



# POLICY BRIEF

## Transforming Faith-Based Responses to Gender-Based Violence (GBV): Evidence and Action from Africa and Latin America

SVRI's Faith & GBV Community of Practice – Working Group 1 on Evidence-Building



## Background

In many low- and middle-income countries, faith institutions carry significant moral authority and influence. In communities where state systems are often under-resourced or distrusted, religious leaders and organisations frequently serve as frontline responders to crises such as gender-based violence (GBV). For many survivors, faith can be both a lifeline and a source of harm. This tension is particularly evident among populations facing high levels of poverty, marginalisation and vulnerabilities, including women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and youth.

This policy brief stems from an innovative research collaboration led by the SVRI's Community of Practise (CoP), specifically Working Group 1 (WG1) on Evidence Building. From October 2024 to May 2025, WG1 explored the intersecting roles of faith, culture, and community in shaping GBV prevention efforts. The initiative aimed to challenge conventional evidence-building paradigms that often exclude spiritual knowledge systems, fail to address power asymmetries and overlook youth voices. This exploration was primarily located within African and Latin American contexts.

The research responded to an urgent gap in the evidence base on the intersections between GBV and faith. Although faith-based responses to GBV are widespread, there is a scarcity of nuanced, locally grounded, and ethically collected evidence that can inform inclusive policy change.

This brief offers a synthesis of the WG1 findings and outlines actionable recommendations for researchers, policymakers, legal institutions, civil society, and donors. It centres the voices of young people, survivors, and faith actors working at the intersection of trauma, belief, and transformation.

## Methods and Technique

At the heart of this research were five **Expert Group Discussions (EGDs)** with 23 participants from Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, and Lusophone countries, representing diverse sectors and languages, spanning faith leadership, research, and practise, all engaged in or connected to faith settings. This method was intentionally chosen and designed to foster deep, participatory engagement on gender-based violence (GBV) in faith-based settings. The EGD approach enabled the inclusion of multiple locally grounded perspectives and disrupted traditional research hierarchies by positioning participants as co-creators of knowledge.

## Limitations

This study embraced a participatory, relational methodology that prioritised depth and local nuance over statistical representativeness. With 23 participants, the findings offer rich insights but do not capture all regions, faiths or trends. Differences in participant profiles mean regional comparisons should be read with caution. While participants came from Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, and Lusophone countries, we recognise that language limitations may have constrained broader representation, with minimal participation from those outside of these linguistic regions. Digital access constraints likely excluded rural and marginalised voices. Finally, while youth was a central focus, few participants were under 35, so the findings largely reflect how older practitioners and faith actors view youth needs and roles. Despite these limitations, the collaborative, iterative approach produced grounded and actionable insights. These are particularly relevant to faith-based actors, donors, and policymakers seeking region-specific GBV interventions.



## Format and Facilitation

- Five EGDs were held virtually between November 2024 and April 2025. Each group included 3 to 6 participants, representing diverse geographies, faiths, genders, and roles, including clergy, youth leaders, researchers, and activists – with 23 participants engaging in the discussions throughout the course of the study.
- Sessions were held on Zoom, using simultaneous note-taking and chat support to help participants communicate across different languages and express emotions comfortably.
- Two WG1 facilitators guided each session using open-ended, reflective prompts rather than rigid questionnaires.
- After each session, participants were invited to submit optional written reflections (around 500 words) in any language. These allowed them to highlight key insights, note unresolved issues, and share their emotional experiences, including discomfort or moments of connection.

## Lessons Learned:

WG1 uncovered several layered insights that fall into two areas. First, what faith contexts reveal about barriers and opportunities for addressing GBV and second, how to better study, document, and strengthen this work. These lessons highlight key priorities for faith actors, policymakers, and funders need to prioritise to prevent GBV more effectively within diverse spiritual communities.

### 1. Insights on Faith and GBV Prevention



#### Faith Can Reinforce or Resist Spiritual Harm

Although religious teachings often underpin patriarchal norms, they can also be reclaimed to promote healing and justice. The same scriptures used to silence women can be reinterpreted through feminist and liberationist theologies. Reinterpretation of theological texts is needed to bridge the gaps between survivors of spiritual harm and the faith communities that have long excluded them. As one participant explained:

*“...church pastors...have some kind of perception and rigid policy ways that they want to run their church based on their understanding and interpretation of the scriptures...Some of them are really having a stronghold on the scriptures in the Bible that wants a woman to be subdued and submissive and does not have a voice...we are trying our best to be ensuring that we educate faith leaders on ways that we can relate the scripture to human rights, relate the scripture to women’s rights and leadership in faith communities.”* (Veronica Ngum, Cameroon; EGD 3, 18 March 2025)

