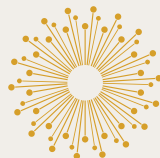




# How to talk about GBV and Religion

A practical toolkit for  
faith actors and policymakers

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**SVRI** sexual  
violence  
research  
initiative





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We would like to express our deepest gratitude to the members of Working Group 3 for SVRI's "Faith & GBV Community of Practice" for their invaluable contributions to this toolkit. Your openness in sharing your lived experiences has greatly enhanced our understanding of the intersection between faith, policy, and gender-based violence. It has been a privilege to learn from one another and engage in this collaborative journey of knowledge creation. We also extend our sincere thanks to SVRI and their funding partner, who has made it possible to explore these critical issues together.





## Introduction

In recent years, the intersection of gender-based violence (GBV) and faith has gained increasing recognition among development policymakers, faith actors, and gender practitioners. Despite the critical role many faith actors play in addressing and preventing GBV in their communities—and growing recognition of the need for governments and policymakers to engage with them—meaningful communication remains rare in practice. This engagement gap is rooted in the deep connections between patriarchy and various societal systems—including financial, legal, cultural, social, health and educational, many of which perpetuate gender-based violence. Religious justifications for gender discrimination and violence continue to present significant obstacles to gender justice advocacy. The lack of awareness of or willingness to engage with faith-based approaches to gender justice can open up space for conservative, religious patriarchal forces to dominate the conversation, hindering progress toward gender equality ([Le Roux & Khalaf-Elledge, 2022](#)).

To bridge this gap, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) established a Community of Practice on Faith and GBV, with a dedicated working group focused on identifying communication barriers between faith actors and policymakers. This toolkit is the result of a year-long collaboration among over 325 working group members. It offers practical guidance to help faith actors and policymakers work more effectively together by integrating GBV prevention and response into faith settings—and incorporating faith perspectives into GBV-related programmes. The ultimate goal is to foster a more inclusive and effective response to gender-based violence.

## Methodology

This toolkit results from the collaborative work of Working Group 3 of the SVRI “Faith & GBV Community of Practice.” The group consists of 325 members, diverse in terms of expertise, geographical location, religious affiliation, and occupation, encompassing researchers, academics, practitioners, faith actors, activists, policymakers, and private sector professionals. The working group focuses on GBV issues relevant to African countries that appear across religions, including female genital mutilation, child marriage, polygamy, levirate marriage, and restrictions on women’s economic or social rights. Working Group 3 aims to address two key questions: (1) How can faith actors and policymakers improve communication about GBV? (2) What are the primary barriers and best practices in these discussions? The group’s discussions and surveys/questionnaires informed the creation of practical tools and resources to promote meaningful conversations at the intersection of faith and GBV, fostering a deeper understanding of different perspectives, identifying sources of legitimacy, and uncovering common ground. Ultimately, the goal is to equip stakeholders with the tools to continue these conversations constructively and build respectful and long-term relationships.

Our methodological approach was informed by feminist ethical principles and participatory research methods and frameworks. The CoP offered a space to directly involve and collaborate with faith actors, policymakers, gender practitioners, researchers, and activists directly affected to produce knowledge for transformative change. Hence, as part of our inquiry, we valued lived expertise, collective learning, and building relationships based on respect, care and reciprocity. In this process, it was important for us to incorporate a diversity of perspectives and experiences in our study and ensure ownership by all participants through continuous solicitation of feedback. For a year, participants engaged in five meetings, where they shared their experiences and contributed to collective insights. These discussions were facilitated using a combination of focus groups, role plays, live polls, and panel discussions, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the topic. Data was collected through these meetings, as well as written contributions of 15 members. Data was organised into emerging themes and supplemented by relevant resources, case studies, and research reports. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, with recurring themes identified through iterative coding and categorised into key insights. The findings reflect a collaborative process, with each participant’s contributions shaping the final analysis. In addition, the authors drew upon their professional expertise and consulted relevant academic and grey literature during the report development to contextualize the findings.

A draft version of the toolkit was shared and collaboratively reviewed with gender and faith experts during a series of workshops at the 69th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW69), enabling further refinement through expert input and constructive dialogue.



The working group's collective approach ensures the insights presented here represent diverse experiences and viewpoints. This methodology emphasises inclusivity and a shared commitment to addressing GBV and improving communication between faith actors and policymakers.

All participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was maintained where requested.

## Who is This Toolkit For?

This toolkit is primarily designed for policymakers and faith actors actively engaged in gender-based violence (GBV) response and prevention efforts. However, it also offers valuable insights and practical guidance to researchers seeking to understand the intersection of faith and GBV, practitioners working on the ground, and educators looking to equip others with the skills for effective dialogue and action in this critical area. This broader applicability stems from the toolkit's foundation in the collaborative knowledge creation and locally grounded stories shared by a diverse group of working group members.

## How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit offers a structured yet flexible approach to fostering a shared understanding and collective action in the fight against GBV. It serves as a practical guide for navigating conversations between policymakers and faith actors. Designed to facilitate effective engagement, the toolkit is divided into five segments: Segment 1 for policymakers, Segment 2 for faith actors, and Segments 3-5 for both groups. Each segment provides actionable steps, practical advice, and considerations tailored to each group's role in these discussions. The toolkit also includes relevant case studies, examples, and two role plays based on hypothetical yet realistic scenarios to demonstrate how to apply these suggestions in real-time conversations.

## For Policymakers

The working group defines policymakers as individuals involved in the creation, implementation, funding, or influence of public policy, such as government officials, legislators, advisors, development partners, or anyone in a position to shape or support initiatives through decision-making or resource allocation.

Policymakers can begin with Segment 1: Homework for Policymakers Before Conversations with Faith Actors to build a solid foundation of religious literacy and contextual understanding. This will prepare them for meaningful, informed, and respectful engagement. Then proceed directly to Segment 3: Sources of Evidence to gather the relevant data, scripture, and legal frameworks that will inform your discussions. In Segment 4: Things to Keep in Mind During the Actual Conversation, you will find strategies to ensure a solution-focused, respectful dialogue. Finally, Segment 5: Next Steps and Follow-Up will help you build long-term collaboration and concrete outcomes.

