

# WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

**Everyone has a role to play in the movement to end child marriage. In this brief, we explore the role of religious leaders and highlight key approaches to support civil society organisations who are considering engaging with them in their efforts to end child marriage.**

**Every year 12 million girls are married before the age of 18.**<sup>1</sup> This denies them their rights and childhood, often meaning an end to their formal schooling and the start of their life as a wife and mother, with profound physical, psychological and emotional consequences.

This brief is intended for civil society organisations that would like to start engaging with religious leaders in their work to end child marriage. It is part of a series<sup>2</sup> that looks at different parts of a comprehensive approach to ending child marriage, and is based on **research by the Unit for Religion and Development at Stellenbosch University**, and on insights from about twenty *Girls Not Brides* members and partners who work with religious leaders.<sup>3</sup> Practitioners can use this

brief to guide them in their decisions about whether to engage with religious leaders, and if so, how.

## WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN CHILD MARRIAGE AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS?

Child marriage is not determined by any particular religion. For example, two countries with the same majority religion can have very different child marriage prevalence rates.<sup>4</sup> Child marriage exists in every region of the world, and cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. It happens because girls are usually valued less than boys, and because poverty, insecurity, and limited access to quality education and work opportunities mean that child marriage is often seen as the best option for girls.



As child marriage is caused by many different factors, ending it requires sustained efforts by a variety of actors across sectors. *Girls Not Brides' Theory of Change on Child Marriage* outlines four interlinked strategies: empowering girls with information and skills to be able to exercise their rights; working with families and communities to understand the risks of child marriage and find alternatives for girls; ensuring education, health, child protection, and other services are available for them; and creating a supportive legal and policy environment.<sup>5</sup> Religious leaders often have great influence and play a key role in their communities. Considering working with them may be an important part of the second strategy on engaging families and communities.

### Religious leaders can be critical allies in efforts to end child marriage

Over 80% of the world's population profess a religious belief.<sup>6</sup> As spiritual guides, religious leaders are among the most respected figures in many communities, and often contribute to prescribe which behaviours are acceptable or not.<sup>7</sup> They can help change existing norms in their communities and be critical allies in the movement to end child marriage.<sup>8</sup> In the last few decades, religious leaders from multiple faiths have contributed to addressing child marriage by: collaborating with development actors; making public commitments; refusing to perform child marriages; participating in campaigns and trainings to build their own capacity to raise awareness about the harmful consequences of child marriage through their sermons, and reflect on solutions.

- Religious leaders helped develop Nepal's national strategy to end child marriage. An inter-religious network also led a **public campaign** against child marriage.<sup>9</sup>
- Female Muslim leaders in Indonesia **issued a fatwa** against child marriage and urged the government to raise the legal age of marriage to 18.<sup>10</sup>
- Many religious leaders in Malawi check the age of the couple before agreeing to marry them, counsel children and families to promote education, and speak about the consequences of child marriage in churches and mosques.<sup>11</sup>
- In West Africa, **many have supported their communities** to end violence against women and girls, including child marriage.
- Religious scholars from many countries worked with activists to develop an international **Framework for Action**, providing key principles to push for greater gender equality in national Muslim laws.
- The renowned Al-Azhar University partnered with UNICEF in Egypt to develop a **manual** which draws on Koranic verses, Hadiths and Sunnas to provide guidance on children's protection and wellbeing. For example, it highlights that only people who are able to demonstrate sound judgment should be considered mature enough to marry.
- Strong voices like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, co-founder of *Girls Not Brides*, have also been championing the movement to end child marriage.



Photo: James Rodriguez / Girls Not Brides

***“I have decided to give the fight to end child marriage my all – with the same commitment that I gave to the struggle against apartheid”***

**Archbishop Desmond Tutu**

## Some religious leaders have also opposed efforts to end child marriage

While some religious leaders have been valuable allies, other religious voices have been resistant to change and continue to promote child marriage and patriarchy.

- At the community level, some leaders continue to perform and register religious marriages that involve children, while others openly condone child marriage, sometimes using various interpretations of religious texts to avoid communities questioning their position.<sup>12</sup>
- In several countries, religious fundamentalism is closely aligned to political interests which together have been influencing laws, policies, and attitudes, holding back progress on gender equality and civil rights. In these contexts, civil society often faces strong barriers to speaking out against child marriage due to increased political and religious conservatism.<sup>13</sup>
- At the national level, the age of marriage is sometimes only regulated by religious laws which might allow child marriage. In Lebanon, for example, Shiite girls can marry at nine, Jewish girls at twelve, and Catholic girls at fourteen.<sup>14</sup> In some contexts, personal status laws might conflict with a State Law that forbids child marriage. Conservative forces have also used religious arguments to oppose legal reforms or implementation of public policies.<sup>15</sup> For example, in 2016 in Pakistan, the Council of Islamic Ideology **demanding the withdrawal of a bill** to raise the minimum age of marriage, considering it blasphemy. In the United States, before child marriage was banned in New Jersey, activists had faced a number of challenges. For example, the governor had **declined to sign the bill** that would prohibit the practice, claiming that it would conflict with religious customs.

## HOW TO DECIDE IF AND HOW TO ENGAGE WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS?

The complexity of religious contexts can make it hard for practitioners to know where to start when considering if and how to engage with religious leaders. This can be especially difficult in areas where civil society activists face a lot of resistance to their efforts to end child marriage.



