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CHAPTER 4

FAITH ACTORS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is a global problem, with at least one billion children (defined as those under the age of 18) experiencing violence every year worldwide.²⁵⁷ VAC is defined as all forms of physical, sexual, and emotional violence, including neglect, maltreatment, exploitation, harm, and abuse, which can take different forms such as child labor, child marriage, corporal punishment, and sexual violence.²⁵⁸ Prevention and response to violence, exploitation, and abuse of children regardless of the context are referred to as child protection.²⁵⁹

Faith communities can play a crucial role in ending VAC.²⁶⁰ For example, many individuals across different countries draw their beliefs around child rearing from religious sources.²⁶¹

The End VAC Report in 2020 shares some statistics on the scale of the problem:

- Every year, at least one billion children experience violence – that's half of the world's children
- One in two children experience violence every year
- Every seven minutes, an adolescent dies because of violence
- Children with disabilities are almost four times more likely to experience violence than non-disabled children
- Over one million children are reported missing every year
- Globally, the cost of VAC adds up to US\$7 trillion a year
- Three out of four young children are regularly subjected to violent discipline by their caregivers
- One in every four children is living in a country affected by conflict or disaster
- Only 12% of children are fully protected from corporal punishment – by law – across the world (or alternately: 88% of the world's children are not protected by law from corporal punishment)
- Worldwide, close to 130 million (more than one in three) students from age 13-15 experience bullying.

Source: *End Violence Against Children 2020*

255 Unit for Religion and Development Research, Stellenbosch University.

256 Institute for Global Health and Development, Queen Margaret University.

257 End Violence Against Children. "Ending Violence against Children: Key Messages & Statistics," 2020, https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/paragraphs/download/Key_Messages_Short_0.pdf.

258 End Violence Against Children, *Key Messages & Statistics*.

259 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Child Protection Overview," UNICEF Data: Monitoring the Situation for Every Child, December 2015, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/overview/>.

260 Rojas, Lina, Talia Markowitz, and Kathleen Kostelny. "Strengthening Child Protection Systems: A Promising Approach to VAC in El Salvador," Latin American and the Caribbean Regional Office: World Vision International, 2017, <https://jliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/El-Salvador-English-final.pdf>; Michael Wessells, "Bottom-up Approaches to Strengthening Child Protection Systems: Placing Children, Families, and Communities at the Center," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 43 (2015): 8–21, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.04.006>.

261 Cindy Miller-Perrin and Robin Perrin, "Changing Attitudes about Spanking among Conservative Christians Using Interventions That Focus on Empirical Research Evidence and Progressive Biblical Interpretations," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 71 (2017): 69–79, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.03.015>; C. A. Taylor, et al., "Beliefs and Ideologies Linked with Approval of Corporal Punishment: A Content Analysis of Online Comments," *Health Education Research* 31, no. 4 (2016): 563–575, <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyw029>.

This section discusses the state of the evidence on faith actors and VAC over the past two decades. Over this period, global faith actors have made two important public declarations on ending violence against children, namely, the Kyoto Declaration (2006) and the Panama Declaration (2017).²⁶²

Overview of literature

A recent scoping study on faith actors' involvement in the prevention, elimination, and perpetuation of VAC by Palm, Rutledge, and Eyber provides a comprehensive overview of existing literature on this topic over the past two decades (1999 – 2019).²⁶³ The study identified and analyzed 172 relevant sources. It highlighted that grey literature²⁶⁴ dominates the evidence base with internal NGO reports, working papers, and newsletters, etc., making up 60% of the research. Academic articles and books only make up 40% of this research, underscoring that it is a highly practice-focused area of evidence in comparison to some of the other thematic areas under religions and development. Half of the literature focused on two geographic areas - the US (23%) and sub-Saharan Africa (27%). Fifty-three percent of the sources referred to solely one religion, with most concentrating on Christianity, followed by Islam and traditional beliefs. The study found that three main types of evidence are dominant on faith actors and VAC:

