible with religious belief. Therefore, these organisations usually have men first approach religious leaders. This is even sometimes the case with progressive, feminist organisations such as *Sisters in Islam*:

“

*(There is a new religious political party) and when we want to engage with them... (O)n our end we also had someone who was a former Mufti, and a former chief judge of one of the states in Malaysia. We thought that because, you know, we had to be strategic, you know, a bunch of women talking with (them would not work)... So therefore this former chief judge was the one who was very, very key (to speaking with them) and critical to speaking our language and also providing the more progressive arguments. (Rozana, Malaysia, 20 April 2018)*

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As was the case with SIS, religious leaders who are committed to ending child marriage are good interlocutors, especially if their peers respect them. Senior religious leaders can be crucial to convincing more junior religious leaders about the validity of arguments against child marriage. In Ethiopia, for example, there was much resistance from the clergy when the leadership of a specific church denomination declared that child marriage is not allowed anymore. A major issue was how virginity

of brides can then be ensured, with some clergy holding on to the idea that only young girls can be virgins (and therefore marriageable). The Orthodox archbishop of the region was crucial to debunking this notion:

“

*(T)here was a resistance (to the declaration)... (T)hey were asking like the virginity issue... (E)ven that day the participants were coming from the rural clergies... (T)hose Priests might have married young girls earlier, even now they are they were really resistant in a way when this was communicated... But then the Archbishop was so angry, to the extent that saying he said... ‘There is no age limit for virginity, to be a virgin... you don’t have to be a girl.’ (Kidest, Ethiopia, 20 April 2018)*

”

Staff members who are also members of the religious community in question can be valuable interlocutors. Especially with resistant religious leaders, staff members can engage with the religious leader as a member of their congregation. Where a staff member is a long-term member of the congregation, the religious leader might even be more receptive to messaging on ending child marriage, as he knows the staff member is religious and as there is trust and influence between them:

“

*Sometimes I found that some of our community level staff, they go to the Mosque and pray there and just prove that they are also religious. It gives them an added advantage to gain trust of religious leaders, this create an opportunity for them to initiate discussion with religious leaders on social issues such as early marriage, girl’s education, women’s access to income and mobility which relate to our community level interventions. It helps them to establish a trustworthy relationship with religious leaders and some extend its help to engage them in different activities. (Habibur, Bangladesh, 23 April 2018)*

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With insular religious groups, having such ‘insider’ interlocutors is quite important. Some religious communities, such as certain Apostolic Churches, are very difficult to enter if one does not belong to the religious community.

Irrespective of the nature of the interlocutor, certain skills are important for them to be able to engage with religious leaders on child marriage. They need to have good communication and facilitation skills, but also excellent religious knowledge, including of the relevant sacred texts. What some organisations have done, to ensure that all of the necessary skill and expertise is available, is to pair a gender expert with a religious leader. Then, when engaging with religious leaders, the gender expert engages around gender equality, child marriage, and its implications, while the religious leader has the authority to talk about it in relation to religion and the relevant sacred texts.

Furthermore, when engaging with religious leaders, using the right language and terminology is very important. It needs to be culturally and religiously appropriate and sensitive. It also includes being attuned to the stigma sometimes wrongfully attached to certain terms. For example, the term ‘gender’ currently carries very negative connotations amongst religious leaders in Brazil:

“(G)ender is our most important issue for us with (religious leaders). And it starts to be really hard to be in some conversation and to have some space. And we realise that if it is possible, we can never use the word ‘gender’, because people have terrible fear about ‘gender’. And then we realise that maybe (to) talk about ‘girls and boys’ and ‘same opportunities’ is better, because we can be in this conversation and then make new ideas around gender. But people really, really, really don’t want to talk about ‘gender’. So, it is learning. We need to find new words, a new approach, especially if we want to talk with religious leaders. (Viviana, Brazil, 3 May 2018)

Early on in their work in Senegal, *Tostan* learnt a similar lesson when using the term ‘women’s rights’ and changed their programming and terminology to be about ‘human rights’. Again, ‘positive’ language is seen as generally best. For example, focusing on ‘child protection’ or ‘violence prevention’ as an entry point is terminology that provides positive framing and a positive identity for religious leaders.

#### 4.3 Build critical mass

Both literature and practitioners argue that the aim should not be to convince *all* religious leaders of the value of ending child marriage, but rather to

convince *enough* for momentum to swing in favour of ending child marriage. In other words, focus on building critical mass behind efforts to end child marriage, so that those opposing attempts to end child marriage feel pressure to conform and therefore stop opposing it. As Hope from the *Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust* in Zimbabwe explains:

“(W)e will never have a universal way of thinking, so no matter how much we are going to be working, we will still find those people who are going to resist. But, then if we have the majority of people speaking against child marriages, I am sure even those that are resisting will be forced to join, because they can’t be left out in the cold themselves, they will be then forced to transform and do the right thing. (Hope, Zimbabwe, 20 April 2018)

In other words, the aim is to build enough positive group pressure that all will conform so as to fit in, even if they are perhaps not personally fully convinced.<sup>10</sup> With the aim of building such positive group pressure as quickly as possible, some practitioners recommend focusing intervention efforts first on working with religious leaders that are receptive to ending child marriage, and/or high-level religious leaders that are not only influential on community members, but on other religious leaders as well, taking a bottom up and a top down approach as the *Voices4Change* programme in Nigeria does. This does not mean that resistant religious leaders should be ignored. On the contrary, it is important to continuously engage with these specific voices, not least as they are often the loudest voices raised in opposition to ending child marriage. Working with such religious leaders often requires a change in approach, when the current approach is not making headway. The *Urmul Trust* in India has often had this experience:

“(O)ne can really identify how difficult that person is and what strategy you have to apply, so dealing with different people, you have to add up different strategies. So you may have second meeting with them; you may have third meeting with them. So that depends on the difficult personalities, tough personality. (Arvind, India, 23 April 2018)

<sup>10</sup> This connects with the concept of social norms, which are informal rules and beliefs held and enforced around how people should behave: “...one of the factors people use in making behavioural decisions pertains to their assessment as to whether others also engage in the behaviour” (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005:128).

However, while recognising that building critical mass is an effective strategy in overcoming religious leader resistance, it can be strategically wise to prioritise engagement with receptive religious leaders. For example, in identifying best practices in engaging Muslim religious leaders on reproductive health and family planning in Yemen, USAID found that building such a critical mass of male and female religious leaders was a key aspect of fostering positive reproductive health and family planning behaviours (Freij, 2010).

One should also realise that critical mass can be built through agents other than religious leaders. Where religious leaders remain inaccessible or unwilling to engage on child marriage, alternative avenues for change can be used. In Zimbabwe, the *Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust* engages directly with members of the church:

“

*So, we have had experiences where they have said, okay, so we have heard it is very important what we have shared here and discussed but we can't go back and tell it to the congregants. So, that is what made us feel it is important as well to engage with the congregants themselves, so they are empowered, and they make informed decision... So, it is really important for us to engage with them as members, not the leadership only. (Hope, Zimbabwe, 20 April 2018).*

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An important way of building critical mass is through making positive examples public and using it to inspire others. Religious leaders that have opposed child marriage, girls that avoided marriage and were able to finish schooling, communities that have declared that child marriage will no longer be done - these are all examples used to inspire others. Furthermore, recognising these champions and what they are doing supports and encourages them to continue opposing child marriage.