Photo: Thom Pierce / Girls Not Brides

To support its members with this challenge, *Girls Not Brides* commissioned the Unit for Religion and Development Research (URDR) at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, to conduct research which focused on the three majority religions from the 20 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage: Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. It should, however, be noted that very limited evidence was available for Hinduism,<sup>16</sup> therefore the study mainly builds on research and practice from Muslim and Christian contexts in Africa and Asia. Based on a literature review and fifteen interviews in different regions and across different faiths, the research explored why some religious leaders might oppose efforts to end child marriage and what can be learned from those with experience in this area.<sup>17</sup> The following sections build on this research to guide practitioners in their reflection and help them develop strategies that make sense in their contexts.

### Adding an extra layer to your situation analysis: background research on the religious context

For any project addressing child marriage, organisations should always allocate enough time to gather all the information needed to understand why and how child marriage happens in the area where the intervention takes place, what might be the main challenges with this project, who can help with these, and who might hold progress back.

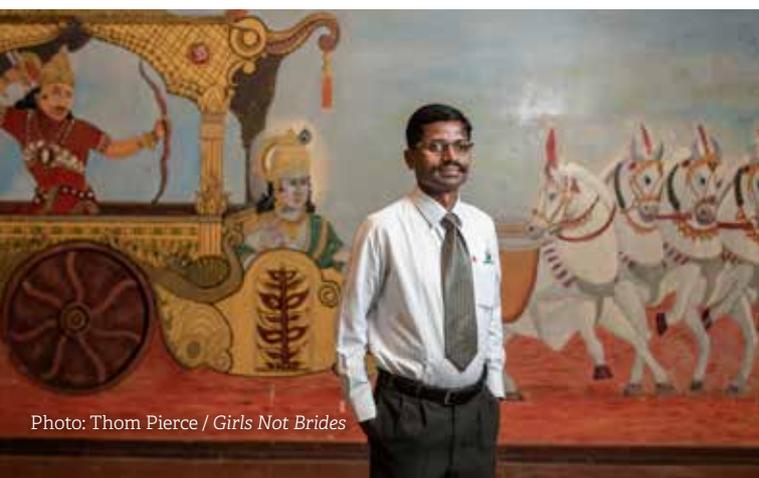


Photo: Thom Pierce / Girls Not Brides

## Design for success! A guide to develop projects to address child marriage

Have a look at pages 15 to 23 of *Girls Not Brides'* "Design for success" toolkit for concrete tips on how to analyse the situation in your project area.

Before making any decision on whether to engage with religious leaders, additional information should first be gathered about the religious context. Organisations who plan to engage with religious leaders as a key part of their interventions should spend extra time exploring various religious beliefs, any role they might or might not play in driving child marriage, as well as the religious system(s) in the project area and/or at the national level. This could involve looking at how decisions are made within a particular religious system, identifying different profiles of religious leaders and their influence in the project area, and using this information to decide where to prioritise engagement. For example, in a context where religion influences the practice of child marriage, and where the religious system has a clear hierarchy where senior leaders make most decisions, organisations might want to prioritise engagement with senior leadership to create change. Similarly, some religious leaders might be more resistant to ending child marriage than others, and organisations might want to focus their efforts on engaging those who are most receptive. The second part of this brief addresses key considerations to help decide whether to engage, and if so, how to prioritise engagement.

### Understanding how and why religious leaders might be resistant to ending child marriage

In their situation analysis, organisations might identify some religious leaders as being particularly resistant to efforts to end child marriage. It is important to remember a number of points when considering engagement with resistant religious leaders:

1. Not all religious leaders are either fully receptive or fully resistant to efforts to end child marriage. The champions of today might have opposed actions to end child marriage a few years earlier.
2. Religious leaders who oppose efforts to end child marriage don't always do so in the same way, and for the same reasons.

3. Organisations should aim to understand different types of resistance, to refine different leaders' profiles and use this to inform their strategies.

### How might some leaders show resistance?

Le Roux and Palm have identified several types of resistance that practitioners commonly face from some religious leaders in their work to end child marriage.<sup>18</sup>

Types	Example
<b>Vocal resistance</b>	A group of religious leaders or party blocks a legal reform that aims to ban child marriage.
<b>Resistance through actions</b>	A local religious leader performs religious marriages involving children although it is forbidden by national law.
<b>Scapegoating</b>	A religious political group accuses those working to end child marriage of being blasphemous, and threatens them with excommunication.
<b>Spiritual resistance</b>	A religious leader uses sacred texts and shared beliefs to endorse their position on child marriage, and argues that those who challenge this position are going against God.
<b>Silent resistance</b>	A religious leader accepted an invitation to participate in a workshop organised by a civil society organisation but refuses to share what he or she learned with his/her followers.
<b>Others</b>	Other forms of resistance might come up in an organisation's analysis (e.g. resistance to women's and girls' empowerment overall). It is also important to note that some leaders might show multiple types of resistance.