## For Faith Actors

Faith actors are defined as individuals or institutions whose work is grounded in religious frameworks, beliefs or practices, including religious leaders, scholars, practitioners, and members of faith-based organisations who engage on social or policy issues.

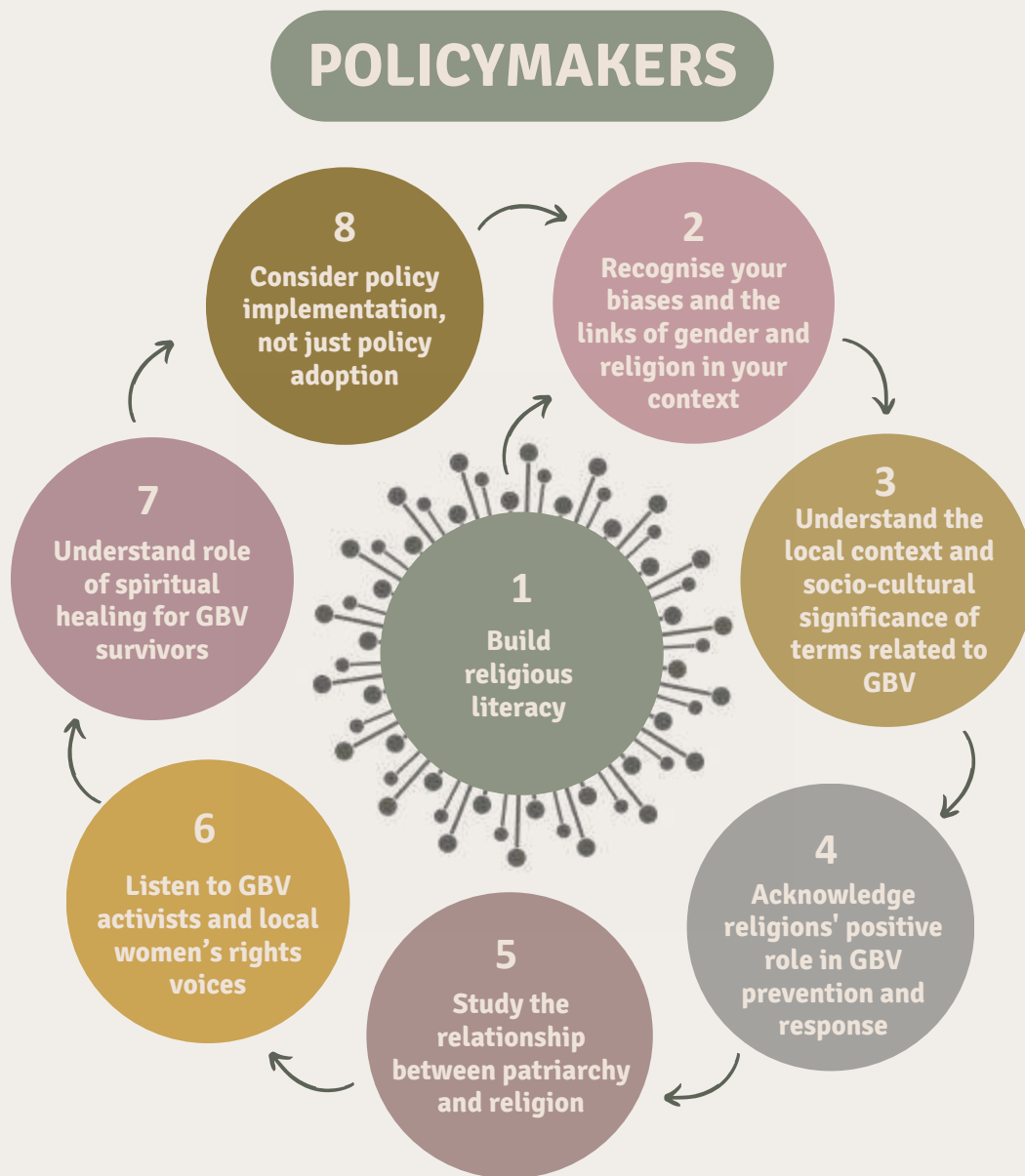
Start with Segment 2: Faith Actors' Advocacy to Connect with Policymakers, which will help you understand how to reach out to policymakers, leverage the knowledge of your contexts, build strong relationships, and advocate effectively. Afterwards, move to Segment 3: Sources of Evidence for the data, scriptures, and frameworks you can use to support your arguments during the discussion. Segment 4: Things to Keep in Mind During the Actual Conversation provides practical guidance for fostering productive dialogue. Segment 5: Next Steps and Follow-Up ensures that your conversation results in sustainable, impactful change.





# The Toolkit

## Segment 1: Homework for Policymakers Before Conversations with Faith Actors



### 1. Build Religious Literacy skills

Developing religious literacy is fundamental for policymakers working on GBV. Religious literacy goes beyond knowing basic tenets; it involves recognising that religions are context-specific, internally diverse, historically and geographically situated, and subject to contested, conflicted, and constantly negotiated interpretations (Moore, 2024). It is the ability to understand how religion influences beliefs, behaviours, social norms, laws, and policies surrounding GBV, while also recognising how societal norms and historical events shape religious practices and interpretations. [Moore's framework](#) on religious literacy, which explores the dynamics of religious authority, interpretation, and practice, is a valuable starting point for meaningful discussions with faith communities.



Furthermore, religious literacy enables policymakers to build their confidence and sense of legitimacy in questioning, resisting, and/or reclaiming religious justifications and interpretations often used to obstruct gender equality.

While often assumed to be solely for faith actors, policymakers must also cultivate religious literacy to ensure informed and nuanced engagement with faith communities. Without this understanding, there is a risk of oversimplifying religious perspectives or misinterpreting faith-based arguments, which can undermine trust and hinder effective collaboration. A robust grasp of religious diversity and the evolving nature of religious thought equips policymakers to engage empathetically and critically with faith actors, fostering more fruitful conversations on sensitive topics like Gender-Based Violence (GBV). This is a long-term investment in developing relationships and collaborations built on trust and mutual respect.