Public declarations, in various community-appropriate forms, have been found to be an effective way of encouraging resolutions and showcase changed behaviour. The *Malawi Interfaith Association*, for example, have assisted numerous villages in passing community bylaws. These customary laws are passed by the community in support of (for example) girl child education or eradication of child marriage and provide powerful legal support and drive for changing community practice. In Yemen, based on requests from religious leaders, a book of fatwas was developed by prominent Yemeni religious leaders and scholars, which compiled religious arguments and statements which religious leaders could use when facing opposition from conservative community members and colleagues. The fact that these fatwas were produced by very neutral or renowned sources assisted in it being recognised and accepted in the community, and thus to overcome religious resistance to family planning and positive reproductive health (Freij, 2010). The *Urmul Trust* encourages religious leaders to take oaths, while *Vikalp Sansthan* asks religious leaders to commit – on a public platform – to one positive change. *Tostan* has had thousands of communities issue declarations against various practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting. While they candidly acknowledge that not all of these communities actually abandon a practice, these declarations are key to building critical mass:

“

*(W)e say these declarations and the major purpose of the declarations are building critical mass. (E)nough people have to see enough others adopting a practice or abandoning a practice in order for it to take hold. And I think we pretty much feel that is the case here. And the more we do these public declarations, which are critical because they bring together not only the group that has been sensitized but it brings together other people invited from other communities, and they see that it is very positive and it's not about blame and shame and it's about moving forward. (Molly, Senegal, 2 May 2018)*

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Over the last decade, *Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in Ethiopia* partnered with Ethiopian faith based organisations and the *Inter-Religious Council* (comprised of eight diverse religious groups, covering 97% of the population) on child, early and forced marriage (amongst other issues). They adopted an institutional, top-down approach, where senior religious leaders of the respective faiths were first engaged in consecutive dialogues based on the prevailing facts on the issues, including impacts of health, where after they decided to themselves lead an internal process of theological engagement on the issue, using their own scholars.

While these lengthy dialogues took place, NCA accompanied the local faith based organisations engaged in preliminary sensitization with lower levels of the faith hierarchy, namely women groups, youth groups



and local clergy. Thus, when the different religious groups (e.g. the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church) issued separate theological position statements, these statements were owned by the accepted leaders of each tradition and the media was engaged positively. Only then were theological resources cascaded out to all levels, accompanied by a strong internal accountability framework. Evidence (Bekere, 2017) suggests this messaging has reached 2.6 million people and 18 000 faith leaders, using established religious structures. Mainstreaming into 68 theological colleges, bible schools and clergy training centres alone reached 68 000 people.

Tailored resources that combined health information with theology were used to help the project operate simultaneously at national, regional and local levels, carefully combining a top-down and a bottom-up approach to build institutional critical mass. Key to the process was building trust and respecting religious leader agency, taking time to develop ownership of theological positions and not forcing the process externally. When given this space, faith leaders began to unpack the roots of the practice and were also able to contest the idea that only young girls under 18 can be virgins. They did this by insisting that couples can wait to marry until they are older than 18 years, without denying the value of virginity which was a strongly held belief here:

*You have an authoritative figure like the Archbishop from the Orthodox church in Northern part of the country. When you see this resistance from some rural clergies, he is able to delink that linking of virginity and early marriage, child marriage. He is saying 'we're not saying virginity is not important, but we're saying there is not an age, you know, where this must happen.'* (Kidist, Ethiopia 20 April 2018)

To enable easier engagement with religious leaders, many organisations try to use existing avenues of engagement. Especially if one is new to engaging with religious leaders, combining such engagement with other institutions or initiatives can be helpful, as one has no existing relationships to build on. For example, BRAC in Bangladesh uses the government's agenda on ending child marriage to assist in engaging with religious leaders on child marriage. BRAC invites government officials to speak at a public event on child marriage, thus creating public awareness of government opposition to child marriage, which then serves as an entry point for BRAC into the community:

“

*Recently government has formulated Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017. In order to make aware and mobilize the community level all stakeholders, we engaged local level government officials in our interventions. Especially we invite District Commissioner and other government officials and the people representatives to speak against child marriage at community level* (Habibur, Bangladesh, 23 April 2018).

”

Government laws can be used in the same way to create awareness. For example, explaining and popularising new statutory laws has in many settings been an integral part of working with religious leaders, including resistant religious leaders. Organisations

such as BRAC spend much time teaching religious leaders about the new laws on marriage registration, and how to abide by these laws. Where government laws forbid child marriage and/or laws exist to protect children's rights, there are added tools for motivating resistant religious leaders to oppose child marriage. While practitioners explain that warning/threatening religious leaders with the legal repercussions if they continue performing child marriages should never be the first nor only approach to resistant religious leaders, it can be a useful tool. *Vikalp Sansthan* in India has used the Prevention of Child Marriage Act in such a way:

“

*The Prevention of Law Child Marriage Act 2006 (was passed) in India and this act have (decreed that)... every marriage service provider is also responsible for that marriage, and so chargeable and then punishable. And, that is the priest, that is the barber, light and mike and sound, all this kind of people who are important for the marriage ceremony. They will also go to jail. (I)nitially we are not talking law with (religious leaders). (We engage with them) because we know that the priest role is very important in our community to stop child marriage. So, we feel this is very important role, so that's why we are working with them. (But those) who are giving (us a) very hard time – then we are talking with them the law* (Usha, India, 19 April 2018).

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It is not only existing government or legal structures that can be used to great success. Informal structures or systems, such as informal child protection systems, can also be used. Another way is to engage via existing religious structures. These can include pastors' meetings, Bible study or Quranic reading groups, women's or youth groups, and theological training institutions. If one engages with a religious community as an insider, these existing structures can be very accessible. It also supports the integrated, holistic approach (discussed earlier) that is considered very important in child marriage interventions.

#### 4.4 Engage with sacred scripture

By default, many religious leaders use sacred scripture to justify child marriage and oppose efforts to end it. Therefore, working with religious leaders will often require engaging with these scriptural texts and interpretations. Furthermore, where religious leaders see sacred scripture as the highest form of religious authority, arguments for ending child marriage that rely on sacred scripture inherently carry value and weight. A recent study on engaging faith leaders on harmful traditional practices (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017) identified engagement with sacred scripture as a key approach to working with faith leaders to end harmful traditional practices, explaining that

“

*...it is a way of engaging faith leaders in terms that they are comfortable with, that they trust, and on which they see themselves as expert... In this way, sacred scripture can be a powerful weapon in challenging and transforming unequal and unjust structures and practices. (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017:20)*

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Engaging with sacred scripture is required to debunk scriptural interpretations that may seem to promote child marriage, both directly (e.g. a command that fathers should marry off their daughters at puberty) and indirectly (e.g. stating that child marriage is a lesser evil than pregnancy outside of marriage). It can

also offer ways of promoting scriptural interpretations that support ending child marriage. However, it is important to realise that this should be a process of participatory engagement, where religious leaders genuinely engage with religious texts and tenets to reach a point of new understanding. This is not a process that can be rushed or merely enforced from outside:

“

*Simply presenting people with alternative religious interpretations, as a fait accompli, seldom works and is arguably just another imposition of an “absolute truth”. More fruitful is giving people the opportunity to work through religious ideas themselves. (Imam, 2016:24)*

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When engaging with religious leaders on re-interpreting sacred scripture, it is important that individuals whose religious knowledge and authority they respect are facilitating or involved in the process. In some settings this would mean specific, respected, authoritative religious leaders that are known to them; in some settings it would (also) mean that the organisations hosting the session/training be a respected, religious organisation (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). For example, *Sisters in Islam* draw on Islamic materials developed by Al-Azhar University in Egypt.

The importance of engaging with sacred scripture is attested to by the religious manuals on child marriage developed by different organisations. For example, the Nigerian *Interfaith Council* has developed a manual that engages with both the Bible and Qur'an; the Nepalese *National Inter-Religious Network* manual engages with the sacred texts of four religions in Nepal (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity); and the *Malawian Interfaith Association's* child protection manual engages with the Bible and Qur'an. Appendix B includes links to resources that offer scriptural arguments across multiple faith traditions (Christian Aid, 2016b; Chaudry & Ahmed, 2016).