## Why are some leaders showing resistance?

In order to determine if and how to engage with religious leaders to develop effective programmes to end child marriage, it is important to understand why they might be resistant. Research by Le Roux and Palm<sup>18</sup> found several reasons why some religious leaders commonly resist efforts to end child marriage. These include:

- **Marriage is an important part of their role.** Religious leaders are usually responsible for performing religious marriages. It is part of their role, identity and value, and their power to perform a sacred ritual gives them a great influence in their communities. Sometimes they also receive money or gifts for this role. When the State tries to regulate marriage practices—including by forbidding marriage before 18—some religious leaders might perceive it as a threat and oppose such reforms, arguing that maturity for marriage should only be dictated by God.
- **Religious texts are open to interpretation.** Christianity, Islam and Hinduism all have stories and texts that can be interpreted in different ways and have sometimes been used to support child marriage. Both religious leaders and their communities might believe their religion requires child marriage.
- **A fear of sex and pregnancy outside of marriage.** In all three religions from the research and across all regions, most religious leaders who were against ending child marriage thought that child marriage would prevent girls from premarital sex and pregnancy, which is often viewed as a sin and a threat to family honour. This belief tends to be largely shared in communities who then see child marriage as a way to protect daughters and the family from this threat.
- **Male religious leaders might want to ensure men keep control.** In many religious traditions, it is accepted that married men have authority over women and children in their family. For example, fathers often—although not always—make the final decision about marriage for their daughters. These patriarchal religious beliefs can then fuel or reinforce discrimination against girls. For example, in some communities people believe that girls' only purpose in life should be to marry and do domestic chores; that one should not eat food in the house when a girl is menstruating; or that women were created as a sexual property for men.<sup>19</sup>



Patrick Galawanda at his Rastafarian church outside Lilongwe, Malawi.

- **In contexts of rising fundamentalism, social change can be seen as an attack on religion.**  
In these contexts, religion is often seen as something that cannot, or should not, change or be adapted to fit different contexts. The association highlighted above between child marriage and beliefs around tradition or family honour can lead to child marriage being used as a symbolic practice, and any attempts to change it may be pointed out as against religion.
- **Some religious leaders don't think child marriage is harmful, or don't know it is forbidden by the law.**  
Many religious leaders are not aware of the negative consequences of child marriage, partly because some of them, such as domestic violence, are not always visible in the public space. Some leaders are also not aware of the existence and consequences of a national law forbidding child marriage in their country.



Photo: Graham Crouch / Girls Not Brides

## What does background research look like?

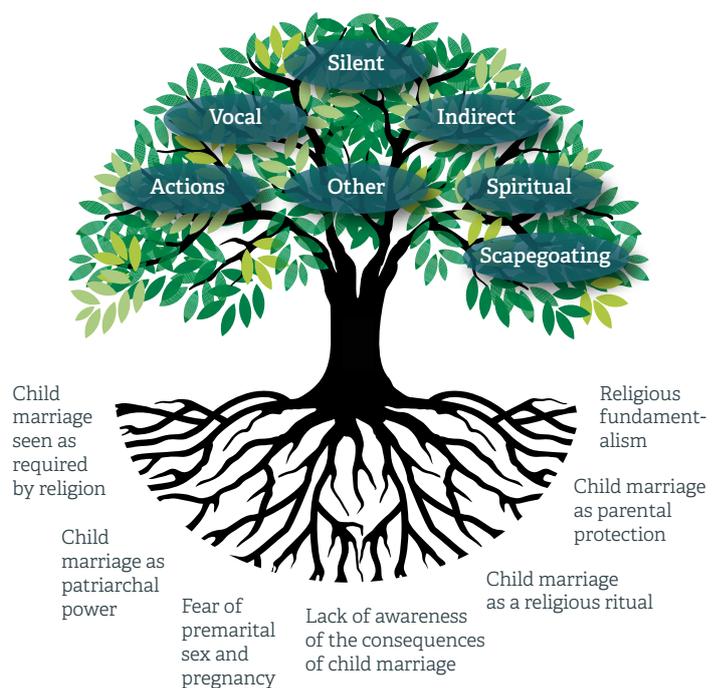
How long and in-depth your background research is will depend on a number of factors, such as how much you already know, and how much time and resources you have. Here are some examples:

- In Nigeria, before implementing the *Voices4Change* project, practitioners undertook research to understand who the main actors were that influenced the way young people think and behave. This allowed them to see that while religious leaders were influential actors in society overall, families had a much greater influence over young people. This could lead an organisation to either work with religious leaders to equip them to influence families, and/or to focus most of their effort on raising awareness among families.

Voices4Change, **Core Values Research Report of a Qualitative Inquiry**, 2016

- In Bangladesh and Nepal, CARE worked with local staff and community-based mobilisers to collect data and understand which social norms might be upholding child marriage, to inform their Tipping Point project. This allowed them to understand the difference in marriage practices among Muslim and Hindu communities in a specific area of Bangladesh (p.24-25)

CARE, **The Cultural Context of Child Marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh: Findings from CARE's Tipping Point Project Community Participatory Analysis**, 2016



Source: Le Roux & Palm, 2018

## TAILORING STRATEGIES

Local social and religious contexts can look very different from one place to another. Using information gathered through background research is essential to design intervention strategies that will make sense for a specific context. Based on research by Le Roux and Palm<sup>18</sup> and on lessons learnt from several practitioners across different regions, a number of strategies have emerged as good practice. Organisations can assess how these resonate with their situation analysis, adapt if needed, test, and monitor the impact of these strategies.

### Decide whether to work with religious leaders, and prioritise your engagement

Before thinking of any strategies to engage religious leaders in efforts to end child marriage, organisations should always ask themselves:

1. What causes child marriage in the project area, and what role do religious beliefs and religious leaders play? Should we be working with religious leaders at all? Are there any risks to working with them in our area?
2. How do we think it will help girls live free of child marriage and realise their potential?
3. If we think it will, is our organisation best placed to engage with religious leaders directly or can we partner with others who already have a good relationship with them?
4. Which religious leaders should our organisation prioritise its engagement with?

