



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Faith sensitive protection from violence against women and girls in humanitarian and forced migration contexts

An integrated intersectional
and socioecological approach

GUIDANCE NOTES

March 2024

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Acknowledgements: Thanks to refugee women in Turkey and Poland who generously contributed their time to the focus group discussions which informed this guidance note. Gratitude goes to Rawan Elfeky for supporting data collection and interpretation. Special thanks to all participants in two consultation meetings on 7 December 2022 and 12 June 2023 – around 50 representatives of INGOs, NGOs, UN agencies, state agencies and academia. Warm thanks to colleagues who supported the facilitation of the consultation meetings: Andres Martinez Garcia, Carolina Buendia Sarmiento, Eleonora Mura, Reem Doukmak, Salma Moustafa Khalil and Justyna Jarząbska. Thanks also to all colleagues who shared relevant resources.

Thanks to ESRC for funding this project as part of the post-doctoral fellowship, grant no: ES/X00676X/1. Also, thanks to the University of Birmingham for supporting the project.

Warm thanks to organisations and specialists who reviewed the guidance note: Carolina Buendia Sarmiento and Andres Martinez Garcia (US Institute for Peace), Michael French and Carolina Tveoy (Lutheran World Federation), Romina Istratii (School of Oriental and African Studies), Salma Moustafa Khalil and Eleonora Mura (Arigatou International). Also, special thanks to Carolina Buendia Sarmiento, Andres Martinez Garcia and Romina Istratii for contributing the case studies.

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Suggested citation: Pertek, S. (2024) Faith sensitive protection from violence against women and girls in humanitarian and forced migration contexts. Guidance Note. University of Birmingham.

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Acronyms

FBO	Faith-based organisation
GBV	Gender-based violence
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IO	International organisation
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
VAWG	Violence against women and girls

Terminology

While there are many definitions of key terms used herein, this toolkit does not prescribe one definition, however for practical reasons the following terms mean:

Faith: refers to various forms of belief or trust in some form of transcendent reality.¹

Faith actors: leaders of or within a religious institution, faith community (male and female, clergy or lay), or a faith-affiliated or faith-inspired organisation.² Faith actors also include local faith communities, FBOs, interfaith networks and active members of congregations.³

Gender-based violence (GBV): “an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private.”⁴

Religion: refers to an institutionalised system of belief, faith or practices regarding a supernatural power shaping religious values and worldviews.⁵

Spirituality: describes a broad quality related to an individual’s connection with higher power, nature and inner self, that can also exist without religion.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG): “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”⁶

¹ Lunn, J. (2009) The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: A Critical Theory Approach. *Third World Quarterly* 30(5): 937–951.

² UNFPA (2014) *Religion and Development Post-2015*. New York: UNFPA.

³ UNHCR (2014) *Partnership Note on faith-based organisations, local faith communities and faith leaders*. Geneva: UNHCR. BMZ (2016) *Religious communities as partners for development cooperation*. Bonn: BMZ.

⁴ IASC (2015) *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action*. Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery. Global Protection Cluster and Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

⁵ Lunn (no i).

⁶ OHCHR (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. General Assembly Resolution 48/104*.

Key messages

The risks of VAWG increase in the context of conflict and forced displacement with a continuum of violence from pre-migration, conflict and flight to refuge with patterns of violence that intensify as time in displacement increases. The exact scale of VAWG in displacement is unknown due to various barriers, but up to 69% of forced migrant women are estimated to be affected⁷. Innovative and holistic approaches are urgently needed to prevent VAWG in displacement contexts and support the survivors.

Religion – religious beliefs, practices, organisations and experiences – is both a protective and a risk factor in experiences of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in displacement.⁸ Religious beliefs and practices can positively and adversely impact experiences of VAWG, help-seeking behaviours, attitudes towards and behaviours regarding VAWG, and (mental) health outcomes.⁹

Differences in religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs are not the only factors influencing the experiences of VAWG in forced migration and humanitarian settings. Various factors can limit the success of VAWG interventions, such as language barriers, insecure immigration status and housing, discrimination, lack of trust between survivors and professionals, and the economic cost of participating in project activities (e.g. bus fares and loss of earnings).

Faith actors play an important role in forced migrant communities by leveraging significant spiritual, physical and social assets to benefit affected populations. They can mobilise human and material resources in under-resourced settings to support protection.

Displaced populations have important inherent resources and learning capacities to support VAWG prevention and response. Faith community-based VAWG responses can empower communities to protect vulnerable persons, identify protection risks and their causes and effects, and discuss solutions. Therefore, it is suggested for faith communities to be continuously involved in VAWG projects in analysis, design, implementation and evaluation across humanitarian programmes.

Protection practitioners (VAWG, GBV, MHPSS) can strengthen their work by demonstrating cultural competency which includes religious literacy. Religious literacy involves being open to the role that religious beliefs, practices, organisation and experiences may play in survivors' and perpetrators' understanding of VAWG and does not require specific knowledge of religious traditions.

Faith sensitivity in VAWG interventions will help interventions be more people-centred and adopt the 'do no harm' principle by tackling and leveraging complex intersecting influences of religion, while upholding the principles of neutrality and impartiality.

⁷ Keygnaert, I., Vettenburg, N. and Temmerman, M. (2012) Hidden violence is silent rape: sexual and gender-based violence in refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 14 (5): 505–520. doi:10.1080/13691058.2012.671961.

⁸ Pertek, S., Block, K., Goodson, L., et al. (2023) [Gender-based violence, religion and forced displacement: Protective and risk factors](https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1058822). *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 5. doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1058822.

⁹ Istratii, R. and Ali, P. (2023) A Scoping Review on the Role of Religion in the Experience of IPV and Faith-Based Responses in Community and Counseling Settings. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (51), 2, pp 141-173.

Key recommendations for humanitarian, protection, VAWG and GBV specialists include:

- ✓ Be aware of how spiritual and religious beliefs impact on perpetrators' attitudes and behaviours and on survivors' vulnerability to VAWG, resilience and well-being
- ✓ Be aware of how their own beliefs and biases influence how they interpret the influences of religion on survivors' experiences and needs
- ✓ Reflect on how they provide support to survivors who hold diverse cultural, spiritual and religious beliefs
- ✓ Demonstrate religious literacy by sensitively exploring the religious, cultural and spiritual factors that are unique to each survivor's circumstances
- ✓ Seek opportunities to tailor services to survivors' holistic needs
- ✓ Develop safe referral pathways to verified providers of pastoral/spiritual care and inform survivors that they can request support from female faith leaders
- ✓ Train faith actors and those responsible for places of worship to provide survivor-centred support with referral to specialist services when needed, promoting confidentiality, safety, non-discrimination and respect for survivors.

Summary of guidance notes

[Part A: Preparing for faith-sensitive VAWG prevention and response](#)

Key actions include:

- Take stock of what resources are available to address VAWG with faith sensitivity
- Identify any significant gaps in organisational capacity to address VAWG with faith sensitivity and develop a plan to fill these gaps
- Include faith actors in your mapping, contextual and influence analysis
- Conduct holistic needs assessments
- Train staff in cultural competency which includes religious literacy
- Improve how protection personnel and GBV and MHPSS specialists respond to the holistic needs of displaced populations of diverse religious backgrounds and no faith
- Consider developing an organisational policy on religious engagement and protection of religious minorities

[Part B: Delivering faith-sensitive VAWG prevention and response](#)

The following recommendations, embedded in Section 4, emphasize the importance of engaging with faith actors and institutions at various levels to effectively address VAWG in displaced communities, while considering cultural, religious, and gender dynamics.

General Suggestions:

1. Engage local faith actors throughout the VAWG project cycle.
2. Provide training on psychological first aid (PFA) for faith actors.
3. Sensitize faith actors on increased risks of VAWG in forced migration contexts.

Supporting Survivors:

1. Listen to women's voices and acknowledge the role of faith in their experiences.
2. Adapt interventions to resonate with displaced people's worldviews.
3. Enable survivors to identify their own sources of power, including faith.
4. Assist survivors in accessing ritual accessories and sites to uphold religious customs.

5. Understand survivors' religious coping mechanisms and support networks.

Supporting Families:

1. Understand culture-specific family structures where VAWG occurs.
2. Recognize that VAWG can be perpetrated by women of faith and address root causes of family violence.
3. Offer training for effective communication and conflict management within families, drawing on faith values.

Faith-Informed Community-Based Protection:

1. Leverage the capacities of faith communities in responding to VAWG.
2. Incorporate faith-community sensitivity into VAWG protection efforts.
3. Prioritize collaboration with local faith actors and organizations.

Engaging with Women's Faith Organizations/Groups:

1. Identify existing women's faith groups and involve them in VAWG programming.
2. Tailor engagement activities for different age and ability groups.
3. Strengthen existing structures of women's faith groups, ensuring confidentiality and non-discrimination.

Engaging with Informal Women Leaders:

1. Identify and engage informal female leaders from local communities.
2. Support informal women leaders in taking on leadership roles in VAWG protection.
3. Understand the religious beliefs and practices of women leaders in relation to VAWG.

Engaging with Men and Boys from Faith Communities:

1. Understand how religious beliefs and practices shape men's attitudes towards VAWG.
2. Adapt gender-transformative approaches to involve men and boys in VAWG prevention.
3. Address toxic masculinity and challenge harmful behaviours and beliefs.