Sacred texts have been seen to be an important part of underpinning harmful constructions of masculinity that shape the patriarchal power identified as a key driver of child marriage. *Voices4Change* in Nigeria carried out empirical research in 2015 to better understand these specific connections between masculinity and religion (see Ekeoba & Fashola, 2015 in Appendix B). This highlighted the power of religious imagination and the use of sacred texts to endorse patriarchy. However, the research also showed the ambivalence and contradiction noted by people within sacred texts and the possibilities of rereading texts through the lens of transformational masculinity – offering a 'redemptive window' where the research shows that young people are more open to reading the texts differently and raising new questions.



Reflecting on the academic and grey literature, as well as the interviews with practitioners, it does appear that there is decidedly less material that engages with Hindu sacred texts, as compared to the Bible and Qur'an. This may be because Hinduism does not prioritise a single sacred text in same way as Christianity and Islam does; it is also a polytheistic religion, which may not always lend itself to engagement with sacred texts in the same way.

When engaging with monotheistic religions, and/or religions that have central sacred text(s) that are seen as authoritative, engagement with such sacred texts is clearly a valuable way of engaging with resistant religious leaders on child marriage. However, it should be noted that there are religions and religious groups that do not have or emphasise sacred texts. In such settings, theological engagement with religious myths, stories, songs, rituals (Stith, 2015), oral traditions and prayers could be an alternative way of working with religious leaders. In such settings, though, it will require more creative thinking to engage theologically with religious leaders. Especially where a religious group's sole source of authority is a specific religious leader, such as a person seen as an independent living "prophet" appointed directly by God, it limits one's ability to engage theologically. This is a challenge, for example, in some branches of the Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe, where these leaders may claim the authority of their dreams to demand that God requires child marriage (Progressio, 2016).

At the same time, it is important that theological engagement is not an exclusive approach. A recent study on religious leaders and harmful traditional practices emphasised the importance of combining a public health approach with theological engagement – and that it is usually best to use public health information as the entry point with religious leaders. It can serve as a way of starting sensitive and difficult conversations on specific practices, while preventing a discussion from becoming an abstract argument about values. Furthermore, *Tearfund*, *World Vision International* and *Islamic Relief Worldwide* (in certain settings and where appropriate and safe) make the public health information less academic by having a survivor (of the particular harmful practice) come and speak with the group, discussing how it has affected them (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017). This also makes married girls visible.

Many of the practitioners interviewed emphasised the importance of making child marriage 'real' to religious leaders. Especially the reinterpretation of sacred texts can often become abstract scholarly debate. It should be balanced with a focus on the real-life aspects of child marriage. This is often

the more appropriate original entry point, namely to first talk about how child marriage is affecting girls and the community. Having religious leaders really understand the girls' point of view, and see for themselves the experiences of individuals and households married as children, greatly assists in overcoming their resistance to ending child marriage:

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*So many interpretations were coming into play. But as we get talking... people start to move from those religious posture to some flexible posture, because we use practical examples: 'Okay, let's assume this daughter is your daughter'... So, when you tell people that a small girl should go and get married because religious leaders are right, the first question I will ask you is that 'can you also give out your daughter at the age of 9,10,11,12,13 into marriage?' (Joseph, Nigeria, 26 April 2018)*

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#### 4.5 Talk about sex and sexuality

As discussed earlier, one of the key drivers of religious leaders' resistance to ending child marriage, are fears about unmarried sex and pregnancy. Therefore, it would be logical for all child marriage interventions to, at some point, talk about sex and sexuality. However, many religious leaders do not see sex as something that should be talked about within religious circles, and some even prohibit SRHR education. If sex remains a taboo topic, some of the key drivers, as well as some of the worst consequences, of child marriage cannot be discussed. It should be noted that this reluctance to engage with sex and sexuality is not only true of religious leaders but is also found more broadly across international development work in general. A reluctance by many actors attempting to address child marriage to talk about sex and sex-related matters can actually reinforce patriarchal notions, by (for example) not including sexuality education or access to family planning in their interventions (Expert working meeting on sexuality and CEFM, 2016). While this strategy may rarely be the 'entry point' with religious leaders, as it often meets with strong initial resistance (especially from conservative groups), it is important to find appropriate methodologies to open up this space over time and to carefully interrogate the connections between sexuality and religion.

Furthermore, religious leaders will only be able to engage constructively with the roots underpinning child marriage issues in their communities, if they are also willing and equipped themselves to talk about sex and sexuality. This is why the *Global Peace Foundation* in Nigeria, for example, is intentional

about talking to religious leaders about sex and sexuality, and is also finding ways to run trainings to build religious leaders' capacity to talk to families and congregants:

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*Well, many religious leaders find it difficult to talk about sex, even on their pulpit or when they are teaching or preaching. So during this training we are doing, now we are deliberately introducing our religious leaders into this. We say 'if you don't talk about it, if you don't openly say it...' Truly I must say to you that many are still finding it difficult, but when I speak to leaders, I say 'look, I will want to take those issues that you don't want to talk about because...by this training, if your capacity is built, you can start saying it yourself ...' (Joseph, Nigeria, 26 April 2018)*

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A religious leader involved with *Global Peace Foundation* in Nigeria gave some specific examples of how to go about doing this. He stresses the need to go right back to basics, by exploring what gender is and what is sex. He notes a lot of misunderstanding at this level, where as a result, religious leaders then fall back on a purely faith-based understanding where they feel more equipped. He notes that religious leaders, as well as many parents and teachers, can feel that discussing sex openly, especially with youth, is taboo. They then avoid using the correct biological terms (e.g. vagina, penis, menstruation), for they feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. They instead use vague euphemisms or warnings when talking to the younger generation. In turn, children and youth then lack accurate information and have a sense of being lied to by their elders. He used the following example of his conversation with a mother as an illustration:

“

*(W)hat she said was: "We should tell our daughters is that don't allow anybody to touch you, if he touch you, you will be pregnant." And I allow her to finish and I tell her: "Mom, if you tell your daughter that anybody who touch her you will be pregnant and then 10 people touch her and she is not pregnant. And then she will start suspecting that everything you are saying to her is a lie." All the mother needed to do was say the specifics about sex, tell her about her about her vagina, her menstruation, her breasts, tell her about everything... (Joseph, Nigeria, 26 April 2018)*

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He suggests that religious leaders can play a role in modelling this willingness to speak up in the community and that this can help to dispel religious taboos and shame around talking about sex or menstruation. But for this to happen, leaders need to be capacitated to do so. They also need to understand that it is important to be specific, so as to prevent misunderstandings. This is why it is important to communicate basic sexual and reproductive health information, for many religious leaders are highly uninformed on these matters (Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017).