- **Emphasis on training and guides:** Thirty-nine percent concentrated on the prevention of VAC with a strong emphasis on mobilization and education that mainly included “the provision of training and developing guides for faith actors to engage in particular subject areas related to a range of child protection issues.”²⁶⁵
- **Focus on child sexual abuse:** Another area emerging and discussed in 23% of the sources, was the perpetuation of violence in relation to faith, mostly focused on child sexual abuse (frequently related to the Catholic Church), and the issue of child sacrifice in folk religions (e.g., witchcraft) which was seen to have a specific research focus.
- **Intersection with research on gender, religions, and development:** A significant amount of the literature on harmful practices is situated within the violence against women and girls field where girls (but not boys) are the focus of research and in programming approaches, forming a significant crossover with the gender theme in this volume.²⁶⁶ To avoid duplication with other themes, this body of literature has been excluded here, but it is noted that there has been an increased focus in recent years on the complex intersections and shared root causes between violence against women and violence against children.²⁶⁷

Evidence on the involvement of faith actors in child protection has increased since the 2010s.²⁶⁸ Robinson and Hanmer are among the most cited authors who have argued that faith communities should be recognized as key actors in the local communities and involved in child protection activities.²⁶⁹ A multi-religious study by Arigatou International in 2019 also explored child rights through the lens of different faith traditions.²⁷⁰ At the same time, however, literature highlights concerns around the problematic role of some faith actors in legitimizing community level forms of VAC such as child marriage.²⁷¹

262 Religions for Peace, “A Multi-Religious Commitment to Confront Violence Against Children,” Kyoto: Eighth World Assembly, Religions for Peace, August 2006, <http://endcorporalpunishment.org/wp-content/uploads/key-docs/Kyoto-declaration-2006.pdf>; Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), “The Panama Declaration on Ending Violence Against Children,” Panama City: GNRC, May, 9-11, 2017, https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/panama_declaration_2017.pdf.

263 Kathleen Rutledge and Carola Eyber, “Scoping Study on Faith Actors’ Involvement in the Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC: Literature Review” (Washington, DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. Ending VAC Hub, 2019), <https://jiliflc.com/resources/evac-literature-review/>.

264 Grey literature is commonly defined as different types of documents which are not controlled by commercial publishing organizations. See Jean Adams et al., “Searching and Synthesising ‘Grey Literature’ and ‘Grey Information’ in Public Health: Critical Reflections on Three Case Studies,” *Methodology* 5, no. 164 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-016-0337-y>.

265 Rutledge and Eyber, *Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC*.

266 Elisabet Le Roux and Selina Palm, “What Lies Beneath? Tackling the Roots of Religious Resistance to Ending Child Marriage,” Report (London: Girls Not Brides, 2018).

267 Alessandra Guedes, et al., “Bridging the Gaps: a Global Review of Intersections of Violence Against Women and Violence Against Children,” *Global Health Action* 9, no. 1 (2016): 315–336.

268 T. J. D’Agostino, N. D’Sa, and N. Boothby, “What’s Faith Got to Do with It? A Scoping Study on Local Faith Communities Supporting Child Development and Learning,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 81 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJEDUDEV.2020.102325>; Rutledge and Eyber, *Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC*; Selina Palm, “Scoping Study on Faith Actors’ Involvement in the Prevention, Elimination and Perpetuation of VAC: Experts Consultation” (Washington, DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending VAC Hub, 2019), <https://jiliflc.com/resources/evac-expert-consultation/>.

269 Stephen Hanmer, “Child Rights Organizations and Religious Communities: Powerful Partnerships for Children,” *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 3 (2010): 451–61, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/782469/summary>; Stephen Hanmer and Malia Robinson, *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children* (New York: United Nations Children’s Fund, 2012); Malia Robinson and Stephen Hanmer, “Engaging Religious Communities to Protect Children From Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation. Partnerships Require Analysis of Religious Virtues and Harms,” *Child Abuse and Neglect* 38, no. 4 (2014): 600–611, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.03.018>.