For example, in 2016, [Musawah](#)—a global movement for equality in Muslim families—partnered with UN Women Arab States to deliver a series of trainings on gender-sensitive religious literacy alongside practical skills for organising and mobilising to address gender-based violence and discrimination in Muslim contexts. These trainings helped UN Women staff and partner policy-makers navigate and challenge the ways in which religious teachings are used to justify gender-based inequalities and infused in laws, policies and norms. One clear outcome of this approach was highlighted in a 2018 interview shared by UN Women, in which Hanan Kamar, a legal analyst with UN Women in Ramallah, described how Musawah’s training empowered her to work within one of Palestine’s most traditional institutions—the Sharia courts—to support more progressive stances for women. This example illustrates how religious literacy can open doors for reform *within* religious institutions, not by dismissing faith, but by engaging with it knowledgeably and respectfully. This kind of religious literacy equips policymakers and practitioners to form alliances with faith leaders, interpret religious texts through gender-equitable lenses, and ultimately challenge harmful practices from within the community’s own frameworks. Without it, well-meaning efforts can backfire, be seen as external impositions, or fail to resonate with those most affected.

## 2. Recognise your biases and the intersection of gender and religion in your context

Policymakers should examine their biases, especially concerning gender and religion. Awareness of how personal or institutional biases shape perceptions of religious beliefs is essential. Recognising the influence of personal experiences on current perspectives is vital for productive conversations and ensuring policies avoid misinterpreting religions or alienating faith communities. Harmful patriarchal beliefs, when conflated with religious beliefs to justify GBV, create lasting scars. For policymakers working to end GBV, many of whom may be survivors, engaging with faith-based communities striving for gender justice can contribute to healing personal and collective trauma.

## 3. Understand the local context and cultural significance of terms related to GBV

Understanding and discussion of GBV differ significantly across contexts. Policymakers must grasp the local cultural and religious significance of GBV-related terms. For instance, “honour” and “shame” are central in many communities’ GBV discussions, but their meanings vary. Gender-related terms, like religious terms, are socially constructed, their meanings evolving with socio-economic, political, and ideological shifts. Policymakers should consult local experts and leaders to use terms that resonate positively while promoting gender justice. GBV terminology, including “gender,” “violence,” and “harmful practices,” varies between language.

## 4. Acknowledge religions’ positive role in GBV prevention and response

Despite some religious doctrines perpetuating harmful gender norms, some faith-based organisations and actors are playing a crucial role in combating GBV. Examples include the [Faith to Action Network \(FAN\)](#), a pan-African Christian alliance that trains faith leaders to advocate against GBV and support survivors, encouraging gender justice and human rights within faith communities. Another is the [SIHA network](#) (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa), led by women activists, which trains advocates and faith communities to advance gender equality within Muslim religious and legal frameworks, providing resources and centring women’s experiences in the Greater Horn of Africa. Policymakers should recognise the positive contributions of faith actors, including their efforts to speak out against GBV, support survivors, and promote respect, equality, and



justice through religious teachings

## 5. Study the relationship between Patriarchy and Religion

Patriarchy and religion often intersect in ways that shape gender roles and power dynamics. Understanding how patriarchal structures are reinforced or contested through religious doctrines is essential for designing policies that challenge gender inequality while respecting religious traditions. In many contexts, religion has been used to justify patriarchal norms, including unequal access to resources, decision-making power, and freedom from violence. To avoid reinforcing the patriarchal misuse of religious texts, policymakers must distinguish between patriarchal norms and religious teachings. It's also important to recognise that religions have historically been interpreted by men to serve a societal order that gave heterosexual white men the most power. Khalaf-Elledge's [power analysis tool](#) helps practitioners, activists, researchers, faith actors, and policymakers navigate the complex entanglement of religion and patriarchy. Another example is [Musawah](#), which distinguishes between religion and patriarchy by critically engaging with Muslim legal tradition. Through research and advocacy, Musawah amplifies the voices of scholars and activists working to reform Muslim laws and practices to support gender equality and justice. In 2010, Musawah launched a [research project](#) examining how patriarchy, through concepts like *qiwamah* (male authority) and *wilayah* (guardianship), has justified gender inequality in Muslim family law. By showing that these concepts are juristic constructs, not Qur'anic mandates, Musawah challenges patriarchal interpretations and advocates for feminist re-interpretations to align Muslim family law with contemporary understandings of justice and human rights.

## 6. Listen to GBV activists and local feminist voices

Western development agencies have historically formed strategic partnerships that often prioritise dominant, male faith leaders who hold influence over large segments of the community ([Khalaf-Elledge, 2021](#))<sup>1</sup>. While such partnerships may produce short-term gains in access and implementation, they can undermine long-term gender justice goals—especially when these leaders promote restrictive or non-progressive gender norms. Development strategies must avoid privileging access over values, and instead ensure that partnerships actively support gender equality. This includes consistently seeking out and engaging local GBV activists, survivors, and feminist advocates.

A key challenge is meaningfully engaging marginalised feminist voices, particularly in contexts where Western or “secular” development is viewed with suspicion. Some grassroots activists may hesitate to collaborate, viewing these models as a threat to local culture, religious identity, or their own legitimacy (Wilkinson et al., 2019, Khalaf-Elledge, 2021). Nonetheless, local feminist actors exist in every country and context—many of whom work from within faith traditions—and their voices are essential to shaping effective and culturally relevant responses to GBV. Development actors have a responsibility to understand the gender justice landscape in each setting and to engage with those working at its front lines.

In light of this, policymakers should recognise that partnerships with any organisation—religious or secular—confer legitimacy, resources, and influence, including over gender norms. Gender experts stress that partnerships must be built with actors who have a demonstrated commitment to advancing women's rights, promoting gender equality, and challenging gender-based discrimination, in order to meaningfully contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Khalaf-Elledge, 2021).

## 7. Understand spiritual healing for GBV survivors

Faith communities often offer unique support to survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) through counselling, prayer, peer relationships, and a strong sense of belonging. By promoting scriptural interpretations that affirm dignity and challenge harmful norms, they help foster both individual healing and collective responsibility. These communities can be critical sources of emotional, spiritual, and practical support, helping survivors reconnect with their bodies, build resilience, and find meaning after trauma. Recognising the role of faith in recovery is essential, particularly as many survivors seek guidance and belonging from faith leaders and religious networks ([Pertek, 2025](#)).