Survivors often experience not only physical or emotional trauma but also spiritual harm- a rupture in their sense of belonging to faith communities. Addressing this requires pastoral tools and trauma-informed spiritual care. Another participant proposed:

*“How do we help people when even the language is forbidden...I don’t think going back to religion will work because they are not talking about it in the churches. They are not ready to deal with it. So how do we now navigate this journey when the people that a lot of people look up to are not ready to talk about it?... And we still have to talk about it because people are dying every day. [All I] do if I have such a situation is to listen! Listen and get a feel of what the person is going through. Just start by listening...say I’m here for you...just let them pour out what their situation is.*



*Maybe with that, we'll make better judgment, but I cannot pass judgment on anyone. Because you need to listen to them.” (Modupe Adelanwa, Nigeria, EGD 1, 28 November 2024)*

### **Youth Are Marginalised but Motivated**

Young people, especially LGBTQI+ youth, are often silenced by both religious and family institutions. Nevertheless, many are creating peer-led spaces for discussion, healing, and advocacy, showing resilience in the face of exclusion.

*“Youth face a dual silence: one from the family, which often refuses to believe or talk about violence, and one from the church, which insists on purity without ever explaining what protection really means. So, youth navigate these threats alone...So maybe instead of asking how we can mobilise young people, we should look at how youth are already mobilising, how they're creating new ways of living their faith without abandoning it.” (Olivia Bandeira, Brazil; EGD5, 22 April 2025)*

### **Masculinity Must Be Reimagined**

Programmes that promote transformative masculinities, which focus on emotional literacy, non-violence, and accountability, show great promise. They, however, require long-term support and culturally grounded tools for monitoring change.

*“But if you go to the rural communities, to the churches, nothing has changed. Women are still not allowed to speak. And men are still taught that leading means controlling. So, we have to do more than write policies. We have to change hearts...then you don't have tools or systems that are in place to do follow-ups. And also to make sure that if you are talking of impact or results, which tools to be able to put into place and which measurements will be used...because even if we would want to say that we are helping the men, we need to also say that we are helping the men for the sustainability of making sure that men are changing their behaviour.” (Luzuko Melaphi, South Africa; EGD 1, 28 November 2024)*

*“And faith leaders [most are men] have their own challenges...Somehow, they have their challenges in their home, but they don't know who to talk to as faith leaders. By giving them that safe space for them even to talk about themselves, that is the key of the approach. Transforming masculinities, it is creating a space for faith leaders also to come as individuals, not just the leaders, as individual and come with [their] baggage in the space.” (Solange Mbonigaba, South Africa; EGD, 1 28 November 2024)*



## **2. Insights on Research and Evidence in Faith Contexts**

### **Local Knowledge and Practises Matter**

Successful GBV prevention relies on community knowledge systems. Recognising how language, narrative, and local wisdom shape evidence and practise is vital for legitimacy and impact.

### **Language Is Both a Barrier and a Bridge**

Using unfamiliar or generic language can create resistance and exclude local communities. However, when messages are adapted into local languages and discourses, they can foster understanding, shift mindsets, and build champions for change.



*"...we were holding a stakeholder engagement with different stakeholders...we had one of the banners...a generic banner for the gender justice components...we put some of the contents of Maputo protocol provisions for the protection of women... about women's rights...we realised that during that meeting, were some side conversations...what they were saying is 'what these people were bringing to us, we're not going to accept it'...It was these two persons that were kicking against that particular phrase, that they don't want to see it. We should drop the banner and remove it from here...And then [one of our representatives] he had to speak to them in their language and all that, and they embrace it. And then let me say today, these two religious leaders are actually gender champions in that local government now." (Helen Akinyemi, Nigeria, EGD3, 18 March 2025)*

### **Storytelling Is a Strategy**

In contexts where statistics are scarce or dangerous to collect, narratives and oral histories serve as legitimate forms of evidence and advocacy.

*"In disclosing their narratives and telling their stories. They could tell me that... 'we are being abused, we are being violated', but now they fear exposing their stories to me...they fear if it is known by their husbands, if it is known by the judge if it will be documented, that would bring stigma to them as individuals. No one would want to hear their stories being told...And so I did narratives, I recorded them with their consent and...I have those stories in store with me." (Josephine Kanyiva, Kenya, EGD 1, 28 November 2024)*

### **Data Fragmentation Undermines Advocacy**

Many faith-based initiatives operate in silos, with little capacity to document impact.