270 Arigatou International, “Faith and Children’s Rights: A Multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child” (New York: Arigatou International, 2019), <https://arigatouinternational.org/all-with-children/faith-child-rights/faith-childrens-rights-multi-religious-study/>.

271 Le Roux and Palm, *What lies beneath?*

Main trends identified in literature

International actors' perspective predominates

Most literature discusses the engagement of faith actors in ending VAC through the prism of international organizations' interventions.²⁷² Experiences of international organizations in working with faith actors are commonly reported, where faith actors are frequently recognized as key stakeholders for formal collaboration to address child protection issues.²⁷³ However, evidence on local faith actors' more organic, informal, and self-initiated work has been identified as needing better documentation and dissemination.²⁷⁴

Overemphasis on positive examples

Overall the majority of this literature generally discusses the positive contributions of faith actors to ending VAC through activities such as pre-violence prevention, advocacy, direct intervention, service provision, and survivor support.²⁷⁵ Faith-based organizations are also identified as having a stronger ability to reach and influence civil society in many contexts than governments or NGOs due to their pre-existing social capital and alignment with the worldview and culture of many communities.²⁷⁶ However, the outcomes and impact of faith actors' initiatives are rarely measured adequately. Most evaluations focus on only quantitatively measuring certain changes such as the transformation of faith leaders' attitudes to reduce harmful traditional practices.²⁷⁷ For example, evaluations in Ethiopia and Nigeria that assessed the outcomes of the intervention involving faith leaders in reducing harmful traditional practices found positive changes in faith leaders' attitudes in support of eliminating female genital cutting and stopping child marriage.²⁷⁸ However, the literature points out that evaluations should also measure reductions in harmful traditional practices due to faith leaders' work.²⁷⁹

Further research and analysis on negative examples

Only a small percentage of the literature focuses on the perpetuation of violence by faith actors.²⁸⁰ A few sources also discuss interpretations of religious scriptures that support some forms of VAC, such as corporal punishment and child marriage. For example, Bible verses such as "He who spares the rod, spoils the child" (Bible, Proverbs 13:24) have been repeatedly cited by parents/caregivers and faith actors in various studies as a reference point to legitimize physical punishment.²⁸¹ The literature identifies a need to further analyze the perpetuation of, or condoning of, certain forms of violence by faith actors and as a result of underlying faith beliefs to effectively counter these entrenched social norms.²⁸²

Major current debates in the last five years

Corporal punishment

Corporal punishment in both homes and schools has been raised in recent years as a primary intersection of concern and controversy amongst faith communities with regard to the task of ending VAC. Experts across six faiths highlighted this as a key current site of religious contestation where some faith actors still seek to normalized and

272 D'Agostino, D'Sa, and Boothby, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*; Palm, *Scoping Study*.

273 Azza Karam, "The United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA's) Legacy of Engaging Faith-Based Organizations as Cultural Agents of Change," *CrossCurrents* 60, no. 3 (2010): 432–450, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/782472>; Jose Riera and Marie-Claude Poirier, "'Welcoming the Stranger' and UNHCR's Cooperation with Faith-Based Organizations," *Forced Migration Review* 48 (2014): 64–67, <https://www.fmreview.org/faith/riera-poirier>.

274 Rutledge and Eyber, *Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC*.

275 Tanya Caufield, "Just and Resilient Communities Project Gender-based Violence and Child Protection: Diocese of Mt Kenya West" (Collingwood: Anglican Overseas Aid, 2016).

276 Johannes Erasmus and Gerbrand Mans, "Churches as Service Providers for Victims of Sexual and/or Violent Crimes: A Case Study from the Paarl Community," *Acta Criminologica* 18, no. 1 (2009): 140–163, <https://researchspace.csir.co.za/dspace/handle/10204/5026>; Karam, *Legacy of Engaging Faith-Based Organizations*; Selina Palm, "Webs of Harm? Online child Sexual Abuse and Theologies of the Digital," *Cursor_ Zeitschrift Für Explorative Theologie* (April 16, 2021), <https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/palm-webs-of-harm>.

