



SVRI Community of Practice on Faith and GBV

Policy Brief: Enhancing Communication Between Faith Actors and Policymakers on Gender-Based Violence in Africa

Written by Nora Khalaf-Elledge and Sarah Marsso



Executive Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a significant global issue, requiring locally grounded and multi-faceted responses. Faith-based actors hold influential roles in shaping cultural norms and social behaviours, positioning them as key stakeholders in efforts to address GBV. However, a gap in communication between faith leaders and policymakers often leads to ineffective policies, fragmented survivor support, and the persistence of harmful practices. This policy brief underscores the critical necessity of fostering robust, meaningful dialogue and collaboration between these two groups to tackle GBV. It outlines the risks associated with inadequate communication or lack thereof, highlights the potential benefits of strengthened dialogue, provides actionable recommendations for building bridges, and uses targeted, research-informed examples to illustrate these points, ultimately aiming to create more comprehensive and socially relevant solutions to GBV. While the brief centres African experiences and voices—particularly those from the field—it acknowledges that both GBV and the communication challenges it explores are not unique to Africa. These dynamics occur globally, and the insights presented here aim to inform broader, cross-contextual learning.

About This Policy Brief

This policy brief is the outcome of a thematic working group focused on communication between faith leaders and policymakers in the context of gender-based violence (GBV). The group was convened under the SVRI's Community of Practice (CoP) on Faith and GBV. It brought together diverse actors—including faith-based practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and civil society representatives—to collectively explore how improved communication can strengthen GBV prevention and response in their locally specific contexts across Africa. The insights and recommendations in this brief reflect the group's collaborative learning and shared commitment to addressing GBV through more inclusive, coordinated, and contextually grounded approaches.


Introduction

In African societies—like in all societies—religious institutions and faith actors influence social norms, behaviours, and public attitudes. Their considerable moral authority often extends into areas such as gender equality, marriage, family life, and perceptions of gender-based violence. Simultaneously, policymakers bear the responsibility of creating and enforcing legal frameworks to protect all citizens from GBV. Effective and sustained communication and collaboration between faith actors and policymakers is paramount to ensure that GBV interventions are not only legally sound but also resonate with the values and beliefs of the specific communities they intend to serve, ultimately leading to more sustainable and impactful change within diverse African contexts. Further, when this knowledge is combined with evidence-based research, transformative and sustainable programming can be achieved. However, without regular and structured dialogue between these groups, GBV policies risk remaining fragmented, under-enforced, and disconnected from both evidence and local community needs. Effective communication between faith actors and policymakers is essential to develop a coordinated, sustainable, and evidence-informed response to GBV.

The Risks of Inadequate Communication

A lack of consistent and meaningful dialogue and information exchange between faith actors and policymakers on GBV can lead to several detrimental outcomes:

- **Misaligned Understandings and Priorities:** Without open communication, policymakers and faith leaders may have differing understandings of the drivers and manifestations of GBV, as well as what effective, evidence-based responses look like in practice. This makes it difficult to create unified strategies, leading to policies that miss important gender-sensitive religious perspectives or to faith-based responses that do not fit with legal standards. To help bridge these gaps, global frameworks such as [RESPECT](#) are available to guide and inform GBV work. These frameworks can be adapted to local contexts and fields, supporting more consistent, evidence-informed, and collaborative approaches to addressing gender-based violence. In Ethiopia, the government's 2019 launch of a national roadmap



aimed at ending child marriage and FGM emphasised the need for community engagement, including collaboration with faith and traditional leaders. However, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission highlighted challenges related to inconsistent communication and coordination at the regional level. In areas where local administrative structures are not well informed about national plans and where there is limited dialogue with faith-based organisations, implementation has been slow. Communication gaps between policymakers and faith actors can contribute to differing interpretations of legal frameworks and religious texts, which may delay coordinated efforts to address child marriage and FGM effectively.¹