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<sup>1</sup> Khalaf-Elledge, N. (2021). *The Religion–Gender Nexus in Development: Policy and Practice Considerations*. Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003112549>



[Tearfund](#)'s research in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) illustrates this well: women actively engaged in faith communities were more likely to experience support and protection, especially when faith leaders were trained to challenge harmful gender norms and promote non-violence. Such engagement was associated with reduced acceptance of violence and increased protective behaviours.

In many contexts, prayer and pastoral counselling are among the first lines of support survivors seek. Integrating these forms of care into GBV response frameworks—alongside psychological and legal support—can offer more holistic recovery options. For instance, [Landman and Mudimeli](#)'s study of religious women in South Africa shows how survivors at the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme rely on prayer for divine intervention, yet often lack broader spiritual resources. The authors advocate transforming harmful religious teachings into affirming messages—such as the belief in equality before God—to strengthen spiritual and emotional support for survivors.

## 8. Evaluate policy implementation, not just adoption

Policymakers need to go beyond simply adopting policies related to GBV and consider how these policies will be effectively implemented. For example, a policy promoting women's legal rights may face resistance in regions where social norms prioritise male authority, often justified by religious beliefs. Therefore, policymakers should collaborate with faith actors to design implementation strategies that respect religious beliefs while advancing gender equality. Laws can be written, but their effectiveness is often hindered by weak enforcement mechanisms, societal resistance, or a lack of political will. In [Egypt](#), for instance, although female genital mutilation (FGM) was officially banned in 2008, the practice continues due to entrenched cultural beliefs, insufficient law enforcement, and limited awareness about the law's significance. This underscores the point that legislation alone is not enough to eliminate harmful practices without strong implementation and societal backing.

The [Maputo Protocol](#) also illustrates the importance of implementation. While it promotes gender equality and the elimination of violence against women, its success has been hindered in countries like Uganda and Kenya, where faith leaders resist reforms that challenge entrenched gender norms, often citing religious doctrines to justify patriarchal structures. Engaging with faith leaders to reinterpret religious teachings in ways that support gender justice is essential, as policy changes are likely ineffective without addressing these interpretations. Faith-based organisations, such as the [Inter-Religious Council of Uganda](#) (IRCU), work with faith leaders to reinterpret scriptures in support of women's rights and challenge harmful practices like child marriage and domestic violence.



# FAITH ACTORS



Faith actors might find it helpful to complete steps 1 and 5 of the policymakers' chart to build religious literacy, since it's not an inherent skill but one that requires intentional, ongoing, and lifelong development. By actively deepening their command of religious literacy and understanding the connections between religion and gender in their specific contexts, faith actors can navigate the complexities of gender norms more effectively and contribute to meaningful discussions, ensuring their insights align with human rights frameworks. Following this, faith actors should proceed to ground their advocacy in the local context, build alliances, and focus on timing and messaging to ensure effective communication with policymakers and drive meaningful change.



## 1. Ground Your Advocacy: Start Local, Use Context, Offer Solutions

Effective advocacy for policy change often begins by starting locally and ensuring efforts are deeply rooted in the specific realities of the communities served. It is important to focus on working with regional and local policymakers before approaching national or international decision-makers. Policymakers are more likely to respond positively when initiatives show a clear understanding of the grassroots situation and address a well-defined need, as this builds credibility for wider engagement. This requires leading with context, statistics and where available evidence of effectiveness; faith actors tend to have a deep understanding and connection to their community and can gather relevant local data, and when coupled with global research and literature, can be a powerful advocacy tool. An important part of this process is to listen actively and ethically to survivor perspectives and analyse the specific cultural and social dynamics driving GBV in their area.

In May 2024, faith-based organisations in Kenya—including the All Africa Conference of Churches and the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA)—convened a [multi-stakeholder forum](#) in Nairobi to address femicide and other forms of GBV. The event brought together faith leaders, civil society, and government representatives to discuss local challenges and develop context-specific solutions. This localised approach emphasised the importance of starting advocacy efforts at the community level and demonstrated how collaborative, grounded engagement can build momentum for broader policy change. Using this deep contextual understanding, informed by local data and experiences, enables faith actors to move beyond simply identifying problems to offer practical solutions that genuinely address identified needs. For example, the African Council of Religious Leaders demonstrated how faith actors can offer practical solutions in Kenya by [training paralegals](#) specifically to provide free legal aid to GBV survivors, tackling justice access gaps directly. Another example is Musawah’s faith-based, practical solutions to address gender inequality in Muslim family laws and practices. Through resources like their [series of policy briefs](#), they equip advocates and policymakers with actionable tools to reform laws that perpetuate GBV, grounded in local realities and religious legitimacy.

To further strengthen these efforts, it is important for faith actors to recognise and align with international frameworks such as [RESPECT](#), which outline the types of evidence needed to inform effective, scalable interventions included in government policy. While not focused specifically on faith, these frameworks can be adapted to local contexts and fields, supporting more consistent, evidence-informed, and collaborative approaches to addressing gender-based violence.

## 2. Build Support: Engage Influential Leaders and Forge Alliances

Effective advocacy requires building strategic relationships, both within community structures and across various sectors, to create a supportive environment for policy change. It is often crucial to first engage gatekeepers; influential religious or traditional leaders frequently shape local norms, and their support—or opposition—can significantly impact policymakers' willingness to act on sensitive issues like GBV. Understanding the roles of gatekeepers, building trust with them, keeping them informed, and ensuring they feel included is vital for navigating local power dynamics. It also helps prevent backlash and ensures community readiness for change that aligns with national laws. For example, the Alternative Rite of Passage (ARP) model used by organisations like [Amref Health Africa](#) in Maasai and Samburu communities in Kenya and Tanzania deliberately involves sustained dialogue with cultural gatekeepers, including Elders. By respecting cultural values while discussing the harms of FGM and offering an alternative ceremony that retains cultural significance without the practice, this approach builds consensus and secures the ownership from these leaders necessary to abandon the practice without inciting major community resistance, thereby supporting national anti-FGM laws.