This last question is key. First, it can help organisations respond to question 1. For example, in contexts where politics and religion are closely linked with strong religious fundamentalism or conflict, and where most religious leaders are very resistant, some organisations might choose not to engage. Second, it can help organisations prioritise their engagement. For example, while in some contexts it might not be a good idea to engage with the most resistant religious leaders, there might be other leaders or religious actors with whom to build strong partnerships.

### Don't try to convince all, try to convince enough

Both researchers and practitioners argue that to build a strong movement to end child marriage, organisations should not spend their energy trying to convince everyone. Rather, they should invest in understanding different actors, their level of influence in their intervention area, including size of their following, assess how likely they are to support ending child marriage, and make strategic decisions on who to prioritise their engagement with. This goes also for engagement with religious leaders.

Focusing on religious leaders who have the biggest influence and/or with those who are most receptive, has often proved useful. For example, leaders who are high up in the religious hierarchy can more easily convince others to join forces. Female leaders and young leaders have often been more receptive.<sup>20</sup> Engaging receptive female leaders can be very useful as it can challenge traditional patriarchal structures where men are usually in position of power, and can facilitate contact with women in a community. It can also be useful to engage other members of a religious community, especially in cases where religious leaders are resistant and too hard to reach. For example, the *Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust* and *Sisters in Islam* have used this approach to create space for public debate, and equip communities to be able to engage critically with their religious beliefs and make their own informed decisions. The idea is to build a critical mass to have the greatest reach and create an environment where those who oppose efforts to end child marriage feel some pressure to conform.

***"(...) No matter how much we are (...) working, we will still find those people who are going to resist. But if we have the majority of people speaking against child marriage, I am sure even those who are resisting will be forced to join, because they can't be left out in the cold".***

**Hope, Zimbabwe**

Who will make up this critical mass will greatly depend on the local context, so organisations should continue developing questions to guide their decisions about with whom to engage. These could include, for example:

- Which religious leader(s) have the greatest reach within the local community? What do we know about their position on child marriage, girls' and women's education, gender justice, children's health etc.?
- Who is most trusted by community members of that particular religious group? If these people are not religious leaders themselves, what is their role in the community, and what is their relationship with religious leaders?
- Are there any female religious leaders in the intervention area? Are there any young religious leaders? How are they perceived by communities? By other religious leaders? What is their position? What is their reach?
- Are there inter-faith networks active in the intervention area? What are they doing? What could be their involvement in the intervention?
- Who are the most renowned religious scholars in the region? What could be their role and influence?
- Who is part of the decision-making within that local religious system? Who has more weight than others?
- Are there any religious leaders involved in conservative political parties? How powerful are they?
- Which religious leaders are known for their opinion and/or action against gender justice and could try to oppose the intervention? What is their influence? What are the risks and opportunities for engaging versus not engaging with them?
- Are there other civil society organisations, including faith-based organisations who have a solid relationship with different religious groups, who could help?

Have a look at the **stakeholder analysis tool** provided on p.23 of the *Girls Not Brides' "Design for success" toolkit*. Instead of considering religious leaders as one single group to position on the stakeholder table, organisations can break it down. As there are many profiles of leaders, with different levels of influence and potentially different views on child marriage and related issues, they will likely spread across the different boxes of the stakeholder table.

- In **Pakistan**, *Peace Foundation* decided not to work with a religious political party or any religious leaders affiliated with a party. Using their experience and knowledge about their local context, they noticed that these leaders were often opposed to ending child marriage, and were likely to hijack intervention activities for their own political agenda.
- In **Malaysia** however, *Sisters in Islam* analysed the pros and cons of engaging with the two Islamic political parties, and decided to only engage and work with the party that was more open to dialogue and receptive to efforts to end child marriage.
- During a project by *Norwegian Church Aid and Ethiopian Orthodox Church* in Amhara, **Ethiopia**, some religious leaders were against banning child marriage in their community. Most resisted as they saw child marriage as a way to preserve virginity before marriage. The Archbishop of the Orthodox Church in that region managed to address this resistance by explaining to other leaders that virginity should not be determined by age and should not be an excuse for marrying young girls. While more discussions would be needed to address the root causes of the clergy's position condoning child marriage as a means of control over female sexuality, this example shows how working with higher leadership can be useful to initiate change among the greatest number.<sup>21 22</sup>

To build a critical mass, several organisations have also found it useful to broaden the debate, break some taboos and profile positive examples in public to demonstrate that change is happening, and to inspire others.

- In **India**, *Urmul Trust* and *Vikalp Sansthan* have worked with Muslim and Hindu religious leaders and supported them in publicly committing to make one specific change to address child marriage.
- In **West Africa**, many religious leaders who participated in **trainings** organised by *Tostan* are now supporting their communities to end violence against women and girls, and have joined them to publicly declare the abandonment of practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting in their villages. This has helped raise awareness and spread the idea that change is acceptable.

### **Once you know who to work with, treat them as partners and respect their agency**

Like many other actors, religious leaders won't be open to partnership if they feel judged and shamed for their opinions. Organisations who decide to engage religious leaders in their interventions should have genuine respect for them.

This starts with using positive language, treating them as partners, and involving them in every step, including evaluating the impact of an intervention. It requires time to build trust; some organisations have taken two or more years to fully gain trust in their project. Others have found it useful to start implementing their interventions through partners who have many years' experience of working with religious leaders.

### **Decide on the best way to start talking about child marriage**

#### **Start with issues that are less sensitive**

Where religious leaders have a lot of influence in the community but are quite reluctant to end child marriage, it can be a good idea to start talking about something less sensitive and allow time to build trust. For example, while gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage, some practitioners in South America avoid using this as an entry point and prefer talking to religious leaders about "ending violence", which is more accepted. Similarly, some organisations choose not to introduce themselves to religious leaders as a rights-based or a women's rights organisation in places where this can often be perceived negatively by religious actors.