However, this alone is not enough. Sex and sexuality also need to be discussed and understood from the perspective of girls and the social lives that they live (Expert working meeting on sexuality and CEFM, 2016). Furthermore, these issues need discussion in relation to religious beliefs. For example, sexuality cannot be discussed within a religious setting without also critically engaging with concepts like purity, chastity and fidelity, especially when teenage pregnancy and prevention of sex outside marriage remain regularly named drivers of child marriage in so many settings. What is needed is an integrated discussion of sex, sexuality and religion and its specific connections to gender and power relations (Haberland, 2015). This remains a gap in much development practice with a 2016 working meeting of experts (Expert working meeting on sexuality and CEFM, 2016) highlighting the lack of engagement with sexuality in relation to child marriage in particular. This meeting also highlighted the need to offer viable alternative paths to early marriage. Norms surrounding sexuality, such as a social emphasis on female virginity, disapproval of sexual experimentation or even of any private cross-gender interaction outside marriage are identified as key drivers of child, forced and early marriage, but also as traditionally missing from many child marriage interventions. It notes a number of possible reasons for this including the fact that “sexuality is a relational phenomenon, based in power structures” (Expert working meeting on sexuality and CEFM, 2016:7) and that this creates a culture of silence, a religious backlash and a lack of safe spaces for conversations with young people about sex. A number of helpful recent resources have been developed in this area (Institute for Development Studies, 2016; Michau & Siebert, 2016; Zengele, 2018) and can be found in Appendix B. Working at this complex intersection requires taking seriously and engaging religious leaders' concerns with matters such as sexual purity, sin and the sanctity of marriage and their influence on many parents. One example of this is the 2017 resource developed by *Islamic Relief Worldwide* entitled “An Islamic Human Rights Perspective on Early and Forced Marriage,” listed



inn Appendix B. *Plan International* in Brazil have had some experiences that indicate the need to develop a unique approach to talking with religious leaders about sex, although they have not (yet) developed it:

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*I think we need a special approach for religious leaders. Because it is not the same to talk about gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights and talk about girl's rights with politicians and talk about religious leaders who can be or not a politician. Because it is about these ideas they have about morality and God and hell and heaven and so we need a special approach. (Viviana, 3 May 2018)*

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Participants need to feel safe enough to participate, ask questions and state their existing beliefs – without fearing judgement from the facilitator. This requires sensitivity and awareness of gendered, religious and cultural issues. Developing toolkits together with religious leaders, that build religious leader capacity to speak about sexual matters and make connections to religious beliefs and questions, e.g. ‘how do I ensure my daughters virtue before marriage’, have worked well in Ethiopia and Nigeria (Religions for Peace/UNICEF, 2013). It should be noted, though, that these approaches can run the risk of re-inscribing patriarchal concepts (such as the importance of female virginity), rather than challenging them. Models such as *SASA!Faith* (Michau and Siebert, 2016) highlight the need to engage with underlying power relations (see Appendix B for a link to this). However, interviewees insist that discussions on sex need to begin with

opening up a space for the stated concerns of religious leaders and communities, to avoid backlash and resistance. Tackling the underlying reasons for why sex outside of marriage is often seen as the ultimate sin for women is important and can (over time) challenge religious leaders’ own vision of gender relations. However, creating a safe container for all opinions to be first expressed without rushing to judgement has been shown to be a critical part of the process of change (Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017). A number of factors should be kept in mind when working with religious leaders around sex and sexuality:

- the use of appropriate language for the context, but also being specific about sexual terms
- the use of age- and sex-segregated groups as well as intergenerational spaces
- the commitment that all opinions are to be respected and not simply personally attacked
- the use of open-ended questions around sex, to open up discussions on a range of social alternatives of what ‘could’ be possible (rather than just a black and white moral framing of what ‘should’ be done)
- the need to guide the discussions by clarifying factual misunderstandings and incorporating diverse views. This can be done either by including voices of girls directly or using case study stories (Herstad, 2009)
- the need to connect discussions of sexuality to issues of gender and power relations (Haberland, 2015).

### Lessons learned from HIV & AIDS programming: talking about sex and sexuality with religious leaders

Faith-based HIV responses have been a crucial part of an effective response to the pandemic, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, including breaking the silence and stigma (Trintapoli, 2011; USAID, 2013). These faith-based responders had to find ways to overcome the religious taboo of talking about sex, sexuality and sex-related matters (Le Roux, 2014).

Religious leaders, especially in Africa, played an important role in breaking the silence around HIV and talking about sex. Many religious leaders were initially highly resistant around HIV, perpetuating problematic narratives such as ‘HIV is a punishment from God’, and only prepared to talk about abstinence and fidelity approaches. However, targeted capacity building turned many such religious leaders into effective allies with a positive role as champions for change (USAID, 2013). This offers hope for religious leaders currently resistant on child marriage and a number of lessons may be applicable from this area:

- **Breaking the silence on sex.** In the light of the HIV pandemic, many religious leaders had to be equipped to talk openly about sex and sexuality. This required tackling religious taboos and silence around these themes. Many recognised the need for a more comprehensive approach to sexuality, even if this included talking about issues such as contraception, which (traditionally)

many religious leaders had condemned. FBOs played a key role in capacitating religious leaders to go first on their own journey of change, so as to then be able to create safe community spaces to talk about these issues. This began the reshaping of *theological and social norms around sex and sexuality in the light of HIV realities*. *World Vision's* Channels of Hope participatory methodology, explored below, and adapted to many other issues, began in response to HIV.

- **Tackling sexual stigma and shame.** Many religious leaders originally employed models of scapegoating, shaming and condemning those living with HIV, using theologies of retribution and punishment. This had to be changed and this required addressing the sexual stigma and shame attached to HIV. Workshops were developed around recognising and changing patterns of stigma and discrimination (Kidd, 2003, see link in Appendix B) and involving those living with HIV in programmes. HIV+ religious leaders speaking out or going to be tested became public ways to lead by example. Direct and visible effort had to be made to address sexual stigma and shame. Religious leaders played roles in shifting this 'solution' to find alternatives. In Tanzania, as a result of this shift, a fatwa was issued by religious leaders against HIV related stigma and discrimination (USAID, 2013).
- **Recognising structural drivers of sexual decisions.** While HIV & AIDS was at first strongly moralised by religious leaders, with a focus on individual responsibility and behaviour change, over time they moved to a deeper awareness of the many structural drivers of HIV&AIDS and the gendered and age power relations that often fuelled these social patterns. Toolkits, like those by SASA! in Uganda (see Appendix B), move away from a 'blame and shame' approach both to and by religious leaders. Instead, it equips them to interrogate gender power relations that shape both GBV and HIV/AIDS as issues of structural social justice and not merely of personal moral choice.
- **Creating inter-generational conversations.** HIV&AIDS highlighted the need for intergenerational and peer conversations around sex and relationships. It required parents to talk to children about topics such as sex, death, consent and harm. The loss of a generation of parents stimulated different ways to have dialogues across generations and peers. This is, for example, a specific strategy adopted by *Lovelife* in South Africa, with their BornFree dialogues, created intergenerational spaces for sex to be discussed publically (Robbins, 2010) as well as media stimulating discussions on the "social constructions of womanhood" seen to be fueling HIV infection amongst young women (Robbins, 2010:237). The need for intergenerational conversations around child marriage has been highlighted by research on child marriage (Karim, 2016; Milward et al, 2016) if social norms are to be rethought. Religious institutions could offer spaces for these.

Child marriage is also situated within wider containers of GBV and child protection. While lessons can also be learnt from these sectors, in relation to engaging the gendered and sexual drivers of child marriage (sex or pregnancy outside marriage), HIV&AIDS programming may offer underexplored possibilities for religious leaders to move from being liabilities that perpetuate shame to allies that help to address it, as this example from *World Vision* shows:

*World Vision International* (WVI) is an example of a faith-based HIV responder that directly engaged with sex and sexuality in their work with religious leaders. Their *Channels of Hope* (CoH) HIV programme, that focuses on the Christian faith in particular, illustrated how more open and potentially transforming conversations about sex and sexuality can be facilitated with religious leaders and employs a participatory methodology that has been extended to other areas such as gender and child protection.

CoH HIV provides education and training on HIV for religious leaders, with the aim of empowering faith leaders and their respective faith communities to tackle behaviour and attitudes that harm people and deny them their rights (Greyling, 2016). It starts with a three-day facilitated interactive workshop, educating religious leaders on crucial facts about HIV (e.g. ways of transmission; how the virus works; treatment options, etc.) (World Vision Fieldguide Addendum 1, n.d.).