Engaging with Formal Faith Leaders:

1. Involve faith leaders in all stages of interventions and sustain their involvement.
2. Provide training on humanitarian standards and survivor-centered approaches.
3. Encourage faith leaders to provide safe spaces and support for survivors.

Engaging with Faith Institutions:

1. Build institutional capacity of faith institutions to offer survivor-centered support.
2. Strengthen partnerships with faith-based organizations around protection from VAWG.
3. Develop innovative faith-sensitive MHPSS services for survivors.

1. Introduction: Why religion matters in VAWG

“You cannot work on the topic of gender-based violence without taking religion into account ... The role of religion is so complicated ... It's a vehicle to maintain a specific order in families and societies. Religion has so many functions and is not discreetly distinguishable from socialisation and family and society ... Religion for me has both sides, it can be used to strengthen structures in society that oppressed women and contribute to VAWG. But religion can also be transformative, it can improve the situation of women and girls, and can always be a personal resource, a spiritual resource after experiencing violence.” GBV and MHPSS Advisor in an international organisation, Lebanon

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is widespread worldwide, with one in three women experiencing violence in her lifetime by their partners and strangers. The risks of VAWG increase in the context of conflict and forced displacement. Conflict-related sexual violence intersects with intimate-partner violence.¹⁰ Forced migrant women face increased risks of harassment from persons in authority along forced migration routes and from informal aid providers in places of refuge with offers of transactional sex, e.g. for food. In fact, there is a continuum of VAWG from pre-migration, conflict and flight to refuge with patterns of violence that intensify as time in displacement increases.¹¹ Stateless persons are at further increased risk of exploitation due to lack of documentation (e.g. identity, birth and marriage certificates) and lack of rights.

While women and men experience displacement differently, gender-based violence (GBV) disproportionately affects women. The exact scale of VAWG in displacement is unknown due to various barriers; however, one study from Belgium and the Netherlands reported that 69.3% of migrant women and 28.6% of migrant men have been subjected to sexual violence after their arrival in Europe.¹²

VAWG entails multiple and long-term effects on survivors – physical, reproductive, emotional and economic costs. VAWG is also lethal; it kills. To address the high prevalence of VAWG in displacement, innovative and holistic approaches are urgently needed to prevent, respond to and mitigate the continuum of VAWG experienced in forced migration – from conflict and transit to refuge settings.

Religion remains an overlooked and under-theorised category in humanitarian and forced migration research, policy and practice. Yet it remains an important concern for many people - according to PEW 2010¹³ with eight in 10 persons from the general population

¹⁰ Istratii, Romina (2023) Wartime violence and partner violence. In: Ali, Parveen, (eds.) and Rogers, Michaela M., (eds.), *Comprehensive Guide of Gender-Based Violence for Nurses and Healthcare Professionals*. Cham: Springer Nature, pp 335-349.

¹¹ Pertek, S. and Phillimore, J. et al. (2022) [“Nobody helped me”: Forced migration and sexual and gender-based violence: findings from the SEREDA project](#). Research Report. University of Birmingham.

¹² Keygnaert, I., Vettenburg, N. and Temmerman, M. (2012) Hidden violence is silent rape: sexual and gender-based violence in refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 14 (5): 505–520. doi:10.1080/13691058.2012.671961.

¹³ PEW Research Center (2010) [The Global Religious Landscape. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010](#). Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

globally, including many migrants, maintaining some religious affiliation¹⁴. Future global projections of religious affiliation estimate a decline to six in 10 persons by 2050 with regional variance.¹⁵

Religion and forced migration interact in complex ways. The meaning of migration is profound, both theologically and spiritually. For many displaced women, faith and spirituality are a lifeline in their experiences of violence and displacement. They turn to religion for meaning and relief from anxiety, psychological distress and trauma. But this reality is often disregarded by practitioners guided by secular humanitarian frameworks - the principles of which can be misunderstood and lead to non-faith-sensitive practice. To address VAWG effectively, it is necessary to consider the worldview of displaced populations.

In many displacement settings, religion is not merely a personal affair but affects public life. In fragile settings, engaging with religion can be risky and messy due to the politicisation of religion and to geopolitical sensitivities. And although the world's major religions' normative values promote refugee protection¹⁶, religion can be a source of intersectional vulnerability and victimisation. Displaced populations may be subjected to:

- Religious discrimination and persecution, which often intersect with other systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism and ageism
- Discriminatory religious interpretations may incite perpetrators to justify their abusive behaviours and shape patriarchal attitudes underpinning VAWG
- Spiritual violence, meaning the use of spirituality to control, harass, harm, demean and exploit an individual
- Conflict-related sexual violence, which can be used to target women and girls and also sometimes men and boys with certain ethno-religious identities
- Certain harmful practices, which may be justified by community-based cultural religious interpretations
- State violence, which can be based on politicised and (mis)used constructs of religion and used against women's rights. Geopolitical and religious dynamics can influence and use religion to exclude VAWG survivors.

So, why focusing on faith sensitivity/responsiveness matters in VAWG prevention and response? As growing evidence demonstrates, devising faith-sensitive and faith-responsive programmatic methodologies is likely to better help mitigate the adverse effects of religious constructs posing VAWG risks. But it also matters for supporting survivors' religious coping capacities, while mobilising important resources to counter VAWG in dire circumstances of displacement.

Experiences of VAWG at different stages of displacement and mental health are closely linked and influence each other. Many migrant survivors develop mental health conditions

¹⁴ <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2012/03/Faithonthemove.pdf>

¹⁵ [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/#:~:text=The%20projections%20anticipate%20that%20the,Muslim%20\(30%25\)%20in%202050](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/#:~:text=The%20projections%20anticipate%20that%20the,Muslim%20(30%25)%20in%202050)

¹⁶ Hollenbach, D. (2014) Religion and forced migration. In Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. by E., Loescher, G., Long, K., et al. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. (Available at: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/religion-and-forced-migration>)

as a result of VAWG, and poor mental health can increase vulnerability to VAWG. Similarly, VAWG and protection interventions strongly impact survivors' mental health and well-being.

Well-being is a multidimensional and relative concept. It may mean different things to people from different cultures. Well-being domains include biological, material, social, spiritual, cultural, mental and emotional realms, as illustrated in Figure 1.¹⁷ Many displaced people value spiritual well-being, as it intersects with other well-being domains, e.g. emotional and social domains (psychosocial). Thus, interventions would benefit from accounting for survivors' spiritual well-being as it can moderate/contribute to their well-being in other domains. Religion, faith and spirituality are important resilience factors that can help forcibly migrant populations with their emotions and interactions and can affect their recovery outcomes.

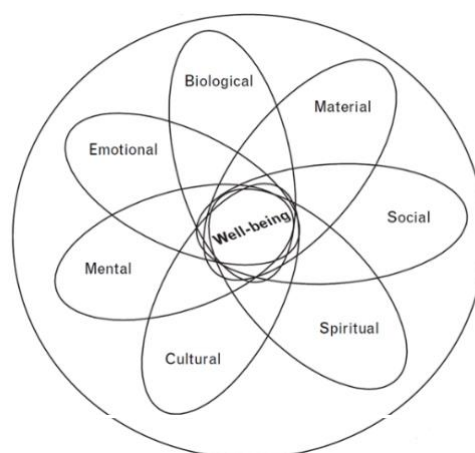


Figure 1 Wellbeing domains (Williamson and Robinson, 2006)

About this guidance note

This guidance note offers broad guidance for protection practitioners (in VAWG, GBV and MHPSS) about working with people of faith, no faith¹⁸ and spiritual backgrounds in the context of VAWG in forced displacement. This guidance note can be adapted to local circumstances (specific faith/no-faith and inter-faith settings).

The note aims to:

- ✓ Raise awareness about why religion matters in VAWG
- ✓ Help humanitarian practitioners navigate through religious complexities in VAWG programming
- ✓ Guide practitioners to strengthen protection from VAWG and improve programming by taking socio-religious factors into account
- ✓ Help practitioners adhere to humanitarian principles by respecting religious freedoms and the religious needs of crisis-affected populations
- ✓ Help service providers better support survivors by recognising their worldview, holistic needs and the impacts of religion on their well-being
- ✓ Offer practical resources to mitigate the detrimental impacts of faith insensitivity on survivors and VAWG programming
- ✓ Inspire engagement with faith actors to prevent and respond to VAWG.

Target audience

The guide is designed for ad hoc use by practitioners in the field and those designing and coordinating responses at the headquarters level:

¹⁷ Williamson, J., and Robinson, M. (2006) "Psychosocial interventions, or integrated programming for well-being?" *Intervention: International Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial Work & Counselling in Areas of Armed Conflict*, 4(1), 4–25. doi:10.1097/01.WTF.0000229526.63438.23.

¹⁸ Some survivors may be of no faith but live in settings influenced by religious manifestations.

- Protection practitioners from multilateral humanitarian agencies, governments and FBOs specialised and non-specialised in VAWG/GBV prevention and response and MHPSS
- Informal and formal female and male faith leaders working on VAWG (English speaking)
- Faith community members who work on community development initiatives and are often the first and only responders in displacement settings (English speaking).

Methodology

A multi-method design underpins this guidance note.¹⁹ In brief, the development process included literature review, interviews and focus group discussions with forced migrant women and humanitarian practitioners and several consultation and validation workshops. All data was analysed inductively using a thematic analysis grid. Feedback from reviewers was also integrated into this document.