*"Through collaboration, we can share knowledge and amplify each other's work...I'm hoping that in future from collaborations and partnerships such as this, then maybe we're able to tackle that issue and find ways and lasting sustainable solutions around that." (Gideon Odiwuor, Kenya, EGD 1, 28 November 2024).*

Standardised yet adaptable tools and interoperable databases are urgently needed.

*"We have a lot of insight, even though we don't have a standardised template. We don't have a standardised reporting mechanism." (Aisha Aminu Marafa, Nigeria; EGD 2, 29 November 2024)*

Faith contexts hold unique barriers and opportunities for GBV prevention. An inclusive, ethical, and locally grounded approach is needed. Putting these lessons into practise requires bold action from faith-based actors, donors, and policymakers.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Enact structural change through systems and mechanisms to support GBV prevention and survivors in faith settings

#### Faith-Based Organisations & Faith Actors

- Provide trauma-informed pastoral care and spiritual support anchored on feminist theologies.
- Create safe, shame-free spaces for survivors to speak and be heard, heal, be respected.
- Host interfaith dialogues and training to break silos and foster trust.

#### Policymakers

- Treat survivors, including clergy spouses and LGBTQI+ individuals, as co-designers of policy solutions.
- Invest in culturally adapted, anonymous reporting platforms.
- Build cross-sector partnerships with civil society and faith leaders.

#### Donors

- Fund faith-based organisations to provide evidence and trauma-informed spiritual care and survivor-centred services.
- Support interfaith collaborations and community-led initiatives that uphold survivors' dignity.
- Invest in training faith leaders to respond safely and ethically to spiritual harm.

#### Researchers

- Uphold strong ethical standards in sensitive data collection.
- Amplify the voices of grassroots and rural faith actors in evidence-building.
- Facilitate interfaith research platforms for shared learning.

Why centring survivor voices matters: Because it helps to ensure that responses go beyond paternalistic protection, focusing instead on ending violence, improving services, and driving systemic change in faith settings.

### 2. Engage Youth as Agents of Change

#### Faith-Based Organisations & Faith Actors

- Transform religious spaces into safe spaces for young people, including LGBTQI+ and Afro-descendant youth, to speak and organise.
- Equip spiritual leaders and pastoral teams with skills and knowledge to understand and address youth experiences with GBV.

#### Policymakers

- Ensure youth perspectives are reflected in GBV policies and funding structures for the faith sector response and prevention programmes.
- Support alternative theologies (feminist, queer, liberationist) that promote gender justice.



## Donors

- Prioritise funding for youth-led, arts-based, and storytelling initiatives that amplify marginalised voices.
- Ensure funding reaches LGBTQI+ and Afro-descendant youth in faith communities.
- Support networks that connect youth with faith leaders, policymakers, and researchers.

## Researchers

- Centre youth voices in research using participatory and mixed methods including for example, storytelling, theatre, and peer dialogue.
- Ensure youth representation in research reflects a wide range of identities and lived experiences, with particular attention to including young people from historically underrepresented or marginalised communities, such as those facing barriers related to geography, language, gender, disability, race, class, and access to resources.
- Ensure research design is responsive to local challenges, including anti-gender discourse, political resistance, and cultural norms that may undermine gender equality and survivor-centred approaches.

***Why engaging youth as agents of change matters:*** *Despite facing age-based and cultural silences, young people are powerful drivers of change. Their creativity and lived experience make them essential to transforming harmful norms and building inclusive, sustainable responses to GBV in faith settings.*

## 3. Address Masculinities Through Long-Term Transformation

### Faith-Based Organisations & Faith Actors

- Embed evidence informed, transformative masculinity programmes in faith spaces and youth groups.
- Create safe, queer-affirming support spaces for both women and girls and men and boys to reflect, heal, and where appropriate be accountable.

### Policymakers

- Develop accountability measures for faith institutions to advance gender equality and evidence informed, transformative GBV prevention and response programmes.
- Support policies that promote more equitable and participatory leadership within faith communities, ensuring congregants, especially those from historically marginalised groups, have a voice in decisions that affect them.

## Donors

- Provide sustained, flexible funding for long-term effective transformative GBV prevention that engage both men and women, as well as response programmes rooted in local faith contexts.
- Support safe spaces for male faith leaders and congregants to reflect, heal and be accountable, while ensuring that these spaces are informed by, and responsive to, the perspectives, experiences, and justice demands of survivors.
- Fund priority driven, impactful research as well as the development of context-sensitive methods and tools to measure shifts in masculinities and norms.



