

COVID-19

PRACTISING OUR FAITH SAFELY DURING A PANDEMIC



ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND WOMEN



Resource Guide for Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

Cover photo credits (clockwise):

Bangkok / Thailand April 2, 2020: Thai Buddhist monks wearing face shields to protect themselves from Covid-19 collect morning alms
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Migrant labourers who failed to reach their native villages after lockdown offer (Namaz) prayers besides the closed shop where they used to work.
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A portrait of a man holding Holy Quran and prayer beads
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A woman raises her hands in prayer, seated in the pews of a church
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Reverend Tito Ringanza, the Provincial Secretary of Episcopal Church of South Sudan, reads a Bible at his office in Yambio, South Sudan, March 2020. Rev. Tito's mother died in the 1976 Ebola outbreak. Reverend Tito's church spends time during church services to educate people on how to take care and protect themselves from Ebola virus.
By Brian Ongoro

BACKGROUND ON THE GLOBAL MULTI-RELIGIOUS FAITH-IN-ACTION COVID-19 INITIATIVE

Faith and Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities (FPCC) <https://www.faith4sbcc.org/> is a global partnership between the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the world's largest inter-faith network **Religions for Peace (RfP)**, and knowledge partner **Joint Learning Initiative on Local Faith Communities (JLI)**. FPCC was conceived in 2018 to move beyond single sector, siloed, ad-hoc and sometimes instrumentalist approaches of faith engagement in development work and was officially launched by RfP and UNICEF's Executive Director in Washington DC in October 2019.

The central aim of the partnership is **to support positive social and behaviour change with and for children, parents and communities** with specific emphasis on going beyond simply delivering messages, to engaging faith communities in self-reflection, dialogue, exchange and feedback in order to achieve lasting positive change on jointly agreed priorities affecting children and their families. After a year of evidence generation, development of 17 country case studies, reviews of existing resource guides and development of a Theory of Change, the partners agreed to work together more systematically and deeply in keeping with the new engagement model in six African "Early Adopter Countries".

In the last quarter of 2019, a process of country level "WorkRocks" was initiated to pilot the new way of coordinating planning and action of UNICEF country offices with their respective Inter-Religious Councils and the local offices of international faith-based organizations.

In February 2020, in response to the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, the FPCC partners agreed to immediately shift focus of its joint workplan to respond to the international crisis through a new global multi-religious Faith-in-Action initiative to provide coordinated and evidence-based inter-faith support for the protection and well-being of children and their communities. UNICEF's Executive Director signed a joint global statement and call to action on the COVID-19 response with 12 of RfP's most senior religious leaders. <https://rfp.org/launch-of-global-multi-religious-faith-in-action-covid-19-initiative-2/>
<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/launch-global-multi-religious-faith-action-covid-19-initiative>.

The initiative aims to mobilize religious leaders, faith communities, women of faith, and youth networks within RfP through its Inter-Religious Councils at country level to support COVID preparedness and response.

The key objectives of the initiative are to:

1. Manage communication, address misinformation and rumours
2. Dispel fear, stigma, discrimination, and promote social harmony
3. Promote adaptation of religious gatherings, practices, rituals, handwashing and hygiene
4. Address specific needs of vulnerable groups
5. Promote the prevention of violence against children and women
6. Promote the participation of children and young people and their active engagement in the initiative
7. Promote and support the recovery of social services, resilience and return to normalcy

In order to achieve the above objectives, the Faith-in-Action initiative has outlined the following strategies:

- High level advocacy at global, regional and country level
- Generation and analysis of faith-related behavioural evidence to inform action
- Development, dissemination and local customization of global guidance on key thematic issues
- Periodic webinars at the different levels for sharing of knowledge, issues and experiences
- Digital engagement and capacity development
- Tracking, monitoring and documentation of the results of the initiative.

Working with UNICEF, RfP and many other partners, JLI developed a Global Reference Document <https://jliflc.com/resources/multi-religious-faith-in-action-covid-19-initiative-reference-document-ed-1/> to inform the development of a series of COVID-related specific thematic guides.

This package of thematic Guides is aligned with and are expected to support the achievement of each of the 7 objectives of the Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action COVID-19 global initiative as outlined in the background. **The Guides have been designed specifically for use, updating and adaptation by religious leaders, faith communities and FBOs at country and community-level with support from UNICEF** and other humanitarian and development partners to support the implementation of the Faith-in-Action initiative.