In **India**, *Urmul Trust* worked for many years with religious leaders to explain the benefits of girls' education for their communities. With time, they became trusted partners in their area. When they started working on child marriage, they had a good reputation and relationship with religious leaders, and it was easier to talk about the issue.<sup>23</sup>

### Use language that resonates with religious leaders

As briefly mentioned earlier, organisations should use positive language when working with religious leaders. For example talking about “encouraging positive fatherhood” might be better received than “fighting harmful traditional practices”. This should help religious leaders identify as positive champions, and reduce concerns that they could be seen as deviant or going against their own traditions. When facing strong resistance, some organisations have also chosen to avoid abstract or ideological goals (e.g. ensuring gender equality) and focus on more concrete and practical common goals. Depending on the context this might be, for example, community health, economic security, or education for all children. While this pragmatic approach can be a good first step, with time and trust it might be possible to engage in discussions around some of the root causes of resistance, such as patriarchy or concerns around female sexuality.

In **Brazil**, *Promundo* noticed that the term “gender” was not well received among religious leaders. They decided to talk about “girls and boys” and “same opportunities” to start a conversation. They continue to test new ways to open a dialogue, to learn about best approaches.

### Get the right people to engage with religious leaders

Expertise and credibility are also essential. For example, while being a faith-based organisation can help make connections with religious leaders, it is still essential to partner with the local community to develop appropriate messaging and approaches, especially when organisations have projects across areas with different majority religions. Promoting inter-faith partnerships can help.

Faith-based organisations *World Vision International* and *Islamic Relief Worldwide* have partnered to adapt World Vision's Christian-based Channels of Hope methodology and make it relevant to Muslim contexts. Both organisations have been working with religious leaders for decades and their partnership reflects both expertise to lead engagement with religious leaders, and the value of partnering across different faiths.

Individuals can also be perceived differently by religious leaders. For example, in the most conservative contexts, several organisations were forced to only ask male staff to lead initial engagement with male religious leaders. While most of the staff and members of *Sisters in Islam* are women, the progressive Malaysian women's organisation chose to use influential male partners—such as a former Mufti and local chief judge—to make the first contact with a conservative religious political party and make sure their message would be heard. Being part of a community also helps, and staff who have been a member of a religious community for a long time are likely to be better accepted.

**“Some of our community level staff go to the Mosque (...). This creates an opportunity for them to initiate discussion with religious leaders on social issues (...) which relate to our community level interventions. It helps to establish a trustworthy relationship with [them]”**

**Habibur, Bangladesh<sup>24</sup>**

People who engage directly with religious leaders not only need to be credible, they should also have good communication and facilitation skills, and strong knowledge both about religion and about child marriage. To build this skill set, some organisations have asked religious leaders they had previously partnered with to work with a gender expert, to better engage with other religious leaders on the issue of child marriage.

### Include sacred scripture as part of your engagement, but not in isolation

Facilitating discussions around religious texts can help unpack interpretations used to condone child marriage, and promote interpretations that support girls' safety and wellbeing. For this type of engagement, expertise in the religious scripture and excellent

facilitation skills are essential. The facilitator might be a religious leader or scholar, or staff from an organisation, who has a strong understanding of scripture and uses materials from trusted institutions. While facilitators should be knowledgeable, they should not try to present alternative religious interpretation as the only truth, or to impose it. They should instead provide a safe and engaging environment for religious leaders to discuss and feel both comfortable and equipped to share their own reflections.

## REPORTS AND MANUALS WITH INFORMATION OR TIPS ON USING SACRED TEXTS<sup>25</sup>

### Child marriage

- Islamic Relief Worldwide, **An Islamic Human Rights Perspective on Early and Forced Marriage**, 2017
- Jackson, E. The Faith Effect. **Early Marriage and FGM. Facilitator manual to train Muslim faith Leaders. Centre for Interfaith Action**, 2017
- Religions for Peace, **Early Marriage: Addressing Harmful Traditional Practices in Your Community: A Faith Leader Toolkit for Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria**, 2013

### Violence, including child marriage

- Al-Azhar University, Coptic Church of Egypt and UNICEF Egypt. **Peace, Love and Tolerance: Key messages from Islam and Christianity on protecting Children from Violence and Harmful Practices**, 2016

### Gender equality

- Norwegian Church Aid, **Created in God's Image: A Gender Transformation Toolkit for Women and Men in Churches**, South Africa, 2015
- Voices4Change, **Purple and religion: shared spiritual values**, 2014
- RIBLA, Revista de interpretación bíblica latino Americana N37. En género en lo cotidiano. Ecuador, 2000/3.

However, building discussions around sacred texts should not be the only approach. It is important to combine this with discussion around the health consequences of child marriage. Providing and reflecting on information related to health is usually preferable to open a dialogue about child marriage in a less sensitive way. Where appropriate and safe, some organisations have even asked married girls to come and talk to the leaders about their experience, to help them understand the practical consequences on their communities.<sup>26</sup> Debates about theology can quickly become theoretical, so this approach can help relate discussions to everyday life.