Limitations

This guide provides general guidance on how to work with persons of religious and spiritual backgrounds using faith and culturally adaptive approaches to VAWG in forced displacement. It is not an exhaustive resource but rather a heuristic tool for further local adaptation, consultation and interpretation in locally used languages. This material does not account for local terminologies used to describe VAWG/GBV. The resource would also benefit from further digital and visual adaptation to enable access for various groups.

2. Religion as risk and protective factor: An integrated intersectional and socioecological perspective

Religion itself has no agency – rather, social actors enact religion. Religion can multiply social resilience and risks with indirect and direct effects. Certain religious beliefs and practices may contribute to VAWG, while others may help counter it as protective factors. Religion, faith and spirituality for many migrants remain part of their displacement experience and are important resources in precarious and under-resourced settings.

In simple terms, religion is constituted by the following religious resources:²⁰

- *Religious ideas* refer to beliefs, including thinking related to VAWG and migration
- *Religious practices* refer to rituals and behaviours which may be gendered

¹⁹ Methodology draws on literature review on religion, forced migration and VAWG; interviews with displaced women in Turkey and Tunisia (2019) on the role of religion in their experiences of VAWG; interviews with humanitarian practitioners in Turkey, Tunisia and with staff of international organisations from different regions (2019/2020) on their approach to religion of displaced populations, focus group discussions with refugee communities in Turkey (April 2023) and Poland (August 2023) during short field visits. Moreover, two multi-stakeholder online consultations (7 December 2022 and 12 June 2023), international workshop at the University of Birmingham (9 June 2023) with humanitarian, protection and IHL specialists and bilateral debriefing sessions with protection specialists from leading humanitarian agencies were held across 2022-2023.

²⁰ Ter Haar, G. (2011) "Religion and Development: Introducing a New Debate". In Ter Haar, G. (Ed) *Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World*, 3-25. London: Hurst Publishers.

- *Religious experience* refers to metaphysical experiences specific to the gendered experiences of forced migration
- *Religious organisation* refers to a place, a community sharing religious beliefs, and official institutions of religious denominations, such as churches or mosques. It also includes formal and informal social structures and religious leaders.

In practical terms, religious resources in local faith communities mean potential access to:

- Material support – food, clothing, hygiene items etc.
- Social connections – facilities to help build friendships and integrate
- Emotional support – by faith leaders and members of congregations
- Infrastructure – e.g. places of worship can offer safe places and accommodation
- Information – including about asylum and migrant rights
- Services- as often congregations operate schools, hospitals and other services

There are various religious factors (intellectual, material, social, spiritual and emotional) at different levels (Table 1).

Table 1 Religious factors

Individual, interpersonal level	Community level	Societal and structural level
Individual religious beliefs Personal religious practices (prayers, fasting, reading religious scriptures etc.) Personal religious experience Memorised religious knowledge (scriptural verses and teachings) Recordings of religious scriptures Peer moral/emotional support Micro-religious practices with family and close neighbours	Congregational religious practices and rituals (prayers, litany, vigils, breaking the fast etc.) School religious education Religious holidays Religious ceremonies (weddings, birth ceremonies, burials) Trusted faith community members Activities in places of workshop Women’s faith support groups (in places of worship and home-based) Alms collected locally Consultations with faith leaders (in/formal, fe/male) Prophetic/traditional medicine/healing practices	Faith-based organisations Religious institutions Wider religious teachings and norms Religious scriptures and books Religious TV and radio channels Religious talks online Wider religious community National religious holidays Alms collected nationally and internationally for welfare support Endowments Sacred places Faith-based rights of vulnerable groups to receive support

An integrated approach

This note integrates two approaches – intersectional and socioecological – to better identify risk and protective factors and improve VAWG interventions, and adds a meaningful social category in GBV analysis, religion. An integrated intersectional and socioecological

framework (Figure 2) enables a better understanding of the intersecting causes of violence and risk factors – often associated with social identities – and the resilience capacities of survivors and affected communities, such as those related to religion.

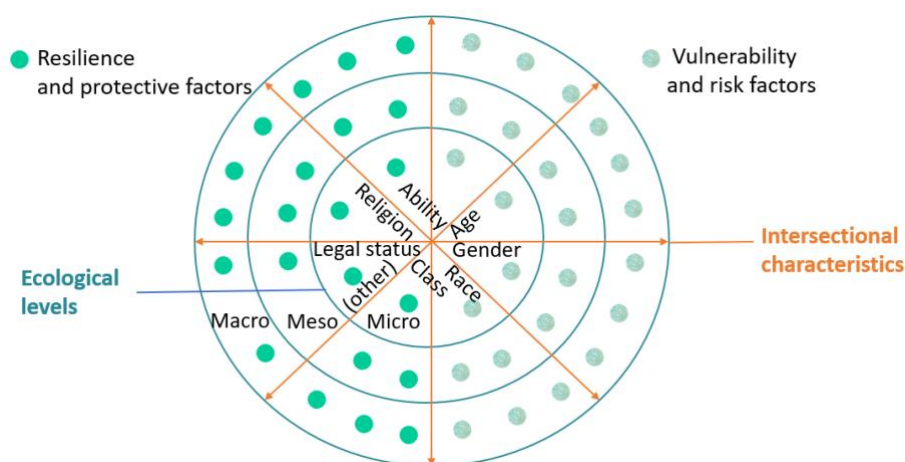


Figure 2 Integrated intersectional and socioecological framework ('other' stands for additional social identities that are marginalised and at increased risk of violence in a specific context)

An integrated intersectional and socioecological approach enables religion at the individual, family, community and societal levels to be taken into account where it intersects with other factors, such as gender, age and race. Therefore, an integrated framework enables the identification of:

- 1) How to reduce vulnerabilities and risk factors of individuals and communities to VAWG
- 2) How to strengthen resilience and protective factors of individuals and communities against VAWG.

The analysis explore three interlinked socioecological levels:

- Micro: Personal characteristics and beliefs, interpersonal and family factors
- Meso: Situational, extended family and community factors
- Macro: Contextual, societal and structural factors

Religious, cultural and spiritual influences on VAWG

Forced migrant populations have varying religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs in relation to VAWG, which vary between cultural contexts, religious traditions and individuals within religious and ethnic minority groups. People understand and experience religion differently.

The cultural and religious beliefs and practices in a migrant's country of origin are not the only influences that shape their understanding of VAWG. A migrant's destination country and countries of transit and refuge will shape their perspectives of VAWG, too. Factors such as education, gender norms, age and socio-economic position, religious beliefs and family history can also influence individual perspectives on VAWG.

Religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices can impact on:

- Survivors' help-seeking behaviours

- Perpetrators’ behaviours
- Mental health outcomes of survivors
- Needs – such as ritual purification and ablution after sexual intercourse
- Use of and access to health-care services (for example, sex segregation norms may hinder access to male doctors for women)
- Use of medication and treatment plans (for example, periods of religious fasting may influence decisions about medicine uptake)
- Use of alternative traditional medicine and healing practices may determine the help-seeking behaviours of survivors and perpetrators.

Religious traditions and cultural contexts are often intertwined and inseparable, and jointly shape VAWG experiences. Understanding of religion varies by cultural context and shape cultural norms which can be a part of religious practices, shaping survivors’ religious experiences. It is not easy to differentiate between cultural, spiritual or religious beliefs about VAWG as often they are all related.

Individuals sharing the same cultural background may hold different religious views on VAWG. Likewise, individuals from the same religious groups may hold different cultural views on VAWG.

Risk and protective factors

Religious beliefs, practices, organisation and experience operate as both risk and protective factors (Table 2) at different levels, the realities insufficiently accounted for by humanitarian actors. In practice, it may not be easy to establish causative links between VAWG and religion due to the multidimensional nature of religion and intersecting VAWG risk factors.

Table 2 Religion as a risk and protective factor

Religion as a risk factor can:	Religion as a protective factor can:
<p>1. Be (mis)used to justify harmful behaviours such as domestic violence (e.g. to discipline a wife and require her spousal obedience)</p> <p><i>‘My husband says it is permissible to beat me ... When he beats me, I ask, “Does your religion permit you to do this?” and he says, “Yes and Allah made it obligatory for women to obey their husbands”, but they forget that Allah ordered husbands to be good men and treat their women fairly.’</i> (Roqaya from Syria)</p>	<p>1. Enable resilience and coping (e.g. prayers help survivors keep calm, beliefs help them find meaning etc.)</p> <p><i>‘When my son died, I thought I’d commit suicide, but Allah gave me peace of mind, and prayer and the Qur’an helped me become more patient.’</i> (Kameela from Syria)</p> <p>2. Be a source of empowerment in perilous journeys</p> <p><i>‘It was in the Mediterranean Sea that I saw people drowning. I am not a good swimmer, but that day I had the</i></p>

<p>2. Be used to stigmatise and shame victims (e.g. for dishonouring family and for sexual relations outside marriage)</p> <p><i>‘He told me, “why did you come here? What would people say about our honour? That’s very shameful. You’re a young woman with two children...?’</i></p> <p>(Shamila from Syria)</p> <p>3. Be understood to encourage passive behaviours (e.g. to endure abuse to protect family, make survivors blame themselves)</p> <p><i>‘Soldiers with weapons do anything to you. Women can’t speak about that – it is very shameful in our religion and education, in our tradition ... Because if you talk, you will destroy your future ... maybe everyone around you knows your story and nobody will want to marry you...’</i> (Amira from Syria)</p>	<p><i>strength to swim and even to save another life ... God has a reason for me to be alive.’</i> (Ayesha from Sierra Leone)</p> <p>3. Motivate perpetrators to change their behaviours (e.g. by drawing on prophetic teachings and emulating the prophets’ fair and kind behaviours)</p> <p><i>‘The prophet said: “Take my advice with regard to women: Act kindly”. If the woman did something wrong, then religion says: “[a woman] must be retained in honour or released in kindness”’</i> (Zainab from Syria)</p> <p>4. Be used to condemn VAWG and stand up to injustice (e.g. using egalitarian religious teachings)</p> <p><i>‘They just took the words from the surah [Qur’an 4:34] about men being protectors of women and make their religious rules to control women. Also, the prophet PBUH said, “the best for you is the best for your family” and that means your wife.’</i> (Sara from Syria)</p>
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Note: Differences in religious and cultural beliefs are not the only factors affecting survivors’ vulnerability to VAWG.