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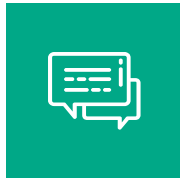
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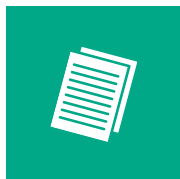
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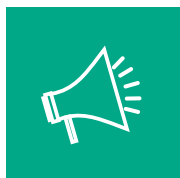
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IN THE COVID-19 CAMPAIGN
TO HELP ADDRESS VIOLENCE
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Series 4: Resource Guide for Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

ISSUES

Violence against children and women increases during emergencies, conflicts, and health crises. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Infection prevention measures that require staying at home have brought on a wave of increased violence for many children and women who find themselves confined in restricted spaces for long periods of time with their abusers. The stress caused by the pandemic is likely to lead to an increase in violence in homes, pushing more people to violent behaviour. For millions, home is no longer a refuge, but a place of violence and abuse.¹ Violence against children and women can be psychological, physical, or sexual, and includes abuse, mistreatment, and neglect, sexual exploitation, and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. While those who perpetrate these kinds of violence often do so within their own families or wider circle of trust, in many cases outsiders can be perpetrators. Violence can also occur within faith communities.² With the increase of internet use, abuse during the COVID pandemic is also likely to be on-line.

“The COVID 19 pandemic is having a devastating impact across the world. Efforts to contain coronavirus are vital to the health of the world’s population, but they are also exposing children to increased risk of violence – including maltreatment, gender-based violence and sexual exploitation.”

- Joint Leaders’ Statement - Violence against Children: A Hidden Crisis of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Some of the key issues threatening children’s and women’s safety and placing them at increased risk of violence are:

- **Increased levels of parental and marital stress:** The pandemic has resulted in heightened fear and anxiety over health, finances, and safety. School and business closures, lockdowns, family confinement, overcrowded living conditions, social isolation, and economic vulnerability are factors that have affected people in different ways and resulted in various levels of physical, emotional and mental health problems. As with all crises, children and women are most vulnerable. The multiple stressors have increased the likelihood that parents will resort to using violence to control their children and that violence will be used within couples.
- **Separation from support systems:** For many women and girls, school closures and restrictions on movement have made it even harder than before to leave the house.³ This has made it more difficult for children and women experiencing violence or threatened with harmful practices such as FGM or child marriage to seek outside support or leave for a safer place. Closure of places of worship has also caused a major disruption in people’s lives and has separated individuals from their faith groups and support networks.

*Children from marginalized communities and mobile phone use, at St. Columba’s School, Delhi, Date 31-08-2016
Photo By Ashutosh Sharma/UNICEF
© UNICEF/UN036675/Sharma*



- **Disruption of essential services:** Access to healthcare or social services, or protection, has decreased, as facilities are closed or only open for a reduced number of hours, or where the professionals working in these areas can only see a restricted number of individuals within a given time period. Childcare facilities, helplines and shelters have had to shut down, limit working hours or have less staff. Disruption of services can lead to violence being unreported or escalating to more severe levels due to lack of interventions. Disruption of health services and fear related to visiting health centres during a pandemic, limit access to sexual and reproductive health services and maternal and child health care, placing women and girls at greater risk of unintended pregnancies and complications relating to pregnancy and childbirth.
- **Risk of online violence:** With school closures, many children are spending more time online. While technology offers many opportunities for learning, play and interaction, without proper supervision, extended time spent online can expose children to cyberbullying, risky online behaviour, and sexual exploitation. Children could also be at risk of exposure to harmful or age-inappropriate content and improper collection, use and sharing of data.
- **Risk of child marriage and other harmful practices:** Many of the factors leading to child marriage and harmful practices such as FGM are further worsened during pandemics. These practices are harmful because they endanger young girls' health and wellbeing. With economic pressures, school closures and disruption of social safety networks, families may be forced to marry off their daughters for economic gain, or to protect the family honour and ensure the girls' physical safety. Sexual transactions exchanged for material benefit or status may also become a coping mechanism for poor families.⁴ FGM and child marriage are likely to increase due to the delay and disruption of community-based programmes aimed at changing these harmful practices. It is estimated that 13 million more child marriages and 2 million additional cases of FGM will take place over the next decade due to the disruption of programs and services following COVID-19.⁵

Gilberte, 15, who is 7 months pregnant, sits with her two-year-old daughter Florencia, in Lazaret IDP camp in Kaga Bandoro, Central African Republic.

© UNICEF/UN0149421/Sokhin/2017



- Long-term impact of violence:** The impact of violence is far-reaching and has long-term consequences (see Figure 1). All forms of violence are human rights violations, and there are laws in many countries that protect children and women from violence, abuse, and exploitation, including harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM. Victims of violence suffer from physical and mental health consequences, which include injury, death, unintended pregnancies, and HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Children exposed to violence are more likely to drop out of school, have difficulty finding and keeping a job, and are at greater risk of becoming victims of violence or perpetrators of it later in life. Violence also has economic costs, impacting the productivity, savings, and earning potential of survivors.