## Researchers

- Conduct in-depth, context-specific research on locally defined priorities, with a particular focus on understanding and preventing perpetration, improving response efforts, and exploring evolving masculinities.
- Develop practical tools and methodologies to track meaningful shifts in gender norms, attitudes, and behaviours over time.

***Why addressing masculinities in evidence informed ways matters:*** Evidence-based approaches to masculinity foster accountability, shift power dynamics, and support more equitable and inclusive faith communities.

## 4. Build Faith-Aligned, Inclusive Evidence Systems

### Faith-Based Organisations & Faith Actors

- Acknowledge lived spiritual experiences shared in faith settings such as sermons, personal testimonies, and community-led initiatives as valuable forms of evidence and documenting, preserving these through archives to inform faith-based responses to GBV.
- Facilitate dialogues in town halls, public spaces, civic/community centres between secular and religious institutions to reflect on the spiritual impact of GBV interventions.
- Engage and invest in co-created, ethical research led by diverse faith actors.

### Policymakers

- Form multi-sector teams that include faith actors to improve data coordination and reduce fragmentation.
- Support interoperable, community-owned data systems that protect privacy and build trust.
- Use evidence, including faith-informed data, to guide policies, funding, and accountability mechanisms.

### Donors

- Fund community-owned, interoperable data systems that integrate spiritual and local knowledge.
- Support research and knowledge exchange hubs that connect grassroots faith actors, GBV practitioners, researchers, policymakers and funders.
- Invest in translation, localisation and contextualisation to ensure evidence resonates with diverse faith contexts.

### Researchers

- Use theological language and local spiritual frameworks to make findings relevant and accessible.
- Expand 'what counts' as evidence to include oral histories, rituals, and spiritual narratives.
- Establish local hubs for training, research, and knowledge exchange.
- Ground research in identified evidence gaps rather than assumptions, to avoid duplication, ensure efficient use of limited resources, and contribute to meaningful progress in the field.



Top ranked research questions in SVRIs facilitated agenda setting process in the Africa Shared Research Agenda related to religion and faith:

- Which interventions working with religious and/or traditional leaders, or other social structures strongly imbued with patriarchy, have been most successful in preventing GBV and why?,
- How can we ensure that those who have the most influence (faith and cultural leaders) are leading the advocacy to shift social norms and cultural/religious narratives that tacitly encourage GBV?
- How do traditional, cultural and religious practises and institutions influence social norms related to GBV, including the acceptability, justification and normalisation of GBV?
- What are the best strategies for discouraging and preventing medical, psychological, and spiritual/religious GBV against LGBTQI+ people in the forms of conversion practises, exorcism, and all other harmful efforts to change sexual orientation and/or gender identity?

Source: SVRI, & UN Women. (2023). English full report: Africa Shared Research Agenda for Ending Gender-Based Violence. SVRI and UN Women. [https://svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2023-11-29/P7\\_ASSA\\_WEB.pdf](https://svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2023-11-29/P7_ASSA_WEB.pdf)

In the Latin America and Caribbean research agenda, experts underscored the urgent need to examine the role of fundamentalist and ultra-conservative religious movements in perpetuating violence against women and girls.<sup>1</sup> While religion is deeply embedded in the region's cultural identity, its concrete expressions—particularly within fundamentalist and patriarchal churches—often challenge gender equality and human rights. Interviewed experts highlighted the importance of researching these movements to understand their strategies, expose how they reinforce harmful stereotypes and justify violence, and support the development of resistance strategies. In particular, faith institutions were identified as critical spaces for challenging the norms that normalise VAWG, given their growing influence across the region.

***Why building faith aligned, inclusive evidence systems matter:*** Evidence that reflects spiritual realities strengthens local trust and engagement, making GBV prevention efforts more effective and sustainable.

## Final word

An agenda grounded in these principles recognises faith as a living, evolving force shaped by multiple interpretations. By centring local knowledge and relational accountability, faith communities can move from passive bystanders, or even sources of harm, to proactive agents of gender justice and transformation.

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1 Porras Gómez, C., Landa Ugarte, A., Argueta Vásquez, I., & Vaca Parada, B. (2022). Spanish full report: Establecimiento de prioridades de investigación en violencia contra las mujeres y las niñas en la región de América Latina y el Caribe. Equipo FREE. <https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2022-05-05/VF%20Informe%20Agenda%20Regional.pdf>