Other factors can also limit the success of VAWG interventions in forced displacement settings, such as:

- Lack of VAWG information in the survivors’ preferred language
- Insecure immigration status, housing, employment and finances, which can limit a survivor’s ability to prioritise their safety and well-being and seek external support
- Experiences of discrimination in VAWG and the humanitarian sector
- Lack of trust and relationship-building between survivors and protection professionals

- Economic cost of attending appointments with service providers (such as transport and childcare).

3. Part A: Preparing for faith-sensitive VAWG prevention and response

Protection, GBV and MHPSS specialists can play an important role in preventing and responding to VAWG through a faith sensitive lens, while promoting more holistic people-centred approaches to humanitarian action. Preparation is key to developing faith sensitivity and identifying entry points for strengthening protection from VAWG in local communities.

Programme managers, team leaders, technical leads and/or specialists and practitioners might analyse their team's level of faith literacy and build capacity to work with socio-religious factors. Consider to:

- a. Take stock of what resources are available to address VAWG with faith sensitivity:
 - In what ways are religious factors accounted for in the project cycle? How do you ensure gender and faith sensitivity in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating interventions?
 - Who among the staff is available and trained to ensure the consideration and, ideally, the integration of religious factors in programmes at HQ and field level? For example, who has the appropriate faith sensitivity to bring to bear when assisting survivors? Who may have religious knowledge, language skills and experience to facilitate collaboration with faith leaders?
 - What resources are available to help prepare other staff and volunteers to develop faith sensitivity in VAWG response?
 - How can you link survivors with services which could support their spiritual and religious needs?
 - What are staff attitudes toward religion (in relation to VAWG) that affect how they might understand the intersection between VAWG and religion?

Note: Check your own and your team's biases and assumptions to ensure the rights and dignity of survivors are respected and protected with the minimum religious bias and the maximum level of reflexivity at all times.

- b. Identify any significant gaps in organisational capacity to address VAWG with faith sensitivity and develop a plan to fill these gaps. Consider:
 - Do humanitarian staff have sufficient faith literacy to understand the faith groups/communities they work with?
 - Who are the faith actors available in the area (beyond places of worship)?
 - What are the dominant faith traditions?
 - Who are the people with the knowledge, capacity and ability to represent voices of faith communities regarding VAWG protection?
- c. Include faith actors in your mapping, contextual and influence analysis. Consider:

- What are the power dynamics and both formal and informal structures in the particular faith community? Who is responsible for decision-making?
- Who are the influential stakeholders in faith communities (e.g. women's faith groups, men's faith groups, formal and informal female and male leaders) and what assets do they have to counter VAWG? (Note that these stakeholders will change across the different stages of migration and can include informal structures, private gatherings etc.)
- How do faith actors impact their communities in terms of political, cultural, theological and psychological influences?
- What dominant and alternative narratives are increasing or decreasing vulnerabilities to VAWG among faith actors?
- What national FBOs can liaise on your behalf with other faith actors for protection from VAWG?
- What faith actors might hinder VAWG responses?
- What faith-sensitive resources/services are available by non-faith actors to support survivors who express religious, spiritual and/or faith needs?
- What faith community-based mechanisms and structures are available to support marginalised or minoritised women (for example, by offering them charity, free-interest loans, health visits etc.)?
- What services are provided by faith actors that could be incorporated into safe referral pathways? Are these services provided without any conditions? (e.g. eligibility based on specific religious affiliation, legal status, gender)
- Are trusted faith actors included in the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) procedures and protocols available in the area? If not, how can they be involved?

Note: Be aware of existing services provided by faith actors that are helpful for survivors; be sure, however, to contact the providers to check eligibility criteria (if any).

- Include religious factors in intersectional gender and VAWG/GBV analysis:
 - Use intersectional and socioecological analysis to identify VAWG causes and resources for resilience building and risk reduction by different stakeholders at different levels (see the proposed tool in Annex)
 - Ascertain how and whether women of particular intersecting identities/intersectional characteristics may be differently affected by VAWG (with reference to gender, religion, race, ethnicity, age, legal status, class, caste and other characteristics)
 - What specific forms of VAWG are prevalent in particular faith communities? What are their causes? (consider both urban and rural settings)
 - How do specific experiences of VAWG vary among and between women of different social and religious backgrounds in local faith communities?

- What local language/terminology is used to describe VAWG/GBV in local faith communities?
- Does religious discrimination against certain minority groups necessitate collecting religion-disaggregated data in a confidential manner to monitor specific risks among religious minority groups for a timely response?

Note: In contexts where risks of religious discrimination are high, consider collecting religion-disaggregated data to identify and monitor risks.

- Conduct holistic needs assessments:
 - Do existing needs assessment formats and approaches enable identifying the multidimensional needs of survivors, including spiritual and psychosocial needs, to be captured?
 - Do survivors express specific needs that relate to their faith? (For example, seeking pastoral care and/or requiring particular religious attire and accessories to perform certain rituals, e.g. prayers, burials, marriage and birth ceremonies)
 - In what ways do religious beliefs positively and negatively impact the mental health of survivors?
 - Is there a link between VAWG and suicide (suicide being often stigmatised in faith communities)?
 - How can your interventions respond to the faith needs of survivors considering the above?
- c. Train staff in cultural competency which includes religious literacy. Religious literacy involves being open to the role religion may or may not play in survivors' and perpetrators' understanding of VAWG as a risk and protective factor. Religious sensitivity can be developed even if staff lack knowledge about specific religious traditions, but achieving a degree of religious literacy would be ideal. Consider:
 - To train staff and volunteers on the core principles of cultural competency and faith sensitivity in VAWG work in order to be able to offer holistic support to individuals in response to their specific needs and to take into account specific religious, spiritual and cultural factors that influence their vulnerability to and resilience against VAWG
 - Cultural competency and religious literacy mean the ability to understand that survivors have a right to holistic care regardless of their culture, ethnicity, religion, faith, no faith, spiritual beliefs and languages spoken.
- Note: Staff might consider to be aware of their own cultural and religious beliefs and how these may differ from survivors' cultural and religious backgrounds; staff also need to be able to learn about and respect the different cultural contexts and religions of survivors and their communities.**
- d. Improve how protection personnel and GBV and MHPSS specialists respond to the holistic needs of displaced populations of diverse religious backgrounds and no faith. Professionals can strengthen their work on VAWG by:

- Being aware of how cultural, spiritual and religious beliefs might impact an individual's experience of VAWG
- Being aware of how their own beliefs and biases might influence how they interpret others' experiences of VAWG
- Asking survivors about their own understanding of their VAWG experiences
- Showing respect for the diversity of intersecting identities and religious, faith and spiritual values
- Understanding how religion can manifest as both a risk and a protective factor in VAWG experiences
- Giving space for survivors to talk about any religious coping mechanisms which they use; show respect and support their coping strategies
- Asking if there are any religious, cultural and spiritual aspects that survivors would like to take into account during case management
- Asking whether the survivor is already engaged in any alternative treatments – such as traditional healing practices – and consider how this may affect case management
- Being aware of any spiritual care services that may be available to and relevant for survivors with specific religious beliefs and traditions.

Note: Be aware that generic facts about religions will not reflect the complexities of each individual's circumstances. Sensitively explore the religious, cultural and spiritual factors that are unique to each survivor's circumstances.

- e. Consider developing an organisational policy on religious engagement and protection of religious minorities to ensure clear communication and guidance to staff and faith communities (for example, see USAID policy²¹, BMZ policy²²).

Addressing violence against women from religious and indigenous minorities

It is important to note that forced migrants from religious and indigenous minorities often experience additional layers of discrimination and socioeconomic exclusion driving VAWG. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities from 1992²³ protects their rights through the principles of:

- Protection of identity
- Non-discrimination
- Effective participation

Including displaced religious minorities in programmes and policy development is essential to developing adequate solutions to their dire situations. Information about interventions is needed in languages used by displaced populations. It is thus suggested that VAWG practitioners consider how to involve religious minorities in ways that enable them to maintain their identity through culture, religion, traditions and customs (see UNHCR's note on working with minorities and indigenous people²⁴).

²¹ USAID (2023) [Building Bridges in Development: USAID's Strategic Religious Engagement Policy. Strategy and Policy](#). U.S. Agency for International Development.

²² BMZ (2016) [Religious communities as partners for development cooperation](#). Bonn: BMZ.

²³ OHCHR (1992) [Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities](#).

²⁴ UNHCR (2011) [Working with National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Forced Displacement](#).