- Vulnerable groups are at higher risk:** People living with disabilities, those who are migrants or refugees or living in places of conflict, those living in poverty or without homes, and women and children who are already living in difficult circumstances are placed at additional risk of experiencing violence during the pandemic. Children who are orphaned during outbreaks and are living with extended family or in institutions are more likely to drop out of school or to be involved in child labour and are at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. Boys are at higher risk of child labour and economic exploitation, while girls are at higher risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.⁶



Figure 1: The long-term impacts of violence against women and children



Drawing by Liza (12) at a UNICEF supported shelter in Moldova. Liza endured sexual abuse by her step father, and recovered with the help of this shelter.
© UNICEF/UN0214445/Babajanyan VII Photo/2018



WHAT CAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES DO

Faith actors, given their position of trust within communities, are well placed to support children and women who experience violence and abuse or are at risk from it. They can continue to send a strong message that violence is never acceptable and that perpetrators will be punished. They play an important role in countering harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM, stressing the negative effects of such practices on the child's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. They can also explain that faith communities do not support these practices and that respecting children's rights and keeping them safe should be one of the foremost aims of all religions. Faith actors can direct survivors of violence to available services. Members of faith communities can motivate each other, friend to friend, to spread a culture that does not tolerate violence, including harmful practices, and looks out for each other. They can also help direct each other to appropriate services, and work to provide space and healing environments for those who have suffered violence at home.

Faith actors can protect children and women by doing the following:



Raise awareness about violence during pandemics

- **Raise awareness about violence prevention:** Make people aware of the risks associated with restrictions of movement and how the pandemic is leading to higher incidences of violence against children and women. Faith actors can include messages about the harmful impacts of violence against children and women and about how to report cases of violence to the appropriate authorities. They can advertise national child helplines to the faith community. They can spread awareness about how girls and boys face different risks. For example, girls are often at higher risk of psychological and sexual abuse, while

boys are more vulnerable to gang violence, corporal punishment (physical violence), and hard labour, but recognise that boys and girls can face all forms of abuse too. Religious leaders and faith communities are well placed to promote unity, empathy and non-violence during the pandemic: this includes speaking up against violence related to xenophobia, stigma, and discrimination against certain groups.

Foyzal Hosain (12) at his work in early morning. His working time is from 6.00 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. Mirpur fish market, Mirpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

© UNICEF/UNI8542/Aminuzzman





A girl stands behind the curtain before a puppet show at a child friendly space at the Sreenagar Resource Center in Dacobe, Khulna on 7 April 2014.

© UNICEF/UNI159909/Khan

- **Stress the detrimental effects of harmful practices:** Child marriage and FGM are traditional practices rooted in deep-seated social norms, and sometimes justified as religious requirements. Faith actors play a critical role in sensitizing their communities about the damages caused by these practices and in emphasizing that religious teachings do not support these practices. They can highlight the increased risks of such practices during lockdown and economically challenging times, reminding families that the short-term gains are outweighed by the long-term consequences for their child.
- **Reiterate the importance of good parenting:** Remind parents and caregivers about how important they are for the emotional and physical well-being of their children. Emphasize that this is a difficult time for everyone and that children need their parents' care and support to help them cope with the stresses related to the pandemic. Explain the importance of nurturing care, which includes health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, social and emotional well-being, and early learning.⁷ In other words, parents need to be committed to their children to make them feel safe, loved and happy.
- **Share information about available services:** During pandemics and lockdowns, many services for women and children experiencing violence may be temporarily suspended, so it is important to find out what services are available and to provide information that is up-to-date and accurate. It is possible that shelters or half-way homes are filled to maximum capacity, or that certain services are not available. Faith communities can find out what

other options and alternatives are available and can provide an important bridge between survivors and support. Consider the safest available option. With restrictions of movement in place, there may be very few places or moments in the day when someone experiencing violence at home can reach out for support. Faith actors and faith communities should share information about available protection and parenting support services, and provide contacts for child helplines, domestic violence hotlines or online support platforms to all members of the community – elders, parents and other adults, youth and children.

- **Promote online safety:** With schools being closed, many children have switched to online learning and are likely to spend more time online, as they cannot meet their friends. Communities of faith can help families understand that people may abuse children online. This is especially true when children are alone and spend more time online. Communities can provide tips to children and parents on how to stay safe on the internet. There is a detailed Guide from UNICEF and Religions for Peace for Religious Leaders and Faith Communities on Preventing Online Abuse, which is listed in the resources section at the end of this guide.