Partnering with other faith groups, secular NGOs, women's rights organisations, and even supportive government departments pools resources and makes advocacy harder to ignore. Identifying and partnering with allies, especially when engaging with national or international policymakers, is vital to create a strong community of solidarity. The [Faith to Action Network](#) (FAN), mentioned previously, is a good example of bringing together diverse faith-based organisations, civil society groups, and government actors across several African countries. It brings together a diverse range of faith communities—including Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious groups—to work collectively on issues of gender justice and GBV. Through its regional and national networks, FAN facilitates dialogue and joint advocacy initiatives, enabling faith actors and activists to



address harmful practices, challenge gender inequality, and promote legal reforms.

Faith institutions should also be encouraged to establish mechanisms for peer learning and cross-sharing—both within and across different faiths—in partnership with researchers and other sectors. This collaborative approach not only amplifies the impact of faith actors but also ensures that lessons learned and best practices are continuously integrated and scaled, ultimately making advocacy for systemic improvements and policy changes more credible and actionable.

By strategically engaging influential local leaders while simultaneously forging broad alliances across different sectors, faith actors can create a powerful, unified front to advocate more effectively for policy action.

### 3. Focus Your Efforts: Strategic Timing and Designated Campaigns

Making advocacy impactful often requires strategic focus in terms of both timing and scope. Faith actors can significantly boost their message's visibility by leveraging key dates (such as International Women's Day); using established international awareness periods allows advocacy efforts to tap into existing media attention and public discourse, maximising reach towards policymakers. A clear example comes from the Faith Action to End GBV Collective in South Africa, which launched its "[Red Chair Campaign](#)" precisely during the UN 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, linking their call directly to national policy commitments during a time of heightened focus. Complementing strategic timing, designating specific campaigns helps to concentrate resources and provides a clear identity for advocacy efforts around particular goals. Another example comes from the [Zimbabwe Christian Alliance](#) (ZCA). In 2023, ZCA, in collaboration with the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe (UDACIZA), launched a comprehensive campaign during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. This initiative included a march, pulpit campaigns, and media outreach, all aimed at raising awareness and mobilising action against GBV within faith communities. By aligning their campaign with this internationally recognised period, ZCA maximised visibility and engaged a broad audience, demonstrating how strategic timing and focused campaigns can enhance the impact of advocacy efforts. While stand-alone communications campaigns are important for building awareness of available services and mobilising public attention, they are not found to be [effective](#) for preventing or ending violence against women. Employing both strategic timing and focused, designated campaigns helps faith actors sharpen their advocacy and increase their resonance with policymakers and the public.

### 4. Communicate Effectively: Tailored Messages and Digital Tools

Finally, the effectiveness of advocacy hinges significantly on how the message is delivered and through which channels. It's essential to tailor communication to resonate with diverse audiences, including policymakers, community leaders, and the public, who all have different priorities and perspectives. Using appropriate framing – perhaps constructively interpreting scripture, appealing to shared values, or presenting relevant evidence – shows respect and greatly increases the chances of the message being heard and considered. For instance, when the [Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria](#) became a vocal supporter of addressing GBV (around 2008), his public statements and engagement with faith networks required messaging that was impactful both within the religious community (signalling importance to other leaders/gatekeepers) and in the broader public sphere, thereby lending legitimacy and urgency to the issue in ways relevant to Nigerian policymakers. In today's world, it is equally vital to use digital tools strategically. Digital platforms offer powerful, often cost-effective ways to disseminate information rapidly, mobilise support, and broaden participation in advocacy efforts. The [All Africa Conference of Churches](#) (AACC) utilised this approach for a GBV forum in Kenya, employing a hybrid format that allowed stakeholders to join both in-person and virtually. This use of digital technology enabled wider engagement, including potentially remote officials, in crucial policy discussions and strategy development. By mastering both the art of tailoring messages and the use of modern digital tools, faith actors can enhance their ability to connect, communicate, and advocate for an end to GBV. However, it is crucial that such efforts are grounded in evidence-based strategies and continuously evaluated, as poorly designed campaigns can sometimes have unintended negative effects, including increased risk of harm.

## IDENTIFY YOUR SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY

Religious Teachings

Shared values

Lived Experiences

Success Stories

Health & Medicine

Joint Development Goals

Human Rights

Legal Frameworks

Local Women's rights Movements

Gender Equality Principles

### 1. Religious Teachings

Gender-sensitive interpretations of religious texts, emphasising respect, equality, justice, compassion, bodily integrity, and advocating for protection and violence prevention. Gender-sensitive interpretations of religious texts can be used to challenge traditional patriarchal readings. For example, [Al-Azhar University in Egypt](#) has supported women's rights to inheritance and gender equality in marriage, reflecting efforts to reinterpret Islamic texts in alignment with gender justice. Additionally, [Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb](#), the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, in 2019, described polygamy as an "injustice" for women and children, emphasising that monogamy is the rule and polygamy an exception requiring strict fairness. He also called for broader reforms to address women's issues, highlighting their vital societal role. His remarks were welcomed by Egypt's National Council for Women for promoting justice and women's rights.

### 2. Lived Experiences

Emotional, social, and physical impacts at individual, community, and collective levels. Survivor testimonies are powerful in advocating for change and challenging harmful practices. In 2019, the Tanzanian organisation [Sauti ya Wanawake](#) (Voice of Women) published a report based on the testimonies of women survivors of domestic violence. Their personal stories highlighted the psychological and physical toll of violence, contributing to greater advocacy for stronger legal protections and support systems for survivors.



Emotional, social, and physical impacts occur at individual, community, and collective levels. Survivor testimonies are powerful tools for advocacy, helping to challenge harmful practices and influence change over time. In Tanzania, organisations like [Women in Law and Development in Africa](#) (WILDAF) have used survivor stories to support advocacy for stronger legal protections, such as the Legal Aid Act No.1 of 2017 and revisions to the Law of Marriage Act No. 5 of 1971. While survivor testimonies alone do not directly change legislation, they serve as crucial levers within broader, sustained movements pushing for safer environments and improved support systems for survivors of gender-based violence.