4. Part B: Delivering faith-sensitive VAWG prevention and response

“Religion is always mentioned as something ... to be overcome ... it's definitely not seen as something that could actually give women options or give women hope or ... the ability even to get out of that situation or to find ways of coping. There's even almost a prejudice within the international humanitarian and development system ... they see religion, culture and tradition as all negative, as if we need to modernise these people so they're not so dependent on these old ways of thinking...” (GBV Specialist from an international organisation, Sierra Leone)

Engaging faith actors – from both the religious majority and minority can help ensure interventions are contextually adequate and encourage the participation of affected populations. While Annex 3 presents suggestions for integrating faith sensitivity into GBV minimum standards, humanitarian practitioners might consider the following specific actions:

General suggestions

- Engage local faith actors across the VAWG project cycle, from assessment, design and implementation to evaluation and monitoring directly or through established initiatives with local expertise and networks
- Train faith actors on psychological first aid (PFA)²⁵ to enable them to support survivors
- Sensitise faith actors on increased risks of VAWG in forced migration to inform adequate prevention efforts (including of trafficking and exploitation due to restricted mobility, food insecurity, homelessness, lack of legal status, language barriers and limited awareness of rights).

Supporting survivors

- What do displaced women say about faith in their experiences? Listen to women's voices! Acknowledge and respect women's voices on the role of religion, faith and spirituality in their lives
- Adapt interventions in ways that resonate with displaced people's worldviews and build upon their valued resources
- Enable survivors to identify their own sources of power which matter to them, including faith (as power from within), and – while ensuring the availability of MHPSS services – encourage survivors to use those sources for coping and healing
- Ask survivors if they need help to access ritual accessories and sites to enable them to maintain traditional and religious customs. This can support their religious coping mechanisms to deal with loss, adverse events and adaptation
- Understand what religious beliefs and practices survivors from faith communities use to cope with VAWG
- Understand which organisations in faith communities survivors turn to for support.
- Help survivors wishing to re-connect with faith communities to make contact with in/formal faith leaders to establish social connections



²⁵ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241548205>

- Provide support through both online groups and in-person meetings to accommodate the diverse needs of survivors with religious, spiritual, faith and no-faith backgrounds
- Train survivors on psychological first aid (PFA)²⁶ to strengthen individual and community capacities to cope with traumatic events and offer support to others.
- Recognise and address the role of religion in shaping perpetrators' attitudes and behaviours in relation to VAWG.

Note: Be aware that intersectional power dynamics – such as inter-faith, secular and cross-cultural dynamics – are likely to affect survivors' communication with professionals.

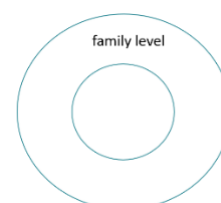
For example, power dynamics between survivors and professionals may affect:

- The ways in which survivors disclose certain information (e.g. some topics related to abuse – such as rape and sexual health – may be too sensitive for individuals from certain cultural and religious groups to discuss)
- The extent to which survivors disclose certain information and to whom (e.g. gender norms in some cultures prevent women from discussing taboos with men)
- The ways in which survivors describe their health issues (e.g. mentioning physical symptoms of underlying mental health issues).

Religious considerations also matter for some survivors when requesting language interpreters. In certain situations, survivors may prefer an interpreter of the same religion, cultural background and sex. In other situations, survivors may prefer an interpreter from outside their community in order to maintain confidentiality or avoid shame and stigma.

Supporting families

Some displaced survivors may rely on their families to cope, but many cannot, having experienced family loss or ruptured family contact in displaced situations. Many displaced families live in inadequate living conditions or in destitution. Unemployment and lack of right to work may increase intra-household frustrations, leading to an increase in domestic violence. Interventions aiming to strengthen family support would benefit from strong faith community-based protection ethos (outlined below), involving trained community members. Protection specialists might consider to:



- Understand culture-specific family structures in which VAWG occurs
- Recognise VAWG is also perpetrated by women and not only by men, e.g. mothers-in-law and step-mothers who negotiate patriarchal structures by exerting power over other (often younger) women²⁷
- Understand how religion shapes social norms governing family life, for example, gender norms and attitudes toward women by male and female relatives
- Work towards removing root causes of family violence, such as by offering training for effective communication and conflict management in the family, and parental

²⁶ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241548205>

²⁷ Lokot, M. (2023) Gendered Power Struggles beyond the Male-Female Dichotomy: Syrian Mothers-in-Law Exercising Power within Patriarchal Structures. *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 18 (1): 35–55. doi:[10.3167/ame.2023.180104](https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2023.180104).

training on communication with children and partners, by drawing on faith values where relevant.

Faith-informed community-based protection

A community-based protection approach draws on and supports displaced populations' inherent capacities and resilience to deal with their situations. It enables communities to participate meaningfully in programmes that concern them.



A faith community-based VAWG response leverages the displaced population's resilience and resources instead of focusing only on risk, victimisation and trauma. Migrant, refugee and host faith communities (including informal women leaders, women's faith groups, men and boys, and local organisations) offer important moral and material resources to welcome people on the move in inclusive spaces, regardless of their faith (see 'Welcoming the stranger' initiative²⁸). VAWG interventions can be strengthened by engaging with local faith actors' capacities, especially in under-resourced and precarious displacement conditions.

Faith communities can help displaced survivors (re)build their often fragmented identities and feelings of belonging. Their structures and platforms enable them to reach affected populations quickly to lend advice regarding immigration and resettlement and to raise awareness of VAWG. Incorporating faith-community sensitivity in developing VAWG protection helps contextualise responses to displacement, e.g. by co-producing faith-sensitive methodologies and drawing on existing protection structures of faith communities.

Localisation

Engaging with faith actors in VAWG humanitarian efforts requires to prioritize collaboration with established connections within the local community, including trusted local NGOs and researchers that have a nuanced understanding of local contexts. It is important to avoid developing expertise in isolation, as this may sideline existing local programs. A collaborative approach, with guidance from those locally grounded actors, means recognising the limitations of external actors. Such an approach fosters meaningful partnerships, prevents duplication of efforts, and ultimately enhances the effectiveness of humanitarian intervention. Engaging local faith actors (from host and forced migrant populations) requires also adherence to humanitarian principles and mutual respect, understanding and transparency at all times.²⁹

Note: Engagement of displaced faith community members in protection programmes can contribute to their improved mental health and well-being as active participants. However, trauma and migration-related stressors may make it difficult for them to engage actively.

Engaging with women's faith organisations/groups

Women's faith organisations/groups (from migrant, refugee and host communities) are important sources of information, exchange and belonging with which displaced women of

²⁸ UNHCR (2013) [Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders](#). Geneva: UNHCR.

²⁹ DFID (2012) [Faith Partnership Principles: Working effectively with faith groups to fight global poverty](#). London: DFID.

faith and no faith may engage. While displacement processes may rupture women's groups, VAWG programming in faith communities can help women and adolescent girls (from religious minorities and the majority) re-establish their groups and activities of choice. Protection specialists might consider to:

- Identify what existing women's faith groups operate in the area and what activities they are already running in relation to VAWG
- Establish contact with women's faith groups and discuss possible ways to raise awareness of VAWG
- Involve women's groups in assessments, design and implementation. Analyse together what specific forms of abuse women and girls experience in local communities. Be aware that women's groups may be influenced by cultural perceptions, and violence against certain women may be tolerated (e.g. women perceived as disobedient and disloyal to their husband)
 - o Enable women's groups to run awareness-raising activities with faith leaders to de-link specific types of VAWG from religious misconstructions
 - o Enable women's groups (refugee and host community-led) to work on women's attitudes to and tolerance of VAWG
- Tailor engagement activities for different age and ability groups e.g. support forming groups and activities for adolescent girls, older women, and women and girls with disabilities
- Engage faith-based women's groups to co-develop preventive messages and ensure VAWG prevention awareness campaigns are accessible to all. Observe local customs in relation to sex segregation and mixing, and take measures to overcome access barriers such as mobility restrictions
- Strengthen existing structures of women's faith groups, e.g. by setting up safe spaces to discuss VAWG and to access information about support for survivors. Safeguard the confidentiality and non-discrimination of VAWG survivors
- Ensure women's spaces are safe for women of different backgrounds. Be aware that women from minorities may fear discriminatory attitudes from majorities; they might have experienced persecution from these groups in their country of origin
- Work with women's groups to improve women's literacy concerning faith and human rights in reference to the rights enshrined in both religious scriptures and in national and international law. Account for literacy disparities between rural and urban women, and reach out to rural areas.
- Respect and enable space for women-led interpretations of religion in prevention initiatives, recognising the spectrum of religious interpretations (from those perceived as more 'liberal' to those perceived as more 'conservative')
- Connect refugee women's informal groups with mainstream services, other associations, host communities and local organisations
- Assess what risks arise from engaging with women's faith groups and how you can mitigate these risks.

Women's peer support groups (in neighbourhoods, schools, work places) are important sources of emotional support, solace and guidance for survivors. Such groups may often draw on women's faith for guidance, coping and healing. Consider how to:

- Facilitate peer mentorship among survivors. Recognise the positive impact of survivors on each other's recovery. Enable spaces to address spiritual struggles by drawing on faith/religious beliefs as protective factors and by dismantling risk factors associated with harmful religious interpretations.
- Train and engage individual displaced women from faith communities as volunteers, peer counsellors and/or peer advocates in community-based outreach programmes to support survivors and raise awareness of VAWG prevention and response in their communities in faith-sensitive ways. Ensure adequate supervision and support.
- Facilitate self-help groups among women and men from faith communities with the help of trained informal leaders. Include women with specific needs e.g. disabilities.