Contemporary action by Sikhs includes the 2015 launch of the Safer Sikh Partnership to promote 'effective safeguarding practices' to protect children from online sexual abuse and from people enticing them through online platforms. This partnership also tries to make it easier to work together with the police on this issue. The partnership aims to open up spaces for discussion and do something about this subject that people do not like to talk about because they may find it highly shameful.⁸

Online schools are the new normal for Ishika
© UNICEF/UNI355764/Panjwani





Promote preventive practices and gender equality

- **Promote gender equality:** Religious leaders and faith community members are well positioned to influence relationships and power structures in their communities. Promoting gender equality takes deep reflection, time, and commitment. In a time such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when our world is swiftly changing, structures of inequality remain entrenched. Faith actors can find new ways to start discussions about previously difficult topics, such as the ways that the pandemic has had different effects on women, men, boys, and girls, and what can be done to help shift power to help those who have less power. Likewise, all COVID-19 interventions must, at a minimum, do no harm, and ensure not to promote gender discrimination, which is the root cause of gender-based violence.
- **Promote positive parenting:** Parenting practices are an effective violence-prevention strategy and address the common drivers behind violence against children and women. Parenting support can lead to positive (non-violent) discipline and strengthened communication and bonding between parents and children, which benefits children from infancy into adolescence. Parenting programmes can also promote gender equality both by supporting positive gender norms and expectations for girls and boys and also by actively engaging fathers in child-rearing. The benefits of parenting pass on to the next generation as girls and boys become role-models in the same way as their own parents. In the long run, this saves communities and nations from the physical, mental and economic costs of violence. Faith actors are perfectly positioned to promote new practices in parenting.

*Jose Angel Aguila Lizama (14) who is autistic, sits at home with his mother, Lourdes Lizama, in Puerto Cortes, Cortes, Honduras.
© UNICEF/UN0231740/Zehbrauskas/2018*



Religious leaders and faith communities can promote the following key parenting principles:

- **Nurturing and caring relationships** between parents and children help both male and female caregivers develop emotional closeness with their children from the early years into adolescence; such relationships prevent violence in the family and beyond.
- **Positive and non-violent discipline helps caregivers reflect on how they communicate** with their children and how to give positive feedback and praise, to explain mistakes and to find alternatives to yelling and hitting in order to provide discipline.
- **Learning how to manage conflicts and calm one's own emotions** can help parents understand how to care for themselves in order to diffuse tensions in the family. This can also show them how they can manage frustrations and conflicts around parenting and find ways to do this as a couple.
- **Problem-solving and communication** for both children and parents can promote shared decision-making and negotiations about household rules and can contribute to healthier and more gender-equitable relationships.¹²

Practising Positive Discipline

- Listen to your children and respect their feelings.
- Try a positive request rather than a negative order or a warning. Say "Please come home early!" instead of "Don't be late!"
- Be specific about what you want your child to do. Say "Please clean your room!" instead of "Help around the house!"
- Use phrases that reflect respect and appreciation. Say "I would like you to...", or "I would really appreciate it if you would do..."
- Always praise your children when they do what you requested or when rules are followed.
- Use consequences rather than punishments. Say "If you do not put your clothes in the laundry basket, you will not have any clean clothes to wear" or "If you finish your homework on time, you will have more free time to play."

- **Encourage parent-child interactions:** Through family-based activities like prayer, singing, meditation, art, play or exercise, faith communities and religious leaders can promote joint problem-solving. Spending quality time together, increased interaction, and more open communication can help families cope with the crisis, while preventing violence and protecting children.
- **Be a role-model of equitable behaviour:** In most households and communities, males are in positions of authority and have control over the household. Male religious leaders and male members of the faith community have an opportunity to help prevent domestic violence and promote positive gender norms by reaching out to each other and teaching their communities to treat girls and boys or women and men equally and fairly. They need to condemn any kind of violence in the community, stress that violence is never acceptable, and explain that no one deserves to be treated with violence or abuse. Religious teachings talk about dignity, respect and harmony, and when religious leaders and members of faith communities live by these principles, they set an example for others to follow.
- **Share domestic responsibilities:** In a crisis situation, women and girls often end up doing most of the household chores including taking care of other people's healthcare, emotional, and psycho-social needs. As a result of COVID-19 school closures, many women and girls have also taken on responsibilities for educating children. During this difficult time, faith actors can encourage husbands and male relatives to contribute and share the workload so that the wife and other female relatives are not overburdened. They can use their position of respect and influence within the community in order to help emphasize messages on the importance of love, support, and respect within families.