Whilst the workshop educated faith leaders on the facts of HIV, the focus of the workshop is on bringing HIV & AIDS into conversation with religion. As the HIV pandemic is in large part due to sexual transmission, this means that religious beliefs about and understanding of sex and sexuality should be discussed. This workshop does this, through tough discussion statements and questions such as “if a person who was infected through an extra - marital sexual relationship seeks your counseling, what would be the first thing you would discuss?” or “It is time for the church to talk openly about masturbation as a safe way of releasing sexual energy?” (World Vision Facilitator’s Manual, 2013)<sup>11</sup>.

The workshop methodology requires those attending to grapple personally and experientially with difficult questions and also uses concrete case study stories to show the impact of these decisions on the lives of others. This confronts participants with the unintended consequences of their attitudes and can lead to significant shifts in these attitudes over the course of the workshop. The workshop intentionally moves away from abstinence-only messaging that is often associated with religion, to tackling the gritty reality of real people of all ages having sex. This helped capacitate religious leaders to be able to create safe spaces for them and their followers to talk about these issues, by having them confront these issues and consider the reshaping of social norms, but also by modelling in the workshops how such conversations can be facilitated (World Vision Facilitator’s Manual, 2013).

To talk about HIV and sex also requires talking about stigma and shame. By bringing guiding principles from the Christian faith (through contextual biblical reflection and discussions) into discussion with the reality and experiences of stigma and shame, often linked to the sexual transmission of the virus, religious leaders are encouraged to rethink their responses to those infected with HIV. For example, the Christian principle of love for all people is brought into discussion with the shaming and rejection that many of those with HIV experience. This helps religious leaders to move from scapegoating, condemning and shaming those living with HIV & AIDS to an inclusive approach of recognising and supporting them as part of the church community (World Vision Facilitator’s Manual, 2013). This is an important area for child marriage, where individual and social stigma and shame over premarital sex or pregnancy is seen to often drive child marriage as a solution. Discussing religiously-driven stigma is critical here and a toolkit is involved in Appendix B that offers some useful tips on understanding stigma (Kidd, 2003).

## 4.6 Making the connections

As stated at the start of this section, there is no simple ‘one size fits all’ way to connect each strategy with a specific driver. Each organisation needs to take responsibility for determining these links in relation to what best suits their context. However, below is

one brief illustration of how work funded by *Christian Aid* in Nigeria and involved in this study is making the links between forms of resistance, drivers of resistance, and strategies for addressing it in *their* setting as an illustration of how connections can be made.



<sup>11</sup> Note that these workshop statements are not meant as a reflection of WVI’s own position but are intentionally provocative so as to serve as starting points for workshop discussion.

In Nigeria, the **types** of resistance being seen include vocal, verbal resistance, and the spiritual scapegoating of those who argue for an end to it as anti-Islamic (Greene et al, 2015). Indirect resistance exists to the idea of girls being educated, with research suggesting that girls not in school are far more likely to be married off (Christian Aid, 2016). Further formative empirical research was then done to better understand the **roots** of this specific religious resistance, focusing on the complex role of the adolescent girl. This showed that the roles of religion and culture were deeply entangled and influential on community views of girls, shaped by religiously underpinned discriminatory norms of patriarchal power, parental concerns, fears and taboos on discussing about emerging sexuality and the need to punish those who get pregnant outside marriage. Girls' voices were invisible and there was a need for safe participatory spaces for them, both on their own and to facilitate their discussions with adults (including with religious leaders, who were also found to often be unaware of the consequences of child marriage).

**Strategies** were then developed to target these types of resistance and their roots. An interfaith approach avoided scapegoating Islam and used a 'we are all in **this together**' model. Creating safe spaces for married and unmarried girls to share their stories showed religious leaders the consequences. Finally, specific toolkits were developed to help religious leaders be equipped to talk about sex and its connection to religion (see Religions for Peace/UNICEF, 2013, in Appendix B), both as leaders and as parents, and to have access to basic sex and gender information. Male religious leaders were offered a role as positive champions that would embrace a 'protection' approach to keeping girls in school, but connected this not to marrying children off but to protecting them from getting married. Sacred text engagement helped detangle misperceptions between culture and religion. A **top tip** seen was that religious leaders could use their power and authority to influence key household decision makers (such as grandmothers) perceived to be playing an important, but often unnoticed, role on issues of child marriage.

This approach is complex, it can potentially reinforce patriarchy by primarily engaging men, but it also finds ways to bring in the voices of girls in a safe way. It seeks to find common ground and also keeps working with girls who have got married. Arguably it 'flips' notions of shame, so that religious leaders can take pride in keeping girls in school rather than in marrying them off and offers an asset-based model as a strategy of positive framing which also draws on the multiple identity of religious leaders as parents too (Palm et al, 2017; Christian Aid, 2016).



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## 5

### Points for consideration



The preceding discussion of resistance, strategies, and practical tips for engaging with religious leaders would be incomplete without a brief discussion of a number of further issues that need careful consideration.

#### 5.1 The heterogeneousness of child marriage

Reflecting on religious leader engagement around child marriage has highlighted how diverse the practice of child marriage is, both in why and how it happens across the world. Child marriage is a complex practice caused by multiple drivers, including but not limited to gender inequality, and these may vary even within one country. For example, one of the many reasons why child marriage happens in Nepal, is because parents see it as a way to ensure that they have a place in heaven; in India it is often used by parents to try and manage the blossoming sexuality of both male and female teenagers and to prevent cross-caste marriages; in Malawi in many instances it is for families to avoid the perceived shame of having a grandchild out of wedlock; and in Brazil it can be a way for teenage girls to secure social freedom to embrace their emerging sexuality.

While ‘child marriage’ is used as a general or cluster term, it encompasses a number of types of marriages that can happen for different reasons. Interventions need to focus on the specific reasons for child marriage in a particular context, and on the different reasons why religious leaders are resisting efforts to end it. For example, compare religious leaders who agree to marry off six-year-olds as a way for parents to acquire ‘salvation,’ due to a belief that this is what the sacred text says, with religious leaders who marry off pregnant 16-year-olds so that she and her family are not stigmatised for having a child out of wedlock. In the second scenario, it would be appropriate to work with religious leaders on sex and sexuality, purity and chastity, and stigma

and discrimination. But not in the setting where child marriage is seen spiritually as a god-ordained way to salvation for the parents.

Therefore, it is crucial to not only work with a general idea of what child marriage is, but to be specific with regard to the reasons why it happens in a particular setting and why religion and religious leaders support it in that setting. Only then can interventions be designed that are appropriate and that can avoid or tackle actual resistance from religious leaders. This, once again, emphasises that child marriage interventions cannot simply be copied from one setting to another. It *has* to be contextualised.

Focusing on the underlying root causes that drive religious leader resistance also helps generate awareness of how these issues and concerns are also present within the Global North, albeit at times in different forms. Consider, for example, religiously conservative movements in the USA, such as the Silver Ring Thing, and father-daughter purity balls. These also started because of a religiously-driven concern with teenage sex and sexuality, and an emphasis on the importance of purity and chastity (Valenti, 2010). Child marriages might not often be the result of these concerns today, but (for example) valuing girls based on their sexual purity carries the same patriarchal dangers. Focusing on the roots driving conservative religious leader responses to sex and sexuality allows one to recognise how unhelpful constructs and beliefs limit healthy engagement with children and teenagers around sex and sexuality everywhere. It also assists in countering a neo-colonialist narrative of child marriage as being a non-Western problem. While child marriage might be less common in the North, the existence of beliefs around the relative value of boys and girls, and especially the religious beliefs around sex and sexuality, appear to be universal. Focusing on the underlying roots allows a much

more open and healthy conversation with all people, irrespective of their nationality, and how they engage with their religion on of gender, sex and sexuality.