Case study: Integrating ritual and psychosocial support for survivors

During the Colombia Community Readiness Assessment within the USIP pilot project on Religion and Psychosocial Support for Displaced Trauma Survivors (2021-2022), a grassroots organization collaborated with survivors and indigenous women to revive ancestral rituals passed down through generations (especially grandmothers). Afro-Colombian and indigenous women joined forces, integrating traditional rituals into psychosocial support for GBV survivors. These rituals, deeply connected to nature, featured elements like mountains, plants, streams, and handcrafts. For indigenous and Afro-Colombian trauma survivors, this approach held symbolic significance, acknowledging and affirming their ethnic identity and religious traditions crucial to their healing. Unlike formal mental health processes, this approach centered on the communities' rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

Engaging with informal women leaders

Informal women leaders have a good understanding of the issues women face in their communities and in displacement. Embedded within local communities and women's faith organisations/groups, they play a significant role in supporting survivors directly. However, they may have varied levels of faith literacy, and cultural norms may influence their positions on VAWG to varied degrees. Informal women leaders can help explore relevant religious beliefs and practices in relation to VAWG, and can actively participate in projects – from design to evaluation – as community leaders trusted by other women. Consider how to:

- Identify informal female leaders from local communities (such as teachers and doctors) who are working in community-based protection structures, and engage them in the design of VAWG protection programmes
- Encourage, train and support women in taking on various leadership roles, such as raising awareness of VAWG, survivor-centred response, facilitating referrals, risk mitigation and disseminating information on the rights of migrants and refugees
- Ask women leaders what safety strategies they used before displacement and how they adapted these in exile. Consider in what ways you can support these adaptations.

- Understand what religious beliefs, practices, organisations and experiences women leaders draw on to prevent and respond to VAWG
- Support informal women leaders from host and refugee communities to reach out to the most vulnerable and marginalised migrant/refugee women from different religious backgrounds
- Engage informal women leaders in VAWG advocacy initiatives with other organisations to enable them to share their voices and contribute to policy-making.

Engaging with men and boys from faith communities

Men and boys are part of local faith communities. Many women consider them as important companions and protectors during migration. Although considered primary perpetrators of VAWG in different settings, men and boys are also vulnerable to gender-based violence, including trafficking and modern-day slavery, in forced displacement.

Consider how to:

- Understand what religious beliefs and practices men and boys from faith communities use to build healthy families and communities and enhance protective behaviours
- Adapt gender-transformative approaches to enable men and boys to draw on their faith and religious resources (e.g. sacred scriptures) as an element of the change process and source of motivation
- Develop with trusted faith actors/theologians technical resources and tools relevant to men in relation to gender equality (e.g. study sessions/activities for men and boys) to facilitate the transformation of social norms underpinning VAWG. Contextualise these resources with displaced faith-based communities in different settings.
- Provide platforms for men to discuss specific types of VAWG (e.g. domestic violence, early marriage) and men's attitudes to women's roles in community development
- Identify and train male champions and advocates for gender equality
- Establish safe spaces and community centres for men that address their specific needs and enhance their well-being and for men survivors to access support, addressing issues such as aid dependency and frustrations faced in displacement contexts
- Address toxic masculinity: identify and challenge harmful behaviours and beliefs, promote positive expressions of masculinity, and address stereotypes, by drawing on religious resources that matter to men and boys.

Engaging with formal faith leaders (male and female)

Faith leaders are influential figures in local faith communities with great potential to address VAWG and transform the norms that condone it. They are women and men, playing informal and formal roles in their communities. Having moral authority, they can encourage a change of behaviours and attitudes from individual and interpersonal to communal and societal levels. For many survivors, faith leaders – as trusted faith representatives – are their first 'go-to person' for support.

Anecdotally in displacement settings, faith leaders often operating outside institutionalised religious structures are less constrained by male-dominated social structures, and so may be better positioned to engage with transformative approaches to VAWG.

At a personal level, faith leaders can and often already do:

- Help survivors resolve spiritual struggles and find meaning by supporting them psychologically and offering pastoral/spiritual care
- Acknowledge the harm suffered by survivors, symbolically and spiritually reaffirm their dignity, and counter social stigma
- Offer practical support to survivors – safe places, accommodation and livelihood support.

At a family and community level:

- Faith leaders can raise awareness about VAWG and transform attitudes and beliefs which underpin VAWG (i.e. patriarchal norms and power imbalances) by leveraging theological reflections including:
 - o Scriptural approach, drawing on faith values, e.g. dignity and justice
 - o Religious education and moral obligations toward survivors, e.g. by tackling shame and stigma against survivors of sexual violence, mobilising support for them, and reintegrating them into communities
 - o Respecting women and encouraging balance and partnership in the family, and helping to mediate conflict in the family
 - o Issuing religious opinions and interpretations on the application of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Case study: Reintegration of Yazidi survivors into communities

Yazidi faith leaders played a significant role in the recovery of Yazidi girls and their reintegration into their families. Initially, when the girls were rescued from armed groups, their communities did not accept their return. However, faith leaders insisted that they accept these girls and their children born of sexual violence, stating that Yazidi girls were still Yazidi and asking the men and fathers to accept their return.

Note: However, faith communities are not always a safe space. Faith leaders are perpetrators, too, or their behaviours can retraumatize survivors. Some choose to silence survivors and protect perpetrators, while others abuse and harass women, sometimes using spiritual means.³⁰ In addition, some faith leaders may deter survivors from seeking support by opinions stigmatising mental health problems and mental health services.

Key considerations for working with religious leaders include:

- Involve faith leaders in the early stages of interventions and sustain their involvement throughout the project (see UNHCR Bangladesh case study³¹) and in different locations along forced migrant routes and in refuge
- Organise multi-stakeholder dialogues with faith leaders, state actors, media and I/NGOs to discuss the important roles faith actors play in countering VAWG

³⁰ Cazarin, R. (2018) [Bishops, imams, sangomas, pastors and ending abuse](#). Africa Is A Country.

³¹ UNHCR Bangladesh (2021) [Strengthening engagement between faith leaders and humanitarian actors - a case study from Bangladesh](#).

- Consider how faith actors' experiences, skills and material and human resources can leverage VAWG protection
- Consider what key protection messages faith leaders can help convey and in what ways they can disseminate these to sensitise communities
- Encourage conversations with female and male faith leaders in rural and urban settings about VAWG prevention, response and reintegration of survivors. Ensure a two-way communication between protection practitioners and faith leaders.
- Train faith leaders on humanitarian standards and survivor-centred approaches to support survivors and enhance faith leaders' understanding of their roles as protection actors
- Engage with faith leaders to co-develop inclusive community action plans to support community-based protection interventions
- Encourage faith leaders to provide and mobilise safe spaces and support facilities for survivors in host communities (e.g. for homeless, displaced survivors) such as safe houses and migrant shelters
- Encourage faith leaders to facilitate safe spaces for survivors to freely discuss their religious beliefs in relation to their VAWG experiences and psychological distress (e.g. feeling of being punished or abandoned by God) to enable them to resolve spiritual struggles and find alternative meanings and relief
- Encourage faith leaders to welcome back the survivors and support their de-stigmatisation, reintegration in society and healing (see the Yazidi case study)
- Engage with women and men theologians and scholars to identify relevant language/terminology to work with faith communities on VAWG and develop practical theology to close the gap between scholars and practitioners.
 - Frame the VAWG problem beyond theory and develop new theological opinions on women's challenges in war and displacement. For example, the protection of wayfarers enshrined in several religious scriptures is relatively little understood and supported by faith communities.
 - Appreciate transformative theological reflection sessions with faith leaders by encouraging the re-examination of religious scriptures and teachings (through a woman's lens) to identify entry points for challenging patriarchal interpretations.
- Encourage faith leaders to provide contextual study sessions for men and boys and community engagement initiatives to tackle discriminatory beliefs, practices, and cultural and religious norms, in transformative ways
- Encourage faith leaders to sensitise communities on the need to dismantle religious and cultural misconceptions on VAWG (e.g. to de-link VAWG references to religious teachings and stop the normalisation of spousal abuse), thereby promoting positive masculinities
- Encourage peer knowledge sharing among faith leaders to condemn VAWG and challenge attitudes and behaviours underpinning VAWG, such as shaming and stigmatising survivors
- Build on inter-faith connections to share resources and encourage joint action against VAWG. Ensure a balanced composition of leaders from different faith denominations, including minority faith groups.

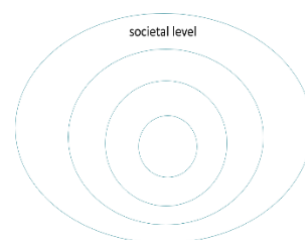
- Be aware of the challenges in building consensus among faith leaders on diverse religious interpretations and how the interplay between faith, social and cultural norms can divide communities and complicate dynamics for VAWG survivors
- Analyse blockages in engaging with faith leaders and develop improvement strategies in collaboration with influential figures
- Clarify the limits of support that faith leaders can provide to survivors who need specialized services and help seek effective collaborations with MHPSS actors to enable survivors to access specialized services in tandem with the other levels of support that faith actors provide.