Various religious scriptures advocate for gender equality and mutual respect, and forbid violence. Islam often advocates people to treat men and women equally and teaches males positive ways to be men in their community. Faith actors can point out when people give wrong guidance and interpret religious texts incorrectly with reference to gender-based violence in the home.

Adapted from: The Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) "Islamic Perspective on Engaging Men and Boys to End Violence in the Family." The document also suggests an "Islamic Model for Managing Marital Disputes."

More information can be found on how Islamic people think about men and women being equal and about justice in Musawah's document "Islam and the Question of Gender Equality."



Support families experiencing violence or at risk

- **Support reporting of violence and referrals:** Faith actors and faith communities can play an important role in encouraging survivors to report violence and to access referral services. Community outreach workers and volunteers can also be trained on how to support survivors, particularly at a time when services are limited or disrupted. Some families may require the support of the faith community to access government systems and services. They also need to act as advocates when talking to policymakers and community leaders, to ensure that violence-related services are included on the list of designated essential services for COVID-19; that staff have access to the necessary supplies to operate safely; that services are adapted or expanded as necessary (for example, in some places, hotel rooms have been made available for women and children who need temporary emergency shelter).

The World Council of Churches and UNICEF published a document called “Churches’ Commitments to Children: Churches Uniting for Children.” That document urges churches to call on governments to protect children and adolescents during emergencies.

- **Promote community surveillance mechanisms and family mediation:** Faith actors can promote community surveillance mechanisms, to identify and refer cases of violence, child marriage and FGM to available services. They can also intervene and mediate with and between families who are thought to have been engaging in violence or harmful practices. They can encourage them to change these practices by reminding them about the consequences of their actions and about religious teachings that promote non-violence.
- **Provide parenting support:** In addition to providing protection services for children and women, faith communities can also connect families with on-going parenting programmes. These can help parents understand the importance of non-violent (positive) discipline which includes rewards and punishment, praise, and setting rules and boundaries. Positive parenting and parenting support programmes can have lifelong benefits for a child. During a crisis, it becomes even more important to learn how to manage emotions and to make safe decisions. Faith actors can lend an ear when parents need support and want advice, or need to express concerns, frustrations, and challenges. They can also help set up places to share information on parenting and or to help parents support each other, such as WhatsApp groups for parents or a community-led helpline.

UNICEF Jordan has facilitated the establishment of community-based WhatsApp groups for parents in response to COVID-19. Parents are assigned to groups with a parenting facilitator as administrator. Text and video messages are shared daily, addressing issues faced by parents and children during the pandemic (e.g. managing stress, keeping children healthy, positive discipline), providing options for learning and educational activities and allowing for dialogue among parents.⁹



Children wait at a food distribution site in Ward 8, Washington DC. JLI/FLC/Tom Sampson/2020

Since 2013, through the Buddhism Leadership Initiative (BLI), UNICEF Cambodia, in partnership with Norwegian Church Aid, and through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Cults and Religions, has supported and partnered with faith actors and their communities to advocate for children and to promote social norms and behaviours that protect children. The partnership has supported inter-faith consultation, working with both the spiritual and development wings of various denominations to support capacity-development workshops on child protection; to map faith-based organisations' engagement on child marriage; to develop inter-faith communication materials; to establish dialogue with high-level religious leaders, including the Buddhist Sangha (Council) and Buddhist scholars to build consensus on approaches to address child marriage and to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework. National messages on ending harmful practices are reinforced through the annual World Day of Prayer and Actions for Children (DPAC). The inter-faith efforts are aligned with wider government efforts through engagement of religious leaders by the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs.¹⁰

- **Support children from vulnerable households:** Children and women from households impacted by a range of vulnerabilities (poverty, disability, discrimination, and other issues) may be at higher risk of violence. For children, many parents may need to work and may not be able to stay at home with them. They may not have enough food or be able to meet their basic needs. Religious leaders and communities of faith can support children and families at greater risk and encourage communities to support families to meet children's physical and material needs. Community-driven fund-raising efforts could also be organized through faith groups. These groups can help coordinate and link protection services, parenting support programmes and available emergency social welfare services for vulnerable children and families in need of food or other emergency support.

Many faith-based responses to child poverty take an inter-faith approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of poverty and violence. The Shanti Ashram is a Gandhian organization in southern India. It works with Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Christian and Sikh groups to stop violence against children. Its Bala Shanti programme works to end poverty, enable children to develop in a healthy way, and stop child marriage.