### Find ways to address concerns about sex and sexuality

As highlighted earlier, concerns about female sexuality and pregnancy before marriage are often key drivers of both child marriage and religious resistance to end child marriage, and organisations should not underestimate the importance of addressing them. Concerns about sex and sexuality are closely linked to notions of patriarchy, power, and gender norms, so religious leaders will need to challenge their own beliefs and attitudes in order to engage in constructive discussion. Given that sex and sexuality is very often taboo, it can be useful to make compromises when first opening dialogue. For example, at the beginning of a



Photo: Hakan Nural / Unspalsh

new project, the organisation *Tostan* asked religious leaders to review the materials that would be used during the programme to ensure nothing appeared to go against the fundamental principles of their religion. The leader of one community asked that pictures of the male and female sexual and reproductive organs only be used in small and single-sex groups, a compromise to which *Tostan* agreed.

### Lessons learned from engaging religious leaders to address gender inequality and HIV/AIDS

- A key learning from the *Voices4Change* programme in Nigeria was to adopt a transformative approach and support religious leaders to first reflect on their own potential patriarchal attitudes and conceptions of masculinity. After doing research on the links between patriarchy and religion, the facilitators of *Voices4Change* held trainings for 403 influential religious and traditional leaders. By using participatory methods that encouraged leaders' critical reflection on their own values, and by providing space to reflect on the social construction of gender roles and stereotypes and what makes healthy relationships, religious leaders were able to better understand gender issues. Transformative approaches may help address concerns around sexuality which are linked to notions of patriarchy and gender.<sup>27</sup>
- In the past decades, faith-based organisations have played a key role in responding to HIV/AIDS. Many religious leaders initially saw HIV as "a punishment from God", and as HIV was often sexually transmitted, faith-based organisations needed to break the silence and talk about sex and sexuality, and inform religious leaders about the issue. For example, *World Vision International* developed a curriculum called Channels of Hope (CoH) in which they shared key facts about HIV with Christian leaders and invited them to discuss the issue in relation to religion. As talking about HIV and sexuality required talking about stigma and shame, the facilitator would, for example, discuss broad Christian guiding principles such as love for all people, and connect this to the experience of stigma. Participants had to explore the unintended consequences of their decisions and actions, make the connection with positive religious principles, and move towards supporting people living with HIV. As stigma associated with

premarital sex and pregnancy is a major driver of child marriage, similar principles could be adapted and applied to work engaging religious leaders to address child marriage.

Parents also have concerns about female sexuality. It is important to equip religious leaders who are keen to support healthier practices for girls with the right information to talk to parents. A religious leader working with two organisations in Nigeria explained that many parents or teachers are very uncomfortable talking to young people about sex and sexuality. This means that many of them avoid using the correct biological terms, which often leaves youth with poor information and a lack of ability to make healthy decisions about sexual matters. This particular religious leader recommended building the capacity of other religious leaders to provide basic sexual and reproductive health information and help break the silence, so that consequences from early pregnancy that often follow a child marriage can be discussed.

### Toolkits to address concerns around sexuality

Few child marriage programmes have addressed the issue of concerns around sexuality and documented their lessons learned. But we can learn from other sectors and explore how to adapt their approaches.

- Raising Voices, **SASA! Faith. A guide for faith communities to prevent violence against women and HIV**, 2016.
- ICRW, **Understanding and Challenging HIV Stigma: Toolkit for Action**, 2003.
- World Vision, **Channels of Hope: an effective behaviour change and advocacy methodology for faith leaders and faith communities**, 2016.

### Resources on changing social norms

In many communities, behaviours around sex and pregnancy before marriage can lead to positive or negative social sanctions. Learning from how to change social norms can also be useful.

- *Girls Not Brides*, **Useful resources on social norms and child marriage**, 2018.

## Addressing concerns around sexuality in child marriage programming

See [Girls Not Brides' online resource centre](#) for upcoming publications: CEFM and Sexuality Working Group, *Tackling the taboo: sexuality and gender transformative programmes to end child marriage*, to be published in 2019.<sup>28</sup>

## How to use research to tailor strategies: example

Organisations should examine their situation and stakeholder analyses, and the potential forms and causes of resistance that some religious leaders might show, to determine the most appropriate strategies for their unique context. Approaches can look very different, for example, working with religious leaders who perform marriages of pregnant adolescent girls to prevent them and their families being stigmatised, or working with those who would marry a six-year-old girl because they believe in salvation for parents who marry their children as early as possible. The following is an example of how work funded by Christian Aid in Nigeria made these connections.

Research in parts of Nigeria has found three main types of resistance among religious leaders: vocal, spiritual resistance, and scapegoating. Oppositions to girls' education was also observed. In their research to better understand the reasons behind the resistance of some leaders, Christian Aid chose to look at how adolescent girls were perceived within the community. They found that:

- Religious and cultural traditions both influenced these perceptions.
- Strong norms were in place that promoted male power in society.
- The main concern of most parents was about adolescent girls' sexuality, which was also very taboo. Families felt the need to punish those who got pregnant before marriage, and were often unaware of the consequences of child marriage.
- They also found that grandmothers were key decision-makers in the household.

Through background research, they noticed that girls were often unheard and had little space to share their concerns with parents, religious leaders, or teachers. Based on this analysis, the organisation decided to develop a **toolkit** to support religious leaders with information on the Christian and Islamic perspectives on child marriage, education, reproductive health and economic empowerment of adolescent girls. After understanding religious leaders' willingness to protect girls in the community, the organisation used information about the consequences of child marriage to encourage religious leaders to protect girls by supporting them to stay in school and not get married. With this information, religious leaders were able to exert their power and authority to influence grandmothers' opinions.