Additionally, in 2019, the Tanzanian organisation [Sauti ya Wanawake](#) (Voice of Women) published a report based on the testimonies of women survivors of domestic violence. These personal stories highlighted the psychological and physical toll of violence and have been used by advocacy groups to strengthen calls for legal protections and survivor support services. While the report itself did not directly lead to legislative changes, it contributed to ongoing advocacy efforts aimed at creating safer environments for survivors. This illustrates how survivor testimonies serve as important components within a broader, sustained movement for change.

### 3. Health and Medicine

Health and medical research across Africa provides robust evidence of the severe mental and physical impacts of gender-based violence (GBV), supporting prevention and care strategies. In [South Africa](#), studies have consistently shown high rates of PTSD and depression among GBV survivors, prompting national health policies to integrate GBV response into mental health services. Separately, research in rural South Africa has shown that survivors often turn to faith as a key source of resilience, relying on spiritual practices to cope with trauma ([Ramos et al., 2024](#)). This underscores the importance of integrating both clinical and faith-informed approaches into GBV support systems. In [Malawi](#), the SASA! Faith approach—developed by INERELA+ and MANERELA+—engages faith leaders to challenge harmful gender norms and prevent GBV by framing it as a public health crisis linked to HIV transmission and poor mental health outcomes. Religious leaders use scripture alongside health data to promote non-violence and gender equity, fostering safer, healthier communities. Similarly, in [Kenya](#), multi-faith coalitions have partnered with UN agencies to develop strategies addressing GBV, adolescent pregnancy, and HIV, reinforcing the health risks associated with gender inequality. These efforts demonstrate the value of integrating faith-based engagement with health sector evidence to create culturally rooted, effective GBV prevention strategies.

### 4. Human Rights

Frameworks and international mechanisms recognising GBV as a human rights violation and holding states accountable for protection and justice. International human rights frameworks can help shape national policies on GBV. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ([CEDAW](#)) has been instrumental in addressing GBV as a human rights violation. While CEDAW does not explicitly mention violence against women, its General Recommendations No. 19 and No. 35 interpret GBV as a form of discrimination prohibited under the treaty. These recommendations have guided countries like South Africa to strengthen their domestic legal frameworks, such as the Domestic Violence Amendment Act (2021), to align with international standards and better protect women from violence. The African Union's Maputo Protocol (2003), mentioned previously, also continues to influence GBV-related human rights frameworks across African nations. Countries like Kenya have adopted policies aligned with the protocol to address GBV.

### 5. Relevant Feminist Movements

Intersectional feminist frameworks that engage with faith-based approaches—particularly those rooted in local communities—are powerful tools for advancing gender justice. One notable example is the [Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians](#), founded in 1989 by Mercy Amba Oduyoye. This movement brings together African women from diverse religious backgrounds, including Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions, to challenge patriarchy, GBV, and harmful cultural practices. By using theology, religion, and culture as vehicles for advocacy, the Circle grounds its work in the lived experiences of African women. Through its engagement with faith communities, it has become a leading voice in reshaping feminist discourse and confronting oppressive systems across the continent.



## 6. Shared Values

Common beliefs across cultures, religions, and communities support the protection of human dignity, equality, and justice. Shared cultural and religious values can support GBV prevention. Globally, regional, and national ethical frameworks and standards—such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and regional human rights charters—provide important guidance that complements local faith-based initiatives. In Nigeria, interfaith coalitions such as the [Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace](#) (IDFP) have leveraged shared religious values to promote gender justice and reduce GBV. The IDFP has worked on initiatives such as workshops for women to raise awareness about hate speech and incitement to violence, equipping participants with tools to foster peace within their communities. These efforts align with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and emphasise the importance of shared values in addressing GBV.

## 7. Success Stories

The hope and evidence provided by successful GBV interventions inspire further action. Faith-based interventions have demonstrated their effectiveness in reducing GBV within some African communities. A compelling example is Tearfund's [Transforming Masculinities](#) initiative in Rwanda and the DRC, which empowers faith communities to challenge harmful gender norms by addressing patriarchal beliefs and cultivating positive masculinities. This programme's engagement with faith actors had significantly contributed to a reduction in intimate partner violence in participating communities by 2021, showcasing the transformative power of faith-based approaches to GBV prevention.

## 8. Joint Development Goals

Joint development goals and initiatives provide evidence of collaborative efforts in addressing GBV. Collaborative initiatives that address GBV within the context of the UN's SDGs are increasingly common. The [EU-UN Spotlight Initiative in Nigeria](#) has actively engaged faith-based organisations to address GBV within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). In 2022, the initiative engaged over 1,500 faith actors, providing training and resources to advocate for GBV prevention and promote gender-sensitive laws. These efforts also included community-level surveillance teams to monitor GBV cases.

## 9. Legal Frameworks

Established laws define, prohibit, and mandate responses to GBV, including local health and child protection frameworks. Legal frameworks are essential for providing clear definitions and responses to GBV. [South Africa's Domestic Violence Amendment Act](#) (2021) expanded the definition of domestic violence to include coercive, controlling, spiritual, and elder abuse, and introduced electronic protection orders and mandated safety monitoring. These provisions aim to strengthen protections for survivors and improve the effectiveness of legal responses to GBV. [Malawi amended its constitution](#) on February 14, 2017, to harmonise its laws with international standards, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, by raising the minimum age of marriage to 18. This change closed a legal loophole that previously allowed children aged 15 to marry with parental consent, aligning the constitution with the 2015 Marriage, Divorce, and Family Relations Act and strengthening protections against child marriage.

Many countries complement these laws with [National Action Plans \(NAPs\)](#) on GBV, which increasingly recognise the important role of faith actors in prevention and response efforts. These NAPs often encourage collaboration between government, faith communities, and civil society to improve survivors' access to justice and support. Given that many survivors seek help through faith-based or community structures, it is also vital to consider [alternative pathways to justice](#), such as mediation and restorative practices within faith communities, alongside formal legal processes. Engaging faith actors in these efforts can help bridge gaps between survivors and formal justice systems, enhancing protection and support tailored to local contexts.