World Vision has written some recommendations about how faith communities can help children during the pandemic.¹¹ While it has a Christian perspective, many of the actions are relevant for people of all faiths. Some suggestions it makes are:

- Listen to the views of children and adolescents, including the most vulnerable children. Allow them to share stories, videos, blogs, vlogs, poems, songs, etc.
- Keep in touch with faith networks and congregations: help children to stay connected with peers to feel supported by each other and feel less alone or isolated.
- Keep values alive. This means thinking about who we want to 'be' during the crisis, more than what we want to get, or what we need to protect. It means we keep leaning into God's sustaining presence, looking outwards, loving our neighbours, and facing death with the same purpose and values by which we faced life.
- Provide care for the parents/caregivers. Lean into your community for support. Take turns with others when providing care. It is tempting to believe in a crisis that we must give or do everything right now. Remember, [caring for yourself] is not selfish, and rest is a necessity (and sometimes a divine command), not a luxury.



*A dormitory in a centre for children in difficulty.
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Collaborate with Local Youth and Women's Groups

- **Engage with youth and women's organizations:** Local organizations act not only as valuable allies in getting life-saving health information to affected communities, they can also serve as a conduit from communities to policymakers and decision-makers, which helps ensure that the perspectives, needs and concerns of the most vulnerable are not overlooked. Collaborate with local youth and women's groups to understand better the safety concerns of women and children in the community and share information about available services for survivors. Members of these groups could also provide peer support remotely. In contexts where violence including FGM and child marriage are prevalent, there are probably local groups whose role is to address these harmful practices and support individuals affected by or at risk from them. Establish linkages with these groups to find out about referral mechanisms, safe spaces and services available.
- **Partnerships for emergency response:** As the health crisis unfolds and government capacities are stretched, faith communities can partner with local groups to provide an emergency response to individuals and families experiencing violence. This could include fund-raising and providing temporary shelters or safe havens. Religious leaders and faith communities could run small group classes, provide access to distance-learning and promote digital literacy and online safety to prevent learning gaps for vulnerable children.
- **Seek community information from local groups:** Collaborate with local youth and women's organizations for updates on issues requiring attention, particularly those that directly affect women and children. In some places, children may be at risk of child labour, exploitation, or trafficking, child marriage and FGM; in others the issues may be domestic violence or corporal punishment.
- **Involve youth and women's groups in local-level planning:** Invite representatives of local youth and women's groups, including groups both within and outside the faith community, to have a seat at the table for community consultations and planning processes, and to be involved in decision-making structures. Past experiences from other epidemics (Ebola, Zika, etc.) show that in order for the overall response to be effective and sustainable, women and youth must be included in the planning and decision-making processes. Women represent over 70 per cent of the healthcare workforce – in addition to being the main caregivers for children, elderly and the sick – so they bring relevant insights to help inform the overall response. In places where FGM and child marriage are prevalent, ensure you also engage with local groups addressing those harmful practices, so that prevention activities, surveillance mechanisms, services and mediating activities can continue and/or be adapted to the COVID-19 context. Likewise, youth and children can provide valuable insights to planning as well as implementation and ensure their concerns and perspectives are considered.

RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AND SACRED TEXTS

“Religious communities are uniquely positioned to prevent and respond to violence against children. There is strong consensus across religious traditions about the dignity of every child and the need to protect children from different forms of violence. The inherent rights of the child are present in the teachings and traditions of the world’s major religions.”

Extracted from: UNICEF and Religions for Peace (RfP) document “From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities Can Do to Eliminate Violence against Children”¹⁴

The following religious teachings provide additional faith inspirations for several of the points outlined in this guide. These religious teachings are meant as conversation starters only and we encourage you to consider their meaning in relation to what you have learned in this guide. You can also add and discuss other teachings that you think speak to the issues affecting children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many religions have teachings that promote equality and non-violence, and emphasize the importance of treating children with kindness, love and respect:

Islam

- A child is a gift from God (Hiba - The Qur’an 14:39), an adornment of life (Zeenah - The Qur’an 18:46), a great blessing (Ni’imah - The Qur’an 16:72) and is regarded as a protector or friend who carries legacy (Waleeh - The Qur’an 19:5-6). Through these powerful words, the Quran reminds us of how blessed we are to have children, and it sets the minds of parents and other caregivers to see them as blessings and not as a burden.

Christianity

- At one point, the disciples asked Jesus, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ (Matthew 18:1). Jesus placed a little child in their midst and said that they must learn to be like the child if they want to become members of the Kingdom of God. In Matthew 18:3-4, we learn that Jesus said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’ (Matthew 18:3-4).

Judaism

- The birth of a Jewish child is welcomed with words of blessing (Baruch haba, B’ruchah haba’ah). Children are to be raised in a climate promoting tzedek (fairness) and kevod (respect) and are to engage in the performance of good deeds (mizvoh). The Babylonian Talmud comments: “Jews are compassionate children of compassionate parents” (Betzah 32a).