The intervention also continued engaging with girls, giving them space to express their concerns, and not reinforcing patriarchy by only working with male religious leaders.

## DOCUMENTING LEARNING FOR STRONGER EFFORTS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

Evidence about the long-term impact of interventions that engage religious leaders to end child marriage remains limited, especially when implemented by small local organisations. Organisations should document learning from their programmes to contribute to a stronger knowledge base on effective strategies. A few general monitoring and evaluation (M&E) principles could apply to interventions with religious leaders and are listed below.

### Develop indicators that link to your situation and resistance analyses

- An indicator is a reference used to gather and track information about something that happened. For example a quantitative indicator could be "number of people reached through sermons that included messaging to promote the end of child marriage".
- A qualitative indicator could be "the way people describe their opinion about child marriage", which an organisation can explore through various methods (e.g. interviews with community members) and at different stages of an intervention.

- Organisations could also develop case studies highlighting positive change and how it came about. Organisations should use information collected in their background research to develop the correct indicators. For example, if the situation analysis shows that some religious leaders resist efforts to end child marriage mainly because they believe their religion requires them to marry girls as children, the organisation should track changes in religious leaders' beliefs about what religion requires regarding child marriage, children's health or gender justice.

### Examples of indicators and methods to measure change in attitudes and behaviours related to child marriage

- Girls Not Brides*, **Recommended indicators for Girls Not Brides members working to address child marriage**, 2015
- CARE International, **Applying Theory to Practice: CARE's Journey Piloting Social Norms Measures for Gender Programming**, 2017

Involving religious leaders both in initial background research and in monitoring change can also be a powerful way of building ownership of a programme from the beginning. This will likely reinforce sustainability and ensure that impacts go beyond the end date of a programme. For example, as part of an intervention in Ethiopia, Norwegian Church Aid encouraged religious leaders to use internal religious structure as accountability mechanisms. Leaders introduced disciplinary measures for leaders who performed child marriage, and appreciation mechanisms to those who became role models for change.

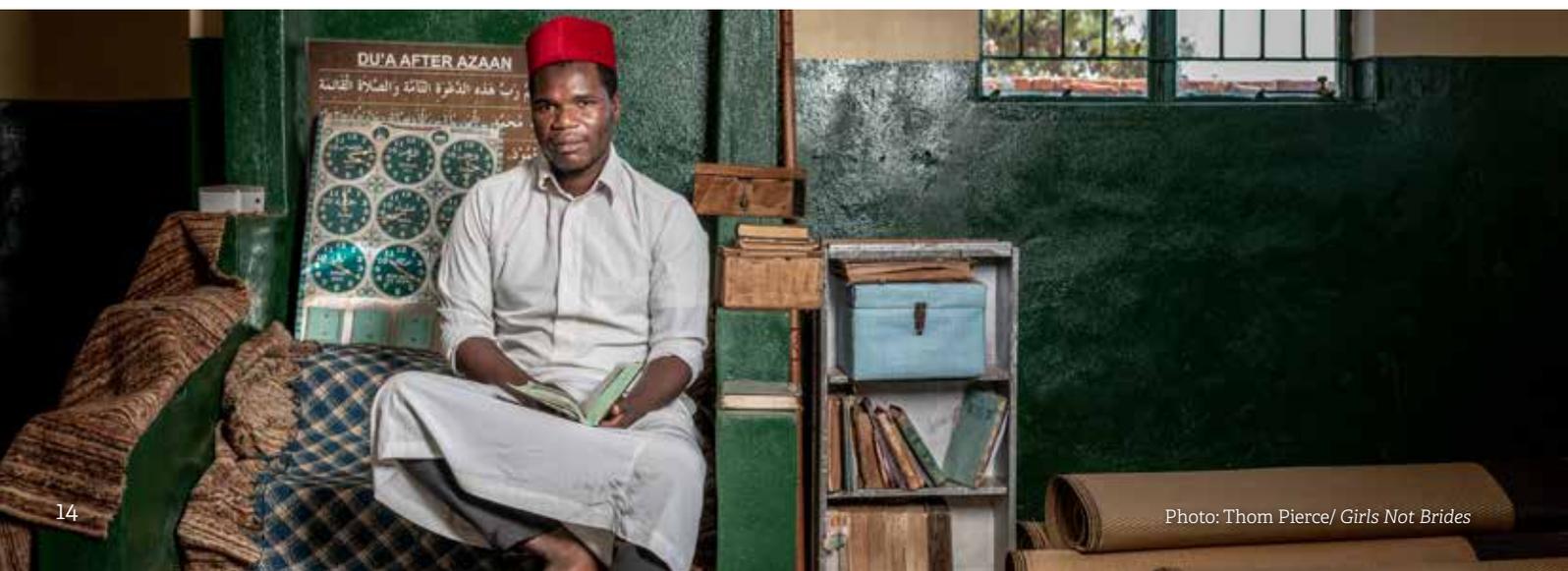
### What does learning about impact look like?

After spending time on **background research** and developing strategies in line with the findings of that research, organisations implementing the *Voices4Change* programme were able to identify key lessons learned about engaging with religious leaders and develop case studies of change.