## 10. Gender Equality Principles

Foundational standards advocate for equal treatment and support the prevention and response to GBV. The African Union launched the [Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment \(GEWE\) Strategy](#) for 2018-2028



during the AU Summit in February 2019. Building on the 2009 AU Gender Policy, GEWE addresses major constraints to gender equality across four key pillars: women’s economic autonomy, rights protection in peace and conflict, institutional capacity strengthening, and leadership opportunities for women. By promoting gender-sensitive policies across member states, GEWE has been instrumental in driving progress toward gender equality and addressing GBV across Africa.

While the strategy is not faith-specific, its implementation across diverse cultural and religious contexts presents opportunities for faith actors to align with and support its objectives. Faith-based organisations and religious leaders—trusted community influencers in many AU member states—can play a key role in advancing GEWE’s goals by promoting gender-sensitive interpretations of religious teachings, supporting women’s leadership within faith institutions, and collaborating on GBV prevention efforts grounded in shared values.

### Building Legitimacy through Faith and Rights-Based Advocacy in The Gambia

In October 2022, Musawah, in partnership with the Child Protection Alliance Gambia, Women’s Association for Victims’ Empowerment, and Think Young Women Gambia, submitted a *Joint Thematic Report* to the CEDAW Committee for its 83rd session. The report provides a powerful example of how to build legitimacy in GBV advocacy by drawing on religious teachings, lived experiences, human rights principles, and legal frameworks. CEDAW representatives use this report to build their arguments and questions to the Gambian government, strengthening the case for policy change and holding the government accountable to its international commitments.

Grounded in the realities of Gambian Muslim women, the report examines how personal status laws and practices—such as child marriage, FGM, marital rape, inheritance, and polygamy—expose women and girls to structural violence. It highlights the disconnect between laws like the Women’s Act and the Domestic Violence Act, and the ongoing normalisation of these practices.

On polygamy, the report documents how the practice—and even its threat—is used as a tool of emotional and economic control, harming women’s mental health, financial stability, and family life. While legally permitted, the report argues for prohibition without exception, using gender-sensitive interpretations of Islamic teachings that prioritise justice and equality, alongside state obligations under CEDAW.

By combining faith-based reasoning with legal and human rights arguments, the report legitimises calls for reform in ways that resonate both locally and globally—offering a strategic entry point for policymakers and practitioners to address GBV in religious contexts.

#### MUSAWAH JUSTIFICATION FOR REFORM

##### QUR’AN PROMOTES MONOGAMY

- When the Qur’an was revealed, it imposed limitations upon the pre-Islamic practice of polygamy.
- The verse in Surah an-Nisa’ that allows polygamy if a man can treat all his wives justly was revealed after a battle which had resulted in many men being killed, leaving behind war widows and orphans.
- As men were breadwinners in that society, the widows found it difficult to provide for their children. It was in this context that polygamy was tolerated in Islam: to provide for the welfare of widows and the orphaned children.

##### CHALLENGING POLYGAMY

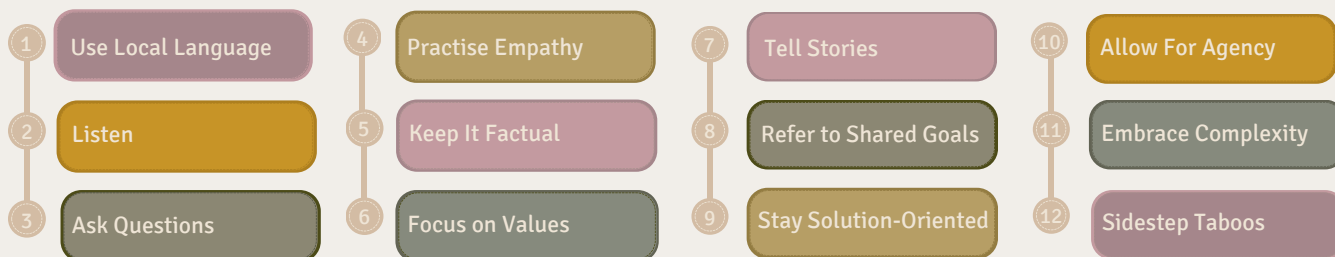
- Polygamy is not an intrinsically ‘Islamic’ practice, as some Muslims believe.
- Polygamy was a practice that existed in various civilizations, religions, and cultures in many parts of the world until it was abolished by law as governments acknowledged the injustices it inflicted on women and children.
- Tunisia has forbidden polygamy on the ground that it is impossible for a man to deal justly with more than one wife. Thus, the continuum of reform suggests that polygamy should be even more restricted than it was in the situation discussed in the Qur’an.

Source: Musawah. (2022). Thematic report on family law and Muslim women’s rights in The Gambia: 83rd CEDAW session



## Segment 4: Things to Keep in Mind During the Actual Conversation

### DURING A CONVERSATION



Engaging in conversations about GBV within faith-based communities requires a thoughtful and culturally relevant approach that acknowledges both the social and personal dimensions of the issue. To create meaningful dialogue and foster a deeper understanding, it is essential to consider a range of factors that ensure respect, inclusivity, and effective communication. Here are some considerations to facilitate such conversations:

#### 1. Use Local Language

Communicating in the community's native language fosters understanding and respect. In Nasarawa State, Nigeria, [Education as a Vaccine](#) (EVA) developed short messages in local languages to raise awareness about harmful practices like female genital mutilation and early marriage. These messages, shared during community sensitisation sessions, enhanced comprehension and engagement.

#### 2. Listen

Active listening builds trust and ensures that community members feel heard and valued. In Ethiopia's Amhara Region, [community conversations](#) have empowered women to discuss issues such as early marriage and sexual relations openly. Participants reported increased understanding of their rights and available support systems.

#### 3. Ask Questions

Encouraging open dialogue through thoughtful, open-ended questions helps deepen understanding and keeps conversations flowing, even after “religious” arguments are invoked. In South Africa's Eastern Cape, schoolgirls led [community dialogues](#) on GBV, using digital tools to facilitate discussions. Their initiative prompted villagers to reflect on and address issues of violence within their community.