277 D'Agostino, D'Sa, and Boothby, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*.

278 Center for Interfaith Action, "The Faith Effect: Equipping Faith Leaders to Empower Girls in Ethiopia and Nigeria," Report (Washington, DC: The Center for Interfaith Action, December 2012), <https://jilifc.com/resources/the-faith-effect-equipping-faith-leaders-to-empower-girls-in-ethiopia-and-nigeria/>.

279 D'Agostino, D'Sa, and Boothby, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*.

280 Rutledge and Eyber, *Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC*.

281 Miller-Perrin and Perrin, *Changing Attitudes about Spanking*; Taylor, et al., *Beliefs and Ideologies*; Troy M. Troftgruben, "Toxic Theology: A Pastoral Response to Bible Passages Often Used to Justify Abuse of Children," 3 (2018): 13–14, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Toxic-Theology%3A-A-Pastoral-Response-to-Bible-Often-Troftgruben/695626fb08273faaed8f2067ccc328e6a8a9d87>.

282 Rutledge and Eyber, *Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC*.

justify this practice, often using diverse sacred texts.²⁸³ A gap has been identified between global pronouncements condemning this by selected religious leaders such as in Panama in 2017,²⁸⁴ and grassroots realities in many local faith communities where corporal punishment practices often continue. Religious voices globally clearly remain divided on this issue of corporal punishment.²⁸⁵ At the same time, several organizations have recently developed some positive resources to seek to address this issue.²⁸⁶

Child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse also emerges as a second area of significant recent concern in relation to faith communities, both as perpetrated by individual faith leaders, and within religious institutions of care and education with recent high profile media revelations on this issue in places including but not limited to Ireland, Australia, South Africa, and the US leading to a number of in-depth investigations.²⁸⁷ Generally, in the child protection sector, this issue is receiving increased attention,²⁸⁸ which the global #metoo movement has also facilitated. Beyond perpetration alone, experts have highlighted a wider religious silence on these realities within families and communities, often due to issues of sex and sexuality, which continue to be viewed as taboo within religious settings.²⁸⁹ Breaking the silence on this issue in faith settings is an emerging focus for practitioners. New initiatives are also developing internal child protection systems and programs to ensure that faith institutions are safe spaces for children and are not exempt from legal requirements.

Influence on faith actors on social norms at multiple levels

Third, faith actors are increasingly identified as playing important roles at the level of the child directly, the family (often viewed as sacred in many faiths), the wider community, and even at national and international policy levels.²⁹⁰ Due to this influence at multiple levels of the socio-ecological system surrounding a child, faith systems can offer significant social capital to the task of ending VAC. However, at the same time, faith beliefs often play a cross-cutting role in all these systems, indirectly influencing them in ways that need further in-depth engagement and research. Wider global strategies such as the 2016 World Health Organization's INSPIRE package of seven strategies for ending VAC have gained currency in this field in recent years and point to transforming social norms and those who influence them as a key factor for change.²⁹¹ As a result, other actors need to take seriously faith actors' specific roles in both promoting and/or transforming underlying social norms on child protection.²⁹²

283 Palm, *Scoping Study*.

284 Arigatou International and Global Network of Religions for Children, "Faith Communities in Action," The GNRC 5th Forum - Ending Violence Against Children, Panama City, 2017, <https://gnrc.net/images/zdocs/GNRC-5th-Forum-PANAMA-Declaration-on-Ending-Violence-Against-Children-Final-EN.pdf>.

285 Palm, *Scoping Study*; Rutledge and Eyber, *Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC*; Selina Palm, "Seen but not Heard? Engaging the Mechanisms of Faith to End Violence Against Children," in *Childhood Vulnerabilities in South Africa: Some Ethical Perspectives*, ed. Chris Jones and Jan Grobbelaar (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2020); Churches' Network for Non-violence (CNNV), "Faith-Based Support for Prohibition and Elimination of Corporal Punishment of Children – A Global Overview," Report (CNNV, 2015), <https://jilflc.com/resources/faith-based-support-for-prohibition-and-elimination-of-corporal-punishment-of-children-a-global-overview/>.