Case Study: Mobilising religious leaders in Ethiopia to respond to domestic violence

Project dIdI/ድልድል centred on developing religio-culturally sensitive domestic violence responses in East Africa and the UK. It employed a decolonial approach based on community-based research and collaboration with grassroots organizations to mobilise clergy against domestic violence. Leveraging extensive anthropological research, the project developed theologically-centred trainings in partnership with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's development commission (EOTC DICAC). It delivered a series of two-day training sessions and a six-month refresher to 155 clergy. The training covered community perspectives and attitudes on domestic violence, the role of faith in marriage, clergy mediation practices, Church teachings on gender equality and the spousal relationship with theological responses to domestic violence. It also trained clergy on domestic violence laws and counselling skills. Evaluation emphasized the success of the program hinging on the theological component, trainers being Orthodox Christians with deep theological knowledge and counselling expertise, and a humble approach acknowledging the clergy's centrality in the community. In summary, the project prioritised theological training, ensuring credibility with the faith community, and fostering a supportive relationship with the clergy, while equipping them with a familiar language to address pernicious gender and marriage attitudes and domestic violence.

Engaging with faith institutions

Faith institutions along forced migration routes offer space for informing displaced populations about immigration and resettlement issues and support their integration (e.g. providing space for community events and shelter for the homeless). Staff and volunteers in faith institutions are often the first responders assisting people who experienced VAWG along migration routes. They require training, knowledge and skills for their own safety and for the safeguarding of survivors.



- Build institutional capacity of faith institutions along migration routes (in countries of transit and refuge) to offer survivor-centred support to people on the move in an inclusive and accessible way and in compliance with humanitarian principles.
 - o Train personnel of faith institutions to respond to forced migrants' needs with sensitivity using psychological first aid and safe referrals to displaced

- people (ensuring respect, confidentiality, non-discrimination and safety of survivors)
- Enable those responsible for places of worship to arrange visits in detention centres to offer spiritual and psychosocial support to detained migrants
- Enable training pathways for more women to become faith leaders so that more female leaders are available to support women survivors.
- Strengthen engagements and partnerships with FBOs around protection from VAWG
- Engage with religious spaces that actively advocate and influence local governments on refugee issues e.g. to provide counselling services to displaced survivors
- Engage state religious ministries and departments (which in many countries play an important role in managing national religious affairs) in VAWG prevention and response
- Inform the development and governance of faith-based anti-poverty mechanisms, such as collecting religious alms (e.g. *zakat* in Islam or offerings during liturgy in Christian Churches), to ensure donations reach displaced survivors of war, violence and trafficking along migration routes. For instance, encourage investment in mobile health services and livelihood programmes.
- Develop innovative faith-sensitive MHPSS services for survivors who rely on their faith e.g. faith-based counselling and spiritually integrated therapies. If using a strength-based approach, recognise survivors' spiritual capital.

Case study: Church supporting survivors of sexual violence

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of CAFOD's church partners runs a project across 34 parishes to support survivors of rape. A local priest noticed that many women were coming to the parish to talk about their experiences, and that the church was the only place where the women felt they could meet and find support.

5. Final recommendations

The following key recommendations have been developed during the three consultative international workshops for the humanitarian sector (including mainstream and faith-based agencies) on working on VAWG with faith sensitivity. Two of the workshops were held online and one at the University of Birmingham (see Methodology).

Humanitarian agencies and international organisations:

1. Strengthen faith literacy among humanitarian actors to effectively promote faith-sensitive VAWG prevention and response for faith-community-based resilience building and vulnerability reduction.
2. Recognise and leverage the role of religious resources, faith leaders and FBOs to mobilise support for displaced survivors and strengthen protection from VAWG in local communities. Adapt formal and informal engagement strategies with FBOs.
3. Understand the diverse spectrum of belief systems within faith communities, including syncretistic practices (combining different belief systems) and ancestral traditions, and their impact on positive and negative coping mechanisms with VAWG.

4. Allocate resources for organisations that develop transformative theological materials for VAWG protection by drawing on an intersectional feminist lens.
5. Integrate faith-sensitive approaches into MHPSS: recognise and support religious coping mechanisms among displaced survivors to promote their well-being and recovery.
6. Integrate faith-sensitive approaches into child protection strategies, education and crisis response, in alignment with children's rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as guaranteed by international human rights instruments (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).
7. Engage with faith leaders to promote rights and support for girls and women with psychosocial disabilities, combating harmful beliefs and stigma.
8. Guide faith leaders and FBOs to address the intersection of VAWG and suicidal behaviour, fostering understanding without judgement and promoting help-seeking.
9. Conduct more consultations on religion and VAWG prevention and response to challenge assumptions, address misconceptions and develop informed approaches.
10. Work with community-based champions as ambassadors for women's protection, peace and safety. Where appropriate, draw on the narratives of faith-based female role models.

Funding agencies:

11. Enable humanitarian organisations to access flexible funding to work with religious factors and faith actors in VAWG programming, as part of developing transformative and inclusive approaches.

6. Way forward and dissemination

This guidance note aims to reach a wide range of users to support their capacity to work on VAWG/GBV and MHPSS with faith sensitivity.

Organisational reviews and contributions to this guidance note are welcome. Piloting/testing of the proposed resources is encouraged.

If you wish to receive this resource by post, arrange for a bilateral debrief, or organise inter-/intra-agency consultation workshops on the way forward, please contact s.m.pertek.1@bham.ac.uk.

7. Other resources

- EC (2021) [*Engaging with Religious Actors on Gender Inequality and Gender-based Violence. Compilation of Practices*](#). Brussels: EC.
- International Medical Corps (2021) [*Traditions and Opportunities: A Toolkit for GBV Programs to Engage Community Leaders in Humanitarian Settings Training Manual*](#). Los Angeles: IMC.
- Istratii, R. and Kalkum, B. (2023) [*Leveraging the potential of religious teachings and grassroots religious teachers and clerics to combat intimate partner violence in international development contexts*](#). Policy Brief. Project dIdI/ᐅᐅᐅᐅ, London: SOAS University of London.
- Le Roux, E. and Palm, S. (2021) [*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.

Annexes

The first tool, an intersectional and socioecological analysis, suggests questions to identify risk and protective factors in VAWG. It seeks to examine the root causes, vulnerabilities and resilience resources among displaced populations with diverse intersecting identities.

The second tool, faith sensitive gender analysis tool, adapts the Moser framework³² to expand gender analysis to take into account religious factors in the VAWG experience and to enable a better understanding of gender dynamics. Religion is part of the social fabric. It interacts with gender and with social and cultural norms and tradition.

The third resource proposes a non-exhaustive list of suggestions of how GBV standards could integrate faith sensitivity.

These tools can be adapted to context.

³² Moser, C. (1993) *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. London: Routledge.

Annex 1: An integrated intersectional and socioecological analysis

Why an integrated analysis?

This analysis tool proposes a faith-sensitive intersectional and socioecological analysis of resilience and vulnerability. It can be used in situational analysis, needs assessments, project design and planning, monitoring and evaluation, and policy and strategy development. As protection initiatives in humanitarian systems are increasingly integrated, so the analysis tools require integration.

Aims of the tool:

- To help identify intersecting vulnerabilities and risks and resilience and protective factors of displaced individuals and communities at different stages of displacement
- To integrate sociocultural and religious factors into the interventions to better respond to socially diverse migrant groups.

Figure 2 (p. 12 and below) illustrates the different levels of the analysis and multiple social characteristics (intersecting identities) around which inequalities centre.

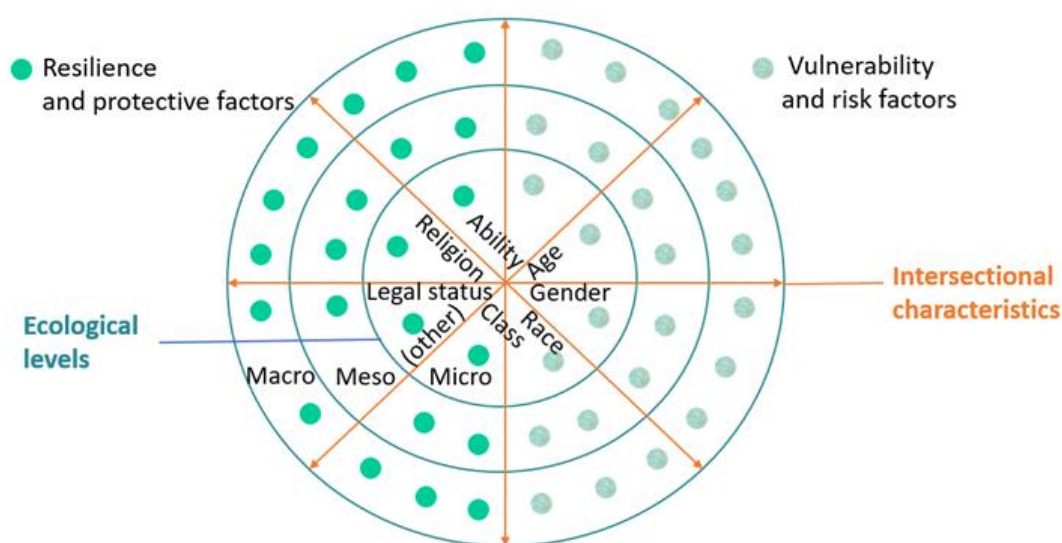


Figure 2 Integrated intersectional and socioecological framework ('other' stands for additional social identities that are marginalised and at increased risk of violence in a specific context)

How to conduct an integrated intersectional and socioecological analysis

To begin your analysis, start from discussing in your project teams and with the representatives of displaced populations the following questions:

Intersectional vulnerabilities

- Who is disadvantaged, excluded and targeted for abuse and exploitation? (consider people with different social identities associated with gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, legal status, age, religion, class, caste, ability etc.)