Voices4Change, **Engaging religious and traditional leaders for gender equality: V4C Stories of Learning**, 2016

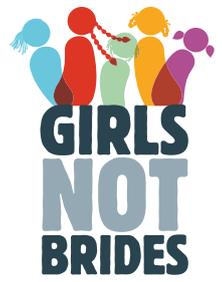
Voices4Change, **Radio stations, religious leaders, traditional leaders and legislative reform**, 2016

*This brief was developed with the valued contribution of Girls Not Brides members and other organisations in Afghanistan, Brazil, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Yemen, and Zimbabwe (Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust, Blue Veins, BRAC, Evangelical Association of Malawi, Global Peace Foundation, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Malawi Interfaith Association, National Inter-Religious Network (NRIN), Norwegian Church Aid, Peace Foundation Pakistan, Progressio, Plan International Brazil, Promundo Brazil, Regional Network of the Children and Young People Trust, Terre des Hommes Foundation, Tostan, Sisters in Islam, Sujag Sansar Organization, URMUL Trust, Vikalp Sansthan, Voices4Change former staff, World Vision, Youth Harvest Foundation, Youth Leadership Development Foundation, and all participants in the session on this topic at the Girls Not Brides Global Meeting in June 2018).*



## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>UNICEF, **Child marriage global database 2018**
- <sup>2</sup>For other briefs, see **Girls Not Brides' online resource centre**
- <sup>3</sup>Le Roux, E., and Palm, S. **What lies beneath? Tackling the roots of religious resistance to ending child marriage. Research Report.** *Girls Not Brides*, 2018.
- <sup>4</sup>For example, Central African Republic, Mexico and Namibia – all Christian 2018 majority countries - have very different rates of child marriage: 68% in CAR, 23% in Mexico, and 8% in Namibia. Similar examples are found in Muslim majority countries: Niger with 76%, Indonesia with 14% and Tunisia with 2%. This data is based on both UNICEF 2018 child marriage global database and the CIA World Fact book.  
A couple of practitioners have also reported that in their country, the highest child marriage rates are found in communities that don't belong to any major religion.
- <sup>5</sup>*Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change was developed with input from over 150 members and partners.
- <sup>6</sup>Pew Research Center, **Global Religious Future database**, 2012.
- <sup>7</sup>Conversations with *Girls Not Brides* members across several countries in South Asia and Africa.
- <sup>8</sup>Social norms are the informal rules and beliefs that groups of people hold and tacitly enforce around how people should behave. Literature on social norms has identified that, as opinion leaders, religious leaders have the potential to "set trends" and influence change in norms. ODI, **How do gender norms change?**, 2015
- <sup>9</sup>*Girls Not Brides*, **lessons learned from selected national initiatives to end child marriage**, 2015.
- <sup>10</sup>Künkler Mirjam, Nisa Eva, **Re-establishing juristic expertise A historic congress of female Islamic scholars**, 2017
- <sup>11</sup>Conversations with *Girls Not Brides* members in Malawi.
- <sup>12</sup>Consultation with *Girls Not Brides* members in several countries, July 2017 and June 2018.
- <sup>13</sup>Consultation with *Girls Not Brides* members in South Asia, June 2018; Awid, challenging religious fundamentalism. Consulted March 2017. Sarah Zaman, **Interlinkages between child marriage and religious fundamentalism, 2017.**
- <sup>14</sup>ABAAD, **Regional seminar on child marriage during democratic transition and armed conflicts**, 2015
- <sup>15</sup>For example in Paraguay. Mano Alzada. **Causa Abierta: 4 casos emblemáticos de vulneración de derechos sexuales y reproductivos**, 2018.
- <sup>16</sup>This is reinforced by the fact that Hinduism includes a large diversity of religious groups, beliefs systems, traditions, and texts, as stated by Maya Warrior in **A Guide to Hinduism**, 2006.
- <sup>17</sup>Op.Cit. Le Roux, E., and Palm, S. 2018
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup>Anderson, C.B. 2004. Women, ideology and violence: critical theory and the construction of gender in the book of the covenant and the Deuteronomic law. Cited in Le Roux, E., and Palm, S. 2018
- <sup>20</sup>Practitioners across all three religions agreed on this statement. Op.Cit. Le Roux, E., and Palm, S. 2018
- <sup>21</sup>Based on the most recent definition of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) proposed by the Lancet Commission and Guttmacher, sexual and reproductive rights include: freedom to decide whether, when and with whom to engage in sexual relationships; freedom of sexual expression; freedom to enter into marriage with consent, to found a family, and to choose the timing, spacing and number of children to have; to have access to information and means to achieve their reproductive goals, and; to be free from discrimination, degrading treatment, coercion and violence. **Accelerate progress—sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher – Lancet Commission.**
- <sup>22</sup>Norwegian Church Aid has been collaborating with the Ethiopian Interfaith Council since 1999. Le Roux, E., and Palm, S. 2018
- <sup>23</sup>It is important to note that the example of girls' education is controversial in some countries, and less in others, so the right entry point will depend on the context.
- <sup>24</sup>Habibur Rahman was working for BRAC Bangladesh at the time of the research.
- <sup>25</sup>There appear to be very few materials that engages with Hindu sacred texts as compared to the Qur'an and Bible.
- <sup>26</sup>Many manuals and standards exists to help organisations include children and adolescents in their activities in a safe way. For example, see "**Child safeguarding standards and how to implement them**" by Keeping Children Safe.
- <sup>27</sup>Voices4Change, **Engaging religious and traditional leaders for gender equality: V4C Stories of Learning**, 2016
- <sup>28</sup>Child Early and Forced Marriage and Sexuality Working Group. American Jewish World Service (AJWS), CARE, CREA, Global Fund for Women, Girls Not Brides, GreeneWorks, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), Nirantar, Plan International, Population Council, and Promundo.



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***Girls Not Brides* is global partnership made up of more than 1000 civil society organisations from over 100 countries, committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their full potential.**