286 Michael Swain, and Selina Palm, "Faith and corporal punishment of children," Interview on The Womxn Show, Cape Town TV, South Africa, 10 Nov 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfhtSSuiA30>; Carol Bower, "Banning Corporal Punishment: The South African Experience," (Cape Town: Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (RAPCAN), 2008), www.childlinesa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/banning-corporal-punishment-the-sa-experience.pdf; Churches' Network for Non-Violence (CNNV), "Ending Corporal Punishment of Children – A Handbook for Worship and Religious Gatherings" (Nottingham: Churches' Network for Non-violence and Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2015), https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/handbook_for_worship.pdf.

287 Ruth Everhart, *The #MeToo Reckoning: Facing the Church's Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020); "Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse," Government of Australia, accessed December 30, 2019, www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au; Linda Stasi, "Secrets and Lies: Sexual Abuse in the World of Orthodox Judaism," *Harper's Magazine*, October 2019, accessed November 21, 2019, <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/10/secrets-and-lies-sexual-abuse-orthodox-jews/>; Child Rights International Network (CRIN), "Child Sexual Abuse and The Holy See: The Need for Justice, Accountability, and Reform" (London: Child Rights International Network, 2014); Johanna Stiebert, *Rape Myths, the Bible, and MeToo* (London: Routledge, 2020).

288 Economist Intelligence Unit, "Out of the Shadows: Shining Light on the Response to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2020, <https://outoftheshadows.eiu.com/>.

289 Palm, *Scoping Study*. See also Stiebert, *Rape Myths*; Hilary Jerome Scarsella and Stephanie Krehbiel, "Sexual Violence: Christian Theological Legacies and Responsibilities," *Religion Compass* 13, no. 9 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12337>; Caroline Blyth, Emily Colgan, and Katie B. Edwards, eds., *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, & Religion: Biblical Perspectives* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018); Miryam Clough, *Shame, the Church and the Regulation of Female Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2017); Le Roux and Palm, *What lies beneath?*

290 Selina Palm and F Colombo, "Scoping Study on Faith Actors' Involvement in the Prevention, Elimination and Perpetuation of VAC: Case Studies" (Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending VAC Hub, 2019).

291 World Health Organization (WHO), "INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children" (Geneva: WHO, 2016), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/inspire-seven-strategies-for-ending-violence-against-children>

292 Selina Palm and Carola Eyber "Why Faith? Engaging the Mechanisms of Faith to End VAC," Briefing Paper (Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending VAC Hub, 2019).

Need to capture informal as well as formal faith actor responses

Fourth, at a practical level, faith communities play a number of roles in wider child protection systems, through informal undocumented responses, semi-formal interventions often around prevention, and through their formal involvement in social systems of care.²⁹³ The unique role of faith communities is also gathering more attention through increased recognition of the need to engage more directly with faith's spiritual capital such as its core beliefs, sacred texts and spiritual rituals, especially, but not only in relation to harmful practices, parenting approaches, beliefs about children, and core values of love and dignity.²⁹⁴

Gaps and cross-cutting themes

Gaps identified in current evidence

There are several gaps in current faith engagement around ending VAC²⁹⁵

- First, few faith organizations address the specific risks to children of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), and this silence can even perpetuate violence, often shaped by underlying religious beliefs.²⁹⁶
- Second, practitioners have raised concerns that boys' vulnerabilities are invisible due to a global focus on girl children and issues that affect them only, with extra attention and funds given to girls due to the VAW/G movement. Faith actors may need to take a nuanced gender-lens on childhood that also avoids reinforcing gender stereotypes.
- Third, the rise of digital VAC is a new concern, emerging as a more prominent issue under COVID-19, and this is an area where faith actors need their own capacity developed.²⁹⁷
- Fourth, witchcraft and child abuse are a focus in academic literature but often remain taboo topics within local communities with practitioners rarely raising these issues.²⁹⁸
- Finally, faith actors identify several structural forms of violence that affect many children's lives, such as trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, armed conflict, child labor, migration, and homelessness. In general, these issues were not the primary focus for most local faith communities, possibly due to their complexity. However, some the larger, formalized faith-based organizations focus on the intersections of these areas.²⁹⁹