## 5.2 Girls that are already married

It appears that little is being done to assist girls that are already married. The focus of the vast majority of interventions is on *preventing* child marriage. This is also true in relation to religious leaders. While religious leaders can be a great resource in supporting child brides, especially since they have the authority to engage with and even reprimand husbands, this potential intervention avenue is not being utilised. In many countries, married girls have few spaces where they can go unsupervised, and the church is one of these spaces. As a result, religious leaders are a potential source of counselling and support that society allows these girls to access. This gap is part of a broader absence of interventions that work with those most directly affected by child marriage, such as girls who are already married as well as with their husbands and family. A recent report from Save the Children (Freccero & Whiting, 2018) reinforces this concern that a focus on prevention may lead to already married girls being ignored.

## 5.3 Engaging religions that do not have a central sacred text

While several organisations have developed manuals that guide engagement with religious leaders on child marriage through the lens of sacred scripture, almost all of these manuals engage only with either the Bible or Qur'an. Important work has been done that identifies what different religions and their sacred texts say about child marriage and related issues of gender, power and sexuality (see Appendix B for some specific toolkit resources). However, there appears to be a dearth of child marriage manuals that engage with Hinduism or Hindu sacred texts (the NIRN manual from Nepal being a notable recent exception). As was discussed briefly earlier, theological engagement appears to be primarily focused on monotheistic religions with authoritative sacred texts. But what of religions or religious groups that do not have a sacred *text*? Alternative forms of theological engagement, e.g. with a religious group's understanding of spirits, prayers, rituals, or mythological stories, around child marriage is currently lacking. In the light of rituals such as first communion (Stith, 2015), that have been noted as pointing to the power of those religious rituals in reinforcing child brides, this may be an important gap to examine more closely across different religious traditions.

## 5.4 Recognising the diversity within religion

This research project has reflected on engagement with religious leaders from the three major world religions – Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. What has been learnt through literature review and interviews has been synthesised, with the aim of identifying commonalities and general best practices that can apply to many different settings. The risk of such a synthesis is that it essentialises religion. It can create the impression that all religions and religious leaders are the same and that all interventions will work equally effectively on all religious leaders, irrespective of their religion. However, this is not the case. On the contrary, we find diversity between different religions, within a religion, and among religious leaders. As the examples and case studies used have illustrated, what can be appropriate in one setting, may be rejected in another. The interplay of religion, region, political situation, and type and position of religious leader all combine to influence what is appropriate and what is not. That is why it is of the utmost importance to more fully understand in advance the context in which one is working.

This will also determine whether it is appropriate to work interfaith or not. In Nigeria, for example, where tension between Christian and Muslim is high and politicised, interfaith work around child marriage also serves to promote the broader aim of interfaith peace. The *Peace Foundation* in Pakistan, on the other hand, works with Hindu and Muslim religious leaders separately. Again, the particular context will determine what is appropriate.

It should be emphasised that those working with religious leaders should be very aware of their own attitudes towards and beliefs about religion and religious leaders. If they, for example, believe all religious leaders to be conservative, reactionary and obstinate, this will influence whether they are willing to work with religious leaders and, if they do, how they work with them. Essentialising beliefs around all religious leaders being conservative and fundamentalist has led to, for example, governments' refusal to engage with any religious leaders. The media in particular has played a key role at times in propagating polarising and static views of religious leaders and their beliefs and it needs to be harnessed sensitively. Therefore, it is important to intentionally challenge essentialising and potentially discriminatory views about religious leaders. As discussed, engaging with religious leaders needs a non-judgemental approach and a willingness to find common ground on which to build.



## 5.5 Going beyond binaries

The adolescent girl sits within a tension held between agency and protection narratives. Religious groups in particular can struggle to acknowledge the emerging agency of girls, often resorting to an ‘obedience’ narrative. However, other groups can also fail to recognise the emerging agency, especially around the sexuality of adolescent girls. The adolescent girl in international development discourse can be framed in confusing ways with an “inconsistent conceptual logic” (Greene et al, 2015:16) across some human rights agreements. She is often treated both as an object of protection by much child marriage framing *and* as a choosing subject by reproductive rights framing. There is a need to better hold these two aspects on a continuum. Seeing the adolescent girl as both a potential victim and an emerging agent is important, going beyond the use of binaries that insist she can only be one or the other. This binary can create an unhelpful “monolithic representation” (Giaquinta, 2017:66). It is also important to consider when key tipping points or danger zones are for girls at different points in their life (e.g. puberty, high school, loss of parents, family financial crisis, dowry discussions) and to put support structures in place around these life transitions, as noted in *Care’s Tipping Point Project* in Nepal and Bangladesh (Karim et al, 2016).

Adolescent girls’ choices need to be listened to and taken into account, but so does their vulnerability to being pushed into situations shaped by discriminatory social norms. Their multiple identities also challenge any essentialisation into one category of ‘child bride’. The choices made by a 17 year old are not the same as those made by a 10 year old. Understanding the diverse contexts that shape those choices, requires

a commitment to engage and amplify the voices of girls themselves (including those still married as child brides) and was recommended by practitioners in Ethiopia and Nigeria in particular. Research in Bangladesh, Nepal and India suggests a need for further research into “self-initiated marriages” by girls (Verma et al, 2013:33), an area unfortunately beyond the scope of this study.

A second problematic binary that needs to be avoided around child marriage is that of faith identity versus secularism. The rise of religious fundamentalism using child marriage as a symbol often employs a binary to resist efforts to end child marriage. This positions secular western forces and those seen as its compromisers as the evil, anti-religious colonial enemy, polarized against religious leaders as gatekeepers of divine ethical plans and salvation for humanity. This can give religious resistance an aura of moral-spiritual credibility. Organisations need to be careful not to reinforce this binary by treating resistant religious leaders as the enemy. Evidence suggests that successful organisations push beyond the static binaries that polarise human rights and religion. Instead, they offer alternatives for engagement that find diverse ways (e.g. through themes of human rights, child protection, gender justice or violence prevention) to interweave the rights of the girl child with the fluid convictions of diverse religious communities (IRW, 2017), and to respect and build on their shared intention to do no harm. This approach offers positive identities for religious leaders to embrace, with lessons learned from similar struggles around other issues. This requires all partners to question their attitudes and assumptions and to develop a level of religious literacy.



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## 6

## Conclusion

This research study offers a deeper understanding of the specific, yet often overlapping, roots of religious resistance to ending child marriage. While these do relate to other key drivers of child marriage, such as poverty and cultural practices, they also point to unique reasons for religious leader resistance to ending child marriage across many different contexts. It highlights the complexity of the multiple drivers of this resistance, and the role religious leaders can play, both directly and indirectly, in upholding harmful, gendered norms. It cautions organisations away from seeking just one root cause and offers a typology and resistance analysis that is more specific to religion and religious leaders. It insists that as a first step, not only is a general situational analysis of the context required, but that more attention must be paid to identifying the specific types and roots of religious resistance. Only then should targeted strategies be identified, developed and evaluated. At the heart of many of these roots lie questions of gender and power (in patriarchal, spiritual, parental, and ritual forms) as well as the enduring power of social norms in relation to shame, social sanctions and stigma.