Buddhism

- Buddhism is concerned with the welfare of all beings. Sigālovāda Sutta makes the point that if everyone develops compassion, mutual respect, courtesy and loving kindness, children will not be ill-treated. In the Buddhist view, true compassion has the power to uproot the causes of misery and suffering in people’s lives and direct them to the cause of happiness.

Sikhism

- Sikhism teaches that the child is a constant remembrance of God, and God protects and nurtures children from the time when they are in the mother’s womb. Family and extended family in the Sikh tradition are the main responsible actors with regards to the upbringing of the child in the early years; it is within the family that the child learns the values and practices of the religion.

Hinduism

- In the Hindu tradition, there is no greater good than a child. Hindus believe their children are gifts from gods and products of their previous karma. Many believe that their children were related to them or were their close friends in past lives. Hindu parents are to lift their children into the higher nature of love, forgiveness, friendliness and security.

Baha'i

- Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha v3, p. 619 says, "Be kind to all peoples; care for every person; do all ye can to purify the hearts and minds of men; strive ye to gladden every soul. To every meadow be a shower of grace, to every tree the water of life; be as sweet musk to the sense of humankind, and to the ailing be a fresh, restoring breeze. Be pleasing waters to all those who thirst, a careful guide to all who have lost their way; be father and mother to the orphan, be loving sons and daughters to the old, be an abundant treasure to the poor." (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha)

Photo credit (on the right):

*Ayaulym, age 7, at her aunt's house in Aktau, Kazakhstan on 15 March 2018. Together with her mother and siblings, Ayaulym moved in with relatives after their mother experienced domestic violence and divorced her husband. The family was supported by the UNICEF-backed crisis centre, Meirim.
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*16 years old Vinita who fought child marriage and now goes to school walks past a graffiti in her village Berhabad in the Indian state of Jharkhand. The graffiti reads: "Let the bondage of marriage not be imposed early, not before the age of 18."
© UNICEF India/2017/Prashanth Vishwanathan*





IDEAS FOR DIALOGUE AND ACTION

As faith actors, your position becomes even more central in these troubled times. As you work with your communities and congregations during this pandemic, these are some points to consider:

Core messages for awareness-raising on violence

- Stress that it is important to follow #Stayhome instructions to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but home is not always a safe place. If women and children's safety is at risk or if they are experiencing violence, encourage them to seek support or find a way to escape.
- Explain that violence is never OK. If someone is hurting you, remember it is not your fault.
- Reiterate that all religions promote love, care and respect and no religion justifies violence or harming women and children. Provide examples of teachings from your faith that condemn all forms of violence.
- Explain that all forms of violence, which should include child marriage and FGM as types of violence, are against the law and have long-term negative impact on the physical and mental health of children and women.
- Emphasize that if you are harmed or feel threatened, intimidated or harassed, you have the right to reach out to seek help.
- Highlight that violence is always preventable, it is never acceptable.
- Remind people that ending all forms of violence will require collective action. It is everyone's responsibility.

Adapted from UNICEF Gender Based Violence in Emergencies Core Community Awareness Messages: Covid-19 Response and End Violence Against Children Key Messages and Statistics.¹³

How can you as religious leaders and faith community members reach out to provide support and protection for those who are experiencing violence? Who else can you mobilize to support these women and children?

When violence occurs how can youth and women's groups provide support, care and protection?

How can women and children participate in local-level planning to ensure their perspectives and concerns are taken into consideration?

Share an example of how you helped engage with youth and women's groups for preventing violence against children and women. Share your example by email (not more than 50 words) with a photo if you have one.

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CONNECT BACK WITH US!

How can you join with men and boys to help them prevent violence and promote equality and harmony?

How has the COVID crisis affected children and women in your community and faith groups? What are some of the specific concerns and risks they are facing?