Emerging cross-cutting issues of significance

One cross-cutting issue receiving increased attention in many faith settings is **the importance of age-appropriate child participation for ending VAC**. This is seen as a promising development as evidence suggests that if a child is positioned as socially inferior to adults, this may form a key driver for patterns of adult/child violence.³⁰⁰ However, many faith traditions inherit beliefs about the need for silent obedience from children with various formulations of the idea that children should be 'seen and not heard' common and in need of transformation. Some promising institution-led approaches are emerging, such as the World Council of Churches 'Placing Children at the Centre' initiative³⁰¹ and Arigatou International's multi-faith series in 2020 which focused on the importance of children being both seen and heard in faith spaces, an issue also presented at global child protection conferences.³⁰²

293 Palm and Colombo, *Case Studies*.

294 Palm and Eyber, *Why Faith?*

295 Eyber and Rutledge, *Prevention, Elimination, and Perpetuation of VAC*; Palm, *Scoping Study*.

296 Gerald West, Charlene van der Walt, and Kapya John Kaoma, "When Faith Does Violence: Reimagining Engagement Between Churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa," *HTS Theological Studies*, 72, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3511>.

297 Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, "Child Dignity in the Digital World Forum," Information Booklet (Abu Dhabi: IAFSC, 2018). Palm, *Webs of Harm?*

298 Stephen Briggs and Andrew Whittaker, "Protecting Children from Faith-Based Abuse through Accusations of Witchcraft and Spirit Possession: Understanding Contexts and Informing Practice," *The British Journal of Social Work* 48, no. 8 (December 1, 2018): 2157-2175; See also Ero Ikponwosa, "Report of the Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism," New York: United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council Thirty-seventh session, 2018 (UN Doc. A/HRC/37/57/Add.2).

299 Olivia Wilkinson and Amy Stapleton, "Learning Brief: Spiritual Support to Children on the Move and Their Caregivers as a Source of Healing and Resilience" (Washington, DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities, 2018), <https://jliflc.com/resources/learning-brief-spiritual-support/>; World Vision, "Displaced: On the Road to Somewhere. Why Ending Violence Against Children on the Move is Possible," Report (World Vision, June 21, 2018), https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/WV_ITAW_Displaced%20Report%202018%20DPS%20Final.pdf.

300 Palm, *Seen but not Heard?*

301 World Council of Churches (WCC), "Churches' Commitments to Children: Churches United for Children in the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace" (Geneva: WCC, 2017).

302 Silvia Mazzerelli and Selina Palm, "Seen But Not Heard: Faith Perspectives on Child Participation to End Violence Against Children," International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Congress, Milan, Italy, June 7, 2021, <https://blogs.sun.ac.za/urdr/files/2021/10/Seen-But-Not-Heard-ISCAN-Milan-Congress-10-June-2021-FINAL.pdf>

Another cross-cutting issue is a rise in attention to practical forms of interfaith engagement around ending VAC.³⁰³ This has led to promising academic and practitioner collaborations to build shared messaging across faiths which has been effective on certain issues, such as child marriage, especially in contexts where more than one faith is substantially present. However, practitioners note that working across faiths also comes with challenges and more research is needed in this area. Faith actors and institutions also need to be embedded into, and accountable to, wider child protection systems and not separated from them. This has implications for both secular and faith actors in terms of building constructive ways to work together.³⁰⁴

Conclusion and recommendations from recent evidence

In the last two decades, increased documentation has emerged around the role of faith actors in relation to the task of ending VAC. Much has focused on the practical work of faith-based organizations (often large international organizations). Expert practitioners suggest however that there may be a gap between global narratives and the local realities of many faith communities whose work with children often remains informal and undocumented. Evidence shows that all religions contain protective elements for children and can offer important contributions to ending VAC due to their often-trusted position in communities. However, in the last five years, revelations around child sexual abuse in faith settings and diverse views around corporal punishment have raised questions about this role. More local research is needed to both amplify their positive potential as well as engage explicitly with harmful beliefs. Religions can offer unique spiritual capital to help end VAC.