Understanding why religious leaders are resisting then offers the opportunity to work to reshape that resistance by finding common ground and building critical mass in ways that offer an alternative role to religious leaders, one that they can embrace positively and can align with their faith values. This is a long-term strategy and requires trust, mutual respect and a non-judgemental approach that moves away from blaming and shaming resisters to offer both capacity building and alternative roles. The importance of a positive framing and finding entry points that can open up conversation with interlocutors accepted by religious leaders cannot be over-estimated. An asset-based approach which sees religious leaders as potentially playing a unique role in ending child marriage can help dispel fears that their influential social role in marriage is being taken away. It can offer opportunities for creative reframing together of ideas about marriage, sacred texts, patriarchal



doctrines and religious rituals, and draw on their power and influence in many communities and families. Understanding the multiple, interconnected roots of a complex practice like child marriage offers possibilities for using similar metaphors to build common ground with religious leaders and develop ways to respond differently. For example: themes of parental protection can be reshaped into positive child protection; binaries of rights versus religion into synergies between human rights and religion; and marriage as a sacred religious ritual can be employed to prevent (and not to endorse) child marriage. Modes of initial religious resistance can be harnessed, if the underlying roots are reshaped, and used in positive ways to instead 'resist' child marriage.

This report highlighted five strategic approaches identified as effective by multiple respondents across diverse contexts. While there is no simple blueprint for working with religious leaders, these offer some emerging lessons that can be taken seriously by those considering engaging with resistant religious leaders within their own contexts:

- The need to respect religious leaders' agency and involve them from the start as programme co-creators for sustainability
- The importance of building a critical mass for change both from the top-down and the bottom-up
- The use of positive framing focused not just on 'stopping' child marriage but on enabling something else. This can nurture religion as a possible asset and religious leader as potential champions in the wider task
- The need to engage theologically, rethinking sacred scripture in explicit detailed ways with credible experts
- The need to address difficult roots: how to talk about gender, sexuality and its connections to power.



A number of existing resources on engaging religious leaders around difficult themes have already been developed, which can be shared between partners across faiths, within faiths, and between regions. Some of these are listed in Appendix B. But they will need detailed, participatory adaptation to the specific context if they are not to further entrench resistance from within to ideas from outside. This report concludes that there is a need to better understand

the ongoing complexity of the religious drivers of child marriage and the strategic task of transforming the deeply rooted and gendered norms, belief and practices that underpin the specific practice of child marriage. Working with religious leaders on child marriage, and responding to religious resistance to ending child marriage, remains a long-term project that requires the utmost sensitivity to contextual nuances.



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## APPENDIX A: Tools for Internal Engagement

### The Religious Resistance Wheel

How are religious leaders resisting – A six-fold typology for organisations.



# Seven roots of religious resistance



Child Marriage  
Required by Religion

Religious  
Fundamentalism

Ignorance of Child  
Marriage Consequences

Child Marriage as  
Parental Power

Child Marriage as  
Patriarchal Power

Marriage as  
Religious Ritual

Fear of pre-marital  
sex and pregnancy



## Decisions

*For example*

- To work with RL or not? Willingness on both sides is needed.
- Which approaches are right for our organisation and context?
- What framing to use?

## Do's

*For example*

- What language is appropriate? What should be avoided?
- How do we include religious leader buy-in and input at all phases of the intervention?
- How do we include formal and informal religious leaders?

## Dont's

*For example*

- How do we avoid taking a side in religiously-fuelled disagreements?
- Are we equipped to engage with sacred texts?
- Are our interlocutors respected and do they have credibility in the community?





## APPENDIX B: Existing Toolkits and other resources

The following selected resources, primarily toolkits, offer some useful aids for those wanting to engage religious leaders on some of the issues identified in this report. While some are child-marriage specific and engage sacred texts from various religious traditions, others target the wider container within which child marriage sits, e.g. violence against children, gender-based violence, adolescent girls etc. Some offer useful approaches to engage faith perspectives on gender and sexuality which as root causes of child marriage need to be addressed.

Since relatively few lessons have been documented on religious leaders and child marriage specifically, selected resources are included from other areas working with religious leaders from which lessons can be applied to child marriage, such as talking about sex, masculinities, power and gender, effective in HIV work. Finally, a few examples of formative research/stakeholder mapping M&E guidelines are included in the light of the need to build this area up further in direct relation to the nexus between religious leaders and child marriage:

### Child marriage related resources

1. Al-Azhar University, Coptic Church of Egypt and UNICEF Egypt. Peace, Love and Tolerance: Key messages from Islam and Christianity on Protection Children from Violence and Harmful Practices. Available: <https://www.unicef.org/egypt/reports/peace-love-tolerance> [Arabic version] [https://jilflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Unicef\\_Joint\\_book\\_high\\_res\\_Eng.3.pdf](https://jilflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Unicef_Joint_book_high_res_Eng.3.pdf) [English version]
2. Chaudry, A and Ahmed, R. 2016. *Islamic Perspective on Engaging Men and Boys to End Violence in the Family*.
3. Canadian Council of Muslim Women. Available: <http://ccmw.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ya-ccmw-islamic-paper-eng-01-02-print.pdf>
4. Christian Aid, 2016. *Improving the Choices and Opportunities for Adolescent Girls: A toolkit for faith leaders*. Abuja:
5. Christian Aid. Available: <http://sidebysidegender.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ImprovingtheChoices-FaithLeadersToolkit.pdf>
6. CoH Project Model. 2016. *Channels of Hope: an effective behaviour change and advocacy methodology for faith leaders and faith communities*. World Vision Guidance for Development Programmes. Available: [https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Channels\\_of\\_Hope\\_project\\_model.pdf](https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Channels_of_Hope_project_model.pdf). [2018, 23 July]
7. Ekeoba, P., and Fashola. T. 2015. *Masculinities and Religion in Nigeria*. Voices4Change Report. Available: <http://www.v4cnigeria.com/resources/researchreports/> [2018, 22 May]
8. FHI 360, Social Impact and USAID, 2018. *Capacity Development Interventions; A Guide for Program Designers*. Available: <https://www.scsglobal.org/file/11470/download?token=eWMH6JQD>
9. Gennrich, D. 2015. *Created in God's Image: A Gender Transformation Toolkit for Women and Men in Churches*.
10. South Africa: Norwegian Church Aid. Available: <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/contentassets/c2cd7731ab1b4727897258c5d49246c8/nca-createdingodsimage-completebook-jun2015-open2.pdf>
11. IDS, Sonke Gender Justice. Wits. 2016. *Faith, Gender & Sexuality: A Toolkit*. Institute of Development Studies (IDS),
12. Sonke Gender Justice and Wits Centre for Diversity Studies. Available: <http://genderjustice.org.za/publication/module-1-sexuality-gender-diversity/>
13. Islamic Relief Worldwide. 2017. *An Islamic Human Rights Perspective on Early and Forced Marriage*. Available: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/an-islamic-human-rights-perspective-on-early-and-forced-marriages/>