- **Ineffective Messaging and Outreach Campaigns:** Poor communication can result in disjointed public messaging on GBV. Policymakers might create campaigns that lack cultural or religious resonance, while faith leaders' messages might not fully align with legal standards or survivor rights, potentially confusing communities and weakening efforts to change harmful norms. For instance, national campaigns against early marriage in Kenya have seen improved progress in areas where dialogue with influential faith leaders was consistent, leading to an increase in culturally resonant messaging and community buy-in.²
- **Delayed Translation of Knowledge into Action:** The absence of regular dialogue can slow the flow of crucial grassroots insights from faith-based organisations to policymakers, delaying the adaptation of policies and programmes to address emerging trends and barriers faced by survivors within faith communities. Faith-based organisations on the ground in South Africa play a crucial role in providing shelter and support for GBV survivors. However, there is often a lack of formal mechanisms for these organisations to effectively communicate the specific needs and challenges faced by survivors within their communities to policymakers. This gap can result in missed opportunities for the appropriate resource allocation that would better address the realities encountered by survivors in faith settings.³ Practice-based knowledge should be integrated with a broad spectrum of evidence—including community-validated experiences, participatory evaluations, and contextually relevant data—to reduce the risk of unintentionally causing harm to survivors.⁴
- **Erosion of Trust and Collaboration:** Infrequent or ineffective communication can breed mistrust between faith actors and policymakers, hindering the development of effective partnerships and collaborative initiatives necessary for a comprehensive response to GBV. The lengthy and sometimes contentious process of abortion law reform in Malawi illustrates how a lack of early and consistent dialogue between policymakers and some faith leaders can create an environment of suspicion and hinder collaborative efforts.⁵
- **Duplication of Efforts and Wasted Resources:** Poor coordination and insufficient communication, combined with a lack of awareness regarding survivors' needs and evidence-based approaches to reducing violence against women, often result in the inefficient use of resources. When faith-based and government organisations operate independently without leveraging their respective strengths, they risk duplicating similar programmes rather than collaborating effectively. This fragmentation can undermine the impact of interventions and fail to deliver the most effective support to survivors.



¹ UNICEF Ethiopia (2019). "Ethiopia launches a five-year, US\$ 94 million plan to end child marriage and FGM."

Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/stories/ethiopia-launches-five-year-us-94-million-plan-end-child-marriage-and-fgm>

² Walk Free & Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK). (2021). *Kenyan Advocacy on Child and Forced Marriage: A Guide for Faith Leaders*. Available at: <https://www.walkfree.org/reports/kenyan-advocacy-on-child-and-forced-marriage-a-guide-for-faith-leaders/>


³ Le Roux, E., & Palm, S. (2018). *Learning from Practice: Faith-Based Responses to Gender-Based Violence in South Africa*. Stellenbosch University & Tearfund. Available at:

⁴ UN Women Independent Evaluation Service. (2020). *Good practices in gender-responsive evaluations*.

Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Good-practices-in-gender-responsive-evaluations-en.pdf>

⁵ Ipas (2020). "Malawi political parties unite to reform abortion law."

Available at: <https://www.ipas.org/news/malawi-political-parties-unite-to-reform-abortion-law/>

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- **Empowerment of Fundamentalist Interpretations and Obstruction of Progress:** Critically, a lack of engagement and open communication can create a vacuum that allows fundamentalist and patriarchal interpretations of religious texts to dominate the discourse around GBV within faith communities. Without platforms for dialogue and the promotion of interpretations that uphold gender equality and condemn violence, restrictive viewpoints can gain traction—even among survivors—and may be used to justify harmful practices and actively obstruct the implementation of protective laws and policies. For example, religious arguments are often used to resist efforts to criminalise FGM or raise the legal age of marriage. This can ultimately empower those who seek to confine GBV within the guise of religious doctrine, undermining the rights and safety of women and girls.⁶

The Benefits of Enhanced Communication

Conversely, fostering strong communication and collaboration between policymakers and faith actors can yield significant benefits:

- **Culturally Relevant Policy Frameworks:** Open dialogue allows policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of GBV in local contexts. This can lead to the creation of more effective, relevant and acceptable policies grounded in community values and culturally nuanced evidence. In Tanzania, the WLAC’s success in mobilising faith leaders against child marriage and FGM involved framing these practices as violations of shared values of family well-being and the dignity of women, leading to greater community acceptance of legal protections.⁷ In practical terms, this includes engaging faith leaders through workshops and interfaith dialogues, supporting them to advocate within their communities, and collaborating with local government and civil society to align faith-based messages with national laws and policies.
- **Increased Community Buy-in and Ownership:** When policymakers actively communicate with faith leaders about GBV prevention and response efforts, it fosters greater understanding and ownership of these initiatives. The engagement between policymakers and faith actors in Kenya has enabled the active participation of religious leaders in anti-femicide campaigns, where they publicly condemn violence against women from a theological perspective, which has been instrumental in shifting the attitudes of their members and spurring community action.⁸
- **Strengthened Support Systems for Survivors:** Established communication channels facilitate the sharing of information about existing support services and needs between faith-based organisations (often the first responders for survivors) and government agencies. Collaboration can lead to the integration of faith-based support services within national frameworks, creating more holistic and accessible care pathways for survivors that address their physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. In Uganda, partnerships between organisations like Faith Action for Children (FAC) and local government units have resulted in coordinated referral systems that link faith-based counselling and support with statutory legal and health services, providing more comprehensive care for survivors.⁹
- **Accelerated and More Effective Policy Implementation:** When policymakers and faith leaders maintain open lines of communication, they develop a shared understanding of policy goals and implementation strategies. This enables faith leaders to become informed advocates for these policies within their communities, fostering grassroots acceptance and smoother implementation. In Malawi¹⁰,

⁶ Human Rights Watch. (2021). *Somalia: Religious Leaders Resist Ban on Female Genital Mutilation*.

Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/15/somalia-religious-leaders-resist-ban-female-genital-mutilation>

⁷ UNFPA Tanzania. (2024). ‘Faith Leaders Take Action to End Child Marriage’.

Available at: <https://tanzania.unfpa.org/en/news/faith-leaders-take-action-end-child-marriage>

⁸ All Africa Conference of Churches. (2024). ‘Kenyan Faith Leaders Unite to End Femicide and All Forms of GBV’.



Available at: <https://aacc-ceta.org/en/kenyan-faith-leaders-unite-end-femicide-and-all-forms-gbv>

⁹ Raising Voices. (2016). ‘Faith Action for Children (FAC) and local government units in Uganda collaborate to provide comprehensive care for GBV survivors’.

Available at: <https://raisingvoices.org/faith-action-for-children-and-local-government-units-in-uganda-collaborate-to-provide-comprehensive-care-for-gbv-survivors/>

¹⁰ Ipas. (2020). ‘Malawi Political Parties Unite to Reform Abortion Law’.

Available at: <https://www.ipas.org/news/malawi-political-parties-unite-to-reform-abortion-law>



the RLNC's ability to support community education around the Termination of Pregnancy Bill was significantly strengthened by their direct communication and engagement with policymakers. However, sustained policy effectiveness depends not only on local support but also on structured, independent evaluations to ensure that implementation leads to positive outcomes and avoids unintended harm.

Recommendations for Strengthening Communication

To bridge the divide and foster more effective communication, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Establish Formalised National and Sub-National Dialogue Platforms:** Governments and development policymakers should institutionalise regular and structured dialogues between policymakers and diverse faith actors, along with other gender practitioners and researchers, especially those with a proven track record working on GBV prevention and response. These platforms should have clear mandates, regular meeting schedules, and the necessary mechanisms and resources to integrate faith-based perspectives and evidence-based programming into policy formulation and review at all levels of governance.
- **Invest in Joint Capacity Building and Sensitisation:** Develop and fund joint training initiatives for policymakers and faith leaders on GBV, gender equality, relevant legal frameworks, religious literacy, and theological perspectives that promote justice and dignity. These programmes should aim to build mutual understanding, challenge harmful interpretations of religious texts, clearly demonstrate the alignment of religious teachings with principles of gender justice and human rights, help faith leaders understand their role in advocating for legal reforms, and equip both groups to be effective advocates against GBV. Training should also include knowledge-building on existing evidence of what works in GBV prevention and response, particularly at scale, and how such approaches can be meaningfully integrated into faith-based programming with appropriate support and partnership from governments.
- **Create Collaborative Advocacy and Outreach Campaigns:** Policymakers must forge strong partnerships with faith-based organisations to jointly design and execute evidence-informed public outreach campaigns. These campaigns should address the root causes of GBV and champion positive social norms rooted in gender-equitable religious teachings and national laws that uphold international standards, ultimately aiming to shift community attitudes and behaviours. However, such campaigns should not stand alone—they must be integrated into broader, multi-level strategies that include community engagement, service provision, and legal accountability to meaningfully shift attitudes and behaviours.

Conclusion

Effective and sustained communication between policymakers and faith actors is not merely a desirable outcome but a fundamental necessity for achieving meaningful progress in addressing the complex issue of gender-based violence across diverse African contexts. By actively bridging the existing divide, these influential groups can harness their unique strengths to develop culturally resonant, evidence-informed policies; mobilise faith communities for transformative change; and strengthen holistic support systems for survivors by incorporating gender-sensitive faith sector services into national response systems. Ultimately, their efforts contribute to a future where all individuals, regardless of gender or belief, can live lives free from violence and with dignity. Policymakers are urged to prioritise the establishment of formal communication channels and collaborative initiatives, recognising those faith leaders who have actively worked on GBV prevention and response. Faith leaders, in turn, have a crucial role to play in engaging constructively with policymakers and leveraging their moral authority to advocate for justice and the well-being of their communities.