Recent evidence has summarized and highlighted several important key messages around this area that shape key recommendations. There are four main points to highlight here:

1. Faith communities include and influence many important actors who can play roles in ending VAC and require constructive, but critical engagement within a wider system of care.
2. Faith leaders provide regular support to many families including children and can also engage formal child protection systems locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally.
3. Engagement with the specific mechanisms and spiritual capital of diverse faith structures, offers a unique contribution to the elimination of VAC in their potential to promote positive beliefs and action towards ending violence against children.
4. There is an urgent need to re-interpret all religious beliefs and practices that may contribute to VAC, and its silencing, particularly those with a spiritual basis in religious texts.

Faith actors have crucial roles to play in the prevention and referral of child abuse cases. However, at the same time, evidence shows that faith communities can be complicit in, and even perpetrate, certain forms of VAC and they have an urgent responsibility to publicly acknowledge and challenge this in all its forms. Some faith communities may assign children to a position of inferiority in comparison to adults, with fewer social rights and less legal protections, which is seen as a root cause of much VAC. The faith sector itself must recognize and challenge the contributions of faith communities in perpetuating these harmful norms. Across the evidence, child participation forms an emerging mechanism used for sustainably changing harmful social norms about children. This requires faith responses to move towards child-centered approaches that link protection and participation, by equipping children as agents.³⁰⁵ VAC also changes and takes on new forms, and the interrelated nature of these forms means faith communities need to be equipped to engage with hidden and emerging forms of VAC, if they are to be effective actors in the wider shared tasks of both prevention and response.

Most faith traditions often mandate practical social action and service in relation to children as part of faith, especially within the areas of education, care, and social support and that protective religious beliefs around the care and protection of children in faith traditions can be harnessed to accelerate the shared task of ending VAC. However, there is also a concern that faith leaders deal explicitly and constructively with entrenched harmful faith beliefs which are still used to justify or indirectly underpin abusive adult/child hierarchies of power. Faith leaders must also work to break the culture of silence and secrecy on hidden practices of child abuse and maltreatment within religious institutions and families and take steps toward preventative action. Finally, faith actors should seek, where

303 Palm and Colombo, *Case Studies*; Palm and Eyber, *Why Faith?*

304 Carola Eyber and Selina Palm, "A Mixed Blessing: Roles of Faith Communities in Ending VAC," Briefing Paper (Washington, DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities End VAC Hub, 2019).

305 Palm and Colombo, *Case Studies*; Palm and Eyber, *Why Faith?*

appropriate, to work with intra-faith, interfaith, and broader child protection systems to prioritize the best interests of the child together.

This evidence summary highlights the need to engage with religious belief systems more deeply, and not just with faith leaders alone.³⁰⁶ Many diverse faith actors internalize and pass on systemic beliefs and values about children and families intergenerationally. Faith plays a significant role in many people's lives around the world. Because of this reality, it holds significant cross-cutting influence in the lives of children, families, communities, and even in national legislation and politics. This influence and power can be harnessed to either end, or to perpetuate, VAC and it should not be ignored.

306 Elisabet Le Roux and Selina Palm, "Learning from Practice: Engaging Faith-based and Traditional Actors in Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls" (New York: United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, 2021), <https://untf.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/07/engaging-faith-based-and-traditional-actors-in-preventing-violence-against-women-and-girls#view>

Chapter 4: Violence Against Children

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