- Who is advantaged and privileged and has power in relation to others?
- Who is at higher risk of VAWG in a specific context?
- What are the risks and causes of VAWG associated with different social identities (discussed above) at different levels (sub-questions below)?
 - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the individual and interpersonal level? (e.g. gender-related, class-related risks etc.)
 - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the family level? (e.g. age-related risks, inter-generational norms etc.)
 - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the community level? (e.g. religion-related risks, other situational risks)
 - What are the identity-related risks and causes of VAWG at the societal levels? (e.g. race-related risks, other contextual risks)
- What are the risks and causes of VAWG associated with social identities that you identified above at interpersonal, family, community and societal levels? (e.g. gender-related risks at the interpersonal level, religion-related risks at the community level, and race-related risks at the societal level etc.)
- What other forms of oppression are disadvantaged groups subjected to (beyond VAWG)?

Multidimensional resilience

- What are the protective factors and resources associated with different social identities at different levels (sub-questions below)?
 - At the interpersonal level, what protective factors and resources related to different social identities can support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. personal resources related to people's racial/ethnic belonging and age)
 - At the family level, what protective factors and resources related to different social identities can support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. family factors, inter-generational norms and resources specific to one's culture)
 - At the community level, what protective factors and resources related to different social identities can support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. local structures and cultural norms of protection and moral standards related one's gender, religious or class identity)
 - At the societal level, what protective factors and resources centre around different social identities that support VAWG prevention/response? (e.g. national symbols and traditions)

Integrated responses to VAWG

- What work is required to reduce risk factors to VAWG at different levels?
- What work is required to increase protective factors at different levels?
- How can faith actors at different socioecological levels address VAWG?

Annex 2: Faith-sensitive gender analysis

The list of questions below can be used to enrich your gender analysis and assessments. Use data collected to inform your programme, policy and strategy. Reflect the findings from your faith-sensitive gender analysis in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

Gender roles

- What roles do women and men play in their families, neighbourhoods, communities and society?
- How do religion (religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organisations), culture and tradition shape gender roles (of women, men, girls and boys of different backgrounds) at different stages of forced displacement (in transit and refuge)?
 - What religious beliefs and cultural norms shape expectations about what activities, work and responsibilities women and men have in the house and community?
 - How does religion help reproduce, negotiate or balance gender roles and power dynamics in the household?
- What are the individual and community attitudes towards a woman undertaking work?
- What are the social norms concerning sex segregation in a specific context?
- What kind of leadership positions do men and women occupy in the community?
- What are the attitudes towards women taking leadership roles?

Access to and control over resources

- What resources do women and men have access to, and what control over them, at interpersonal, family, community and societal levels?
- How do religion (religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organisations), culture, and tradition (expectations and norms) enable and restrict access to and control over resources and services for women, men, girls and boys of different backgrounds at different stages of forced displacement?
- What decisions do women and men make in the household? Who decides what? (e.g. in terms of household management, marriage matters, accessing work, education and health, transportation)
- How do men's and women's participation in faith-based groups affect their access to resources, care and support from other community members?

Gender needs

- What practical and strategic gender needs do women and men have at individual, interpersonal, family, community and societal levels?

- How do religion (religious beliefs, practices, experiences and organisations), culture and tradition shape gendered needs (of women, men, girls and boys of different backgrounds) at different stages of forced displacement?
- What are the practical/short-term gender needs of women and girls in the family, community and society? (e.g. to meet their immediate needs such as food security, access to water, shelter, education, health care)?
- What are the strategic/long-term gender needs of people (e.g. advocacy against discrimination, VAWG prevention, financial inclusion, access to rights etc.)?
- What religious resources can help women and men meet their needs?

Notes:

- Practical gender needs are context-specific immediate perceived necessity, e.g. primary health care, family planning, reproductive health, mental health, antenatal care, education, vocational training, water provision, health care and employment.
- Strategic gender needs are long-term needs which, if met, can transform subordinate positions and lead to empowerment e.g. equal access to training, rights to land, rights to inheritance, prevention of violence etc.

Victimisation

- How do religious factors and faith actors contribute to VAWG at different stages of displacement (in transit, refuge)?
- How do religious beliefs, practices, culture and tradition drive attitudes and behaviours that lead to abuse and discrimination against women and girls?
- What are the gendered forms of religious discrimination or spiritual violence?
- Who is worst affected by VAWG underpinned by religious constructs (in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, religion, ability and other characteristics of marginalisation)?

Protection

- How do religious factors and faith actors contribute to protecting women and girls of different backgrounds from violence at different stages of displacement (e.g. in transit, refuge)?
 - How do religious beliefs and practices, culture and tradition drive protective attitudes and behaviours that help prevent VAWG?
 - How does religion foster resilience of displaced individuals and communities (what mindset, actions and feelings support them)?
- Who is best protected from VAWG by religious resources and who is left out and why? (in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, religion, ability and other characteristics of marginalisation)

Annex 3: Integrating faith sensitivity into GBV minimum standards

The GBV minimum standards in the humanitarian sector also require integration of faith sensitivity. Table 2 introduces a non-exhaustive list of suggestions of how each GBV standard could integrate faith considerations.

Table 2 Introducing faith sensitivity to GBV minimum standards

	GBV Minimum Standard	Faith sensitivity
1.	GBV Guiding Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Train faith actors involved in VAWG prevention and response on a survivor-centred approach promoting confidentiality, safety, non-discrimination and respect for women and girls
2.	Women's and girls' participation and empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Involve women and girls of different ages and abilities from faith groups as partners in humanitarian response and across all stages of design and implementation of VAWG interventions ● Train informal women leaders of faith groups to support survivors' access to quality services ● Listen to women's voices! Recognise women's and girls' sources of power in displacement situations, including their faith as a source of strength, coping and healing ● Support women's and girls' religious coping and power from within ● Ensure women's and girls' religious beliefs are respected by humanitarian staff ● Address faith-insensitive practices and/or religious prejudice within your interventions
3.	Staff care and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure informal and formal faith leaders (women and men) are trained to address VAWG safely in their communities ● Recognise that faith can be a coping mechanism for staff to support their well-being. Ensure religious coping mechanisms are respected and supported by non-discrimination and inclusion
4.	Collection and use of GBV survivor data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include faith-based organisations involved in survivor data collection in capacity-building activities to ensure data is only collected if it can be safely and ethically stored, analysed and shared
5.	Health care for GBV survivors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Train health-care providers to recognise that survivors have a diverse range of religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices in relation to health, which vary between cultures

		<p>and religions and between individuals within cultural and religious groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Train health-care providers to recognise that religious, cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices can impact survivors' help-seeking behaviours, health-care access and medical treatment preferences, following VAWG exposure
6.	Psychosocial support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide psychosocial support in faith-sensitive ways ● Account for and support religious coping strategies among survivors of faith, such as meaning-making, reappraisal of life events and achieving closure to overcome traumatic experiences ● Recognise the impact of religious coping on survivors' well-being, and on their positive and negative coping strategies ● Work with faith leaders to offer pastoral care to people of faith expressing such needs
7.	GBV case management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Train humanitarian FBOs involved in VAWG/GBV case management to provide safe and quality services
8.	Referral systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Train faith actors to provide psychological first aid, map quality services and offer safe referral pathways to survivors confidentially (using a survivor-centred approach)
9.	Women's and girls' safe spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Help places of worship to develop capacities to offer safe women's and girls' services in an inclusive and accessible manner ● Encourage faith institutions and places of worship to develop activities that promote survivors' empowerment and healing, drawing on the institutions' and places' intellectual and material religious resources
10.	Safety and risk mitigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Involve faith actors in efforts to integrate risk mitigation into humanitarian responses and safety plans and their implementation ● Establish feedback mechanisms in collaboration with faith actors ● Ensure relevant and trusted faith actors are informed about VAWG standard operating procedures (SOPs) and other security concerns
11.	Justice and legal aid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Train faith actors, including informal women's groups, about the legal rights of displaced survivors and how to connect with legal and justice actors to support survivors' rights and access to justice

12.	Dignity kits, cash and voucher assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Faith actors to provide dignity kits and financial and material support to survivors in places of worship and through grassroots mobilisation, utilising pathways of religious donations and faith-based charity
13.	Economic empowerment and livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sensitise FBOs to mobilise more support to women to strengthen their resilience and decrease vulnerability from exploitation by using e.g. Islamic social finance instruments (charity, free-interest loans etc.)
14.	GBV coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Better coordinate with trusted faith actors and include them in coordination efforts in VAWG interventions and procedures
15.	Assessment, monitoring and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Train FBOs and other relevant faith actors to ensure they thoroughly consider the ethics of data collection in VAWG research so as not to harm survivors and communities ● Collect data (and advise FBOs similarly) only if existing data is unavailable and when new data is needed to inform/improve VAWG/GBV interventions
16.	Transforming systems and social norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Build on religious resources and theology to develop transformative approaches to VAWG in faith communities ● Engage faith actors in tackling harmful social norms ● Draw on faith values when working to tackle misconceptions about women and promote their position



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