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities Can Do to Eliminate Violence against Children
[https://www.unicef.org/protection/What_Religious_Communities_Can_Do_to_Eliminate_Violence_against_Children__\(UNICEF_Religions_for_Peace_Guide\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/protection/What_Religious_Communities_Can_Do_to_Eliminate_Violence_against_Children__(UNICEF_Religions_for_Peace_Guide).pdf)
- Protecting Children from Online Sexual Exploitation: A Guide to Action for Religious Leaders and Communities https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/FBO_Guide_for_Religious_Leaders_and_Communities_ENG.pdf
- Arigatou International, Faith in Action for Children: 12 Messages and Actions to Ensure Children's Wellbeing during the COVID-19 Pandemic
<https://arigatouinternational.org/en/response-to-covid19#posters>
- COVID-19 and Early, Child and Forced Marriage: An Agenda for Action
<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-and-child-early-and-forced-marriage.pdf>
- Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Church of Egypt and UNICEF Series on Violence against Children includes Peace, Love and Tolerance: Key Messages from Islam and Christianity on Protecting Children from Violence and Harmful Practices, Islamic Perspective on Protecting Children from Violence and Harmful Practices and FGM: Between Incorrect Use of Science and Misunderstood Doctrine.
- Gender Equity and Inclusion in the Time of COVID-19: Why Religious and Traditional Leaders Matter
<https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/gender-equity-and-inclusion-in-the-time-of-covid-19-why-religious-and-traditional-leaders-matter/>
- Gender-Based Violence Pocket Guide
<https://gbvguidelines.org/en/pocketguide/>
- GBV Case Management and the COVID-19 Pandemic <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1897/guidance-on-gbv-case-management-in-the-face-of-covid-19-outbreak-final-draft-5.pdf>
- Identifying and Mitigating Gender-Based Violence Risks within the COVID-19 Response
<https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Interagency-GBV-risk-mitigation-and-Covid-tipsheet.pdf>
- Faith for Life Handbooks for Christians, Faith for Life Handbook for Muslims – Interreligious Council of Kenya



*Zhanerke, age 8, receives sand therapy from a psychologist at her school in Kyzylorda, Kazakhstan on 13 March 2018. Zhanerke could not go to regular school after she faced abuse from her father. She is now attending a boarding school regularly.
 © UNICEF/UN0214689/Anush Babajanyan*

Endnotes

1. UN Women, COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls; <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>; UNDP (2020). Gender-based Violence and COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/womens-empowerment/gender-based-violence-and-covid-19.html>; The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, End Violence Against Children, UNICEF, WHO, COVID-19: Protecting Children from Violence, Abuse and Neglect in the Home, Version 1, May 2020 <https://www.unicef.org/media/68711/file/COVID-19-Protecting-children-from-violence-abuse-and-neglect-in-home-2020.pdf>
2. https://evac.jlilfc.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/JLI-Brief-01_9.5.19.pdf
3. Identifying and Mitigating Gender-Based Violence Risks within the COVID-19 Response <https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Interagency-GBV-risk-mitigation-and-Covid-tipsheet.pdf>
4. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1104-working-paper-impacts-of-pandemics-and-epidemics-on-child-protection-lessons-learned.html>
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7. World Health Organization, UNICEF, World Bank. (2018). Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development: A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential.
8. Protecting Children from Online Sexual Exploitation: A Guide to Action for Religious Leaders and Communities https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/FBO_Guide_for_Religious_Leaders_and_Communities_ENG.pdf
9. UNICEF. Designing Violence Prevention Parenting Programmes: A Guidance Note (Draft May 2020).
10. <https://www.faith4positivechange.org/2018-workshop>
11. https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Guidance%20for%20Faith%20Communities_FINAL.pdf
12. UNICEF. Designing Violence Prevention Parenting Programmes: A Guidance Note (Draft May 2020).
13. https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/paragraphs/download/Key%20Messages_Short_0.pdf
14. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/commitment-action-what-religious-communities-can-do-eliminate-violence-against-children>

JOINT CALL TO ACTION

for the Faith-in-Action COVID-19 Initiative by the UNICEF Executive Director, Henrietta Fore, and 13 of Religions for Peace's Senior-most leaders representing diverse religious traditions:

1. **Religious practices:** Adapt faith gatherings, rituals, and services to ensure the safety of worshippers and develop alternative pastoral approaches.
2. **Hygiene:** Promote a heightened focus on handwashing, hygiene and sanitation.
3. **Active listening:** Listen to the experiences, needs and hopes of children and families and provide support for inter-generational dialogue.
4. **Advocacy:** Promote the inclusion of voices of faith and wider community engagement to inform local responses.
5. **Communication and inclusion:** Tackle misinformation, rumours, stigma and discrimination associated with the disease.
6. **Active engagement:** Engage networks of religious communities including faith-based women's and youth organizations in collaboration with local governance structures to provide organized voluntary services.
7. **Pastoral Care:** Provide further spiritual and emotional care and support to bring comfort and hope for parents, children, and the elderly.
8. **Parenting:** Promote positive age and gender-specific parenting guidance and support to families, particularly the most vulnerable and the hardest to reach.
9. **Youth engagement:** Practice youth-friendly communication and engagement including more systematic use of technology and social media during periods of physical distancing and beyond.
10. **Recovery:** Provide support for recovery of social services.

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Mr. Homi Gandhi, President, Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America

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<https://rfp.org/launch-of-global-multi-religious-faith-in-action-covid-19-initiative/>