14. Jackson, E. 2017. *The Faith Effect. Early Marriage and FGM. Facilitator manual to train Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith Leaders*. Centre for Interfaith Action. Available: <https://rfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Ethiopia-FGMC-EOTC-Faith-Leader-Training-Manual.pdf>
15. Jackson, E. 2017. *The Faith Effect. Early Marriage and FGM. Facilitator manual to train Muslim faith Leaders*. Centre for Interfaith Action. Available: <https://rfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Ethiopia-FGMC-Muslim-Faith-Leader-Training-Manual.pdf>
16. Kidd, R. 2003. *Understanding and Challenging HIV Stigma: Toolkit for Action*. International Centre for Research on Women. Available: <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Understanding-and-Challenging-HIV-Stigma-Toolkit-for-Action.pdf>
17. Michau, L and Siebert, S. 2016. *SASA! Faith. A guide for faith communities to prevent violence against women and HIV*. Uganda: Raising Voices. Available: <http://raisingvoices.org/sasa-faith/>
18. Religions for Peace. 2009. *Restoring Dignity: A Toolkit for Religious Communities to End Violence Against Women*. Available: <http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/Restoring%20Dignity%20-%20A%20Toolkit%20for%20Religious%20Communities%20to%20End%20Violence%20Against%20Women.pdf>
19. Religions for Peace. 2010. *From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities Can Do to Eliminate Violence Against Children*. UNICEF. Available: [http://www.unicef.org/eapro/UNICEF\\_Religions\\_for\\_Peace\\_Feb2010.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/eapro/UNICEF_Religions_for_Peace_Feb2010.pdf)
20. Religions for Peace/UNICEF. 2013. *Early Marriage: Addressing Harmful Traditional Practices in Your Community: A Faith Leader Toolkit for Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria*. Available: <https://rfp.org/sites/default/files/publications/Nigeria%20Early%20Marriage%20Faith%20Leader%20Toolkit%20-%20201.28.2013.pdf>
21. Stefanik, L & Hwang, T. 2017. "Applying Theory to Practice: CARE's Journey Piloting Social Norms Measures for Gender Programming. Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Inc. (CARE). Available: <http://gender.care2share.wikispaces.net/file/view/care-social-norms-paper-web.pdf>
22. Toure, A. 2006. *Engaging Faith-based Organizations in HIV Prevention: A Training Manual for Programme Managers*. New York: UNFPA. Available: [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/HIVTrainingManual\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/HIVTrainingManual_eng.pdf)
23. Zengele, B. 2018. *Church Resources Manual on Sexual Gender Based Violence*. Available: <http://genderjustice.org.za/publication/church-resource-manual-sexual-gender-based-violence/>

### **Selected formative research/evaluation resources**

24. FHI 360, Social Impact and USAID, 2018. *Capacity Development Interventions; A Guide for Program Designers*. Available: <https://www.scsglobal.org/file/11470/download?token=eWMH6JQD>
25. Girls Not Brides. 2017. *Design for Success toolkit*. Available: [https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Girls-Not-Brides-Design-for-Success-Toolkit\\_Final-ENG-high-res.pdf](https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Girls-Not-Brides-Design-for-Success-Toolkit_Final-ENG-high-res.pdf)
26. Girls Not Brides. 2014. *Recommended indicators for Girls Not Brides members working to address child marriage*. Available: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/child-marriage-indicators/>
27. Population Council. 2011. *From Research, to Program Design, to Implementation Programming for Rural Girls in Ethiopia: A Toolkit for Practitioners*. Available: [http://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2011PGY\\_EthiopiaGirlsProgramToolkit.pdf](http://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2011PGY_EthiopiaGirlsProgramToolkit.pdf)
28. World YMCA. 2016. *Child, Early and Forced Marriage Community Initiative Implementation Toolkit*. Available: <http://www.worldywca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CEFM-toolkit.pdf>





## APPENDIX C: Key Tips for organisations engaging religious leaders

### Do's: Recommendations of things to do

- Draw on the 'other identities' of religious leaders, not just seeing them through a religion-only lens.
- Use positive language (e.g. "encouraging positive fatherhood"), rather than negative (e.g. "ending harmful traditional practices") within how the program is conceptualised and presented
- Focus on finding common ground to build a shared agenda. Compromises by both may be needed here.
- Respect religious leader ownership/agency at all stages of the process, from design to accountability.
- Select and be open to work with religious leaders at multiple levels, formal and informal.
- Prioritise the intentional engagement of women and youth.
- Use existing avenues and/or structures of engagement within and outside religions.
- Recognise and respect the diversity of religious groups, both across and within faiths.
- Know the context and do research on the community, child marriage and religious leaders.
- Build capacity of interlocutors, so they are equipped and skilled to engage religious leaders
- Design long-term interventions, which allows for relationships and trust to grow over time.

### Don't's: Recommendations of things to avoid

- Don't use confrontational language or words that may cause a knee jerk backlash.
- Don't get caught up indirectly in 'taking sides' in wider religiously-fuelled conflicts.
- Don't try to engage sacred texts directly if not equipped and qualified; use a credible partner/ staff member.
- Don't write off already married girls as 'beyond help'.
- Don't use interlocutors that have no community credibility or relevant expertise.
- Don't expect to persuade every last person – remember the 80/20 rule.
- Don't engage with the media in ways that demonise religious leaders.
- Don't set up a different 'silo' or parallel structure for addressing child marriage alone if other structures are already in place.
- Don't assume religions are static and homogenous.
- Don't have 'ending child marriage' as the only success measure worth using.
- Don't exclude or scapegoat independent religious groups.



## APPENDIX D: KII participants

Name	Organisation	Religious leaders worked with	Country
Mohammad Kaddoura and Fatmeh Ardat (joint call)	<i>Terre des Hommes.</i> A humanitarian organisation focused on improving the conditions of vulnerable children worldwide emphasising health, justice especially in areas of conflict, poverty and migrancy	Islam	Lebanon
Rozana Ina	<i>Sisters in Islam.</i> A civil society organisation committed to promoting the rights of women within the frameworks of Islam and universal human rights.	Islam	Malaysia
Usha Choudary	<i>Vikalp Sansthan.</i> An organisation of young social workers, with the aim of creating a violence-free society based on equity, peace and justice.	Hindu	India
Matilda Matabwa	<i>Evangelical Association of Malawi.</i> A Christian umbrella organisation for evangelical churches and Christian organisations that seeks to mobilise, unite and equip churches and organisations.	Christian	Malawi
Robert Ngaiyaye	<i>Malawi Interfaith Association.</i> Building the capacity of faith leaders to respond to HIV&AIDS; also addressing related emerging social issues.	Christian & Muslim	Malawi
Molly Melching	<i>Tostan.</i> A NGO empowering African communities to bring about sustainable development and positive social transformation based on respect for human rights.	Muslim & Christian	Senegal
Arvind Ojha	<i>URMUL Trust.</i> The URMUL Rural Health, Research and Development Trust is a family of organisations working towards social and economic change.	Muslim & Hindu	India



Muhammad Aslam	<i>Peace Foundation.</i> A NGO that promotes and protects children's rights and provides evidence-informed early childhood services for young children, their families and communities.	Hindu & Muslim	Pakistan
Joseph Hayab	<i>Global Peace Foundation.</i> An NGO which promotes a values-based approach to peace building, guided by a vision of One Family under God as the foundation for ethical, cohesive societies.	Christian & Muslim	Nigeria
Kidist Belayneh	<i>Norwegian Church Aid.</i> An FBO linked to the Norwegian government working on harmful traditional practices in Ethiopia since 1999 in collaboration with the Ethiopian Interfaith Council	Christian & Muslim	Ethiopia
Habibur Rahman	<i>Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC).</i> An NGO dedicated to alleviating poverty by empowering the poor to bring about change in their- lives, founded in Bangladesh in 1972 and now working in multiple countries	Muslim/ Interfaith	Bangladesh
Hope Dunira	<i>Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust (AWET).</i> An inter-apostolic FBO mandated to advance the rights of adolescents & the women and mainstreaming of gender in Apostolic church activities.	Christian	Zimbabwe
Seema Khan	<i>National Inter-Religious Network (NIRN)</i> This faith-based network addresses issues of VAW caused by socio-cultural-religious harmful practices and works across multiple faith groups in Nepal.	Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian	Nepal
Viviana Santiago	<i>Plan International (Brazil)</i> An NGO with a focus on providing children with a healthy start, economic empowerment and protection against violence.	Christian	Brazil
Mohara Valle	<i>Promundo Brazil</i> An NGO working with partners to engage men, advance gender equality and prevent violence in over 40 countries. It focuses on research, advocacy and community programme implementation.	Christian (emerged in research)	Brazil