#### 4. Practice Empathy

Be critical yet empathetic. Approaching sensitive topics with empathy acknowledges the complexities involved. Be critical yet empathetic, acknowledging challenges and complex situations. Organisations like [Episcopal Relief & Development](#) emphasise the importance of listening without judgment and providing compassionate support to survivors of GBV, fostering environments of trust and healing.

#### 5. Keep It Factual

Utilising evidence-based arguments, including medical studies and statistics, strengthens the credibility of the message. Using evidence-based arguments strengthens the credibility of the conversation. In Africa, a



notable example is the work of the [African Medical and Research Foundation](#) (AMREF), which has used data-driven campaigns to address gender-based violence (GBV) in Kenya. AMREF's research and reports, backed by statistical evidence on the health impacts of GBV, have been pivotal in lobbying for stronger legal frameworks and support systems for survivors. Their data has shown the significant links between GBV and maternal health complications, making a strong case for action.

## 6. Focus on Values

Focusing on value-based messaging rather than directly confronting religious texts or beliefs is more likely to bridge gaps in conversations. Aligning discussions with shared values such as bodily protection, dignity, safety, and well-being resonates deeply. For example, Tanzania's [Women's Legal Aid Centre](#) (WLAC) has used community-based dialogues to highlight the cultural and religious values that emphasise the importance of family unity, protection, and well-being. By framing GBV as a violation of these shared values, WLAC has been able to shift attitudes and encourage faith leaders to speak out against harmful practices like child marriage. This approach has led to greater community support for laws that protect women and girls.

## 7. Tell Stories

Narratives and case studies make the issue relatable and meaningful. In Liberia, the [Young Women's Christian Association](#) (YWCA) has used survivor testimonies in their campaigns to shed light on the effects of sexual and gender-based violence. By sharing real stories from survivors, YWCA has humanised the issue and made it easier for communities to understand the urgency of preventing GBV. Their storytelling approach has been used in schools, churches, and local community gatherings to raise awareness and build support for survivors. This practice has proven effective in reducing stigma and encouraging survivors to seek help.

## 8. Refer to Shared Goals

Emphasising common objectives, such as prioritising GBV survivors and the well-being of all community members, fosters unity. In Kenya, AMREF has implemented structured [community dialogues](#) to address harmful gender norms and promote collective action to end GBV. These community-based dialogues focus on engaging local participants, including community members, leaders, and change agents, to discuss and challenge entrenched gender norms. Through these conversations, the aim is to create a shared understanding and collective commitment to preventing GBV. The approach helps shift attitudes, encourages community involvement, and fosters a sense of collective responsibility in addressing and preventing violence.

## 9. Stay Solution-Oriented

Focusing on practical solutions empowers communities to act. In Uganda, the "[Becoming One](#)" programme, implemented by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and World Vision, offers a faith-based couples counselling course aimed at reducing intimate partner violence (IPV). This programme focuses on practical gender needs by providing immediate support to couples through relationship skills training, including communication, emotional regulation, shared control over financial resources, financial planning, and sexual consent and pleasure. The curriculum is deeply rooted in Christian teachings, challenging traditional interpretations that justify male dominance and promoting mutual submission in relationships.

By addressing these immediate relationship dynamics, the programme empowers couples to create healthier partnerships. Simultaneously, it addresses strategic gender needs by challenging and changing the underlying [power structures](#) and gender norms that perpetuate IPV, aiming for long-term societal transformation. This dual approach exemplifies how focusing on both practical and strategic gender needs can lead to sustainable change in addressing GBV.

This initiative aligns with Moser's (1993) framework<sup>1</sup>, which distinguishes between practical gender needs (immediate actions) and strategic gender needs (long-term changes). By focusing on practical solutions, such

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<sup>1</sup> Moser, C. (1993). *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice, and Training*. Routledge.



as relationship skills training, and addressing strategic needs, like challenging gender norms, the "Becoming One" programme demonstrates how faith-based interventions can effectively reduce IPV and promote gender equality.

### 10. Allow for Agency

Addressing GBV effectively means empowering individuals to make informed decisions rather than prescribing fixed solutions. Providing multiple options for collaboration respects participants' autonomy and fosters agency. In Ethiopia, [UNFPA](#) partnered with the Meserete Kristos Church to address intimate partner violence (IPV) through a faith-based initiative. Instead of offering a one-size-fits-all response, the programme provided couples with a variety of tools and resources, enabling them to choose approaches aligned with their values and circumstances. This flexible model promoted ownership and strengthened commitment to the process—enhancing both relevance and impact.

### 11. Embrace Complexity

GBV is both a social issue and a deeply personal matter, with roots deeply embedded in societal structures, such as patriarchy, economic inequality, and cultural norms. Acknowledging this complexity is essential for understanding the full scope of GBV and its impact. In South Africa, initiatives involving both [community and school-based dialogues](#) have addressed the multiple layers of GBV, recognising that solutions require a nuanced approach that includes both immediate support for survivors and long-term systemic changes. These discussions also focus on deconstructing harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence.

### 12. Side-Step Taboos

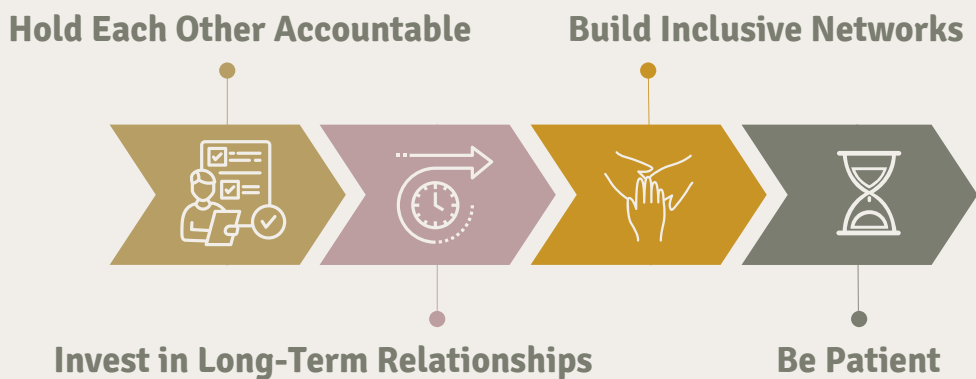
Using careful, non-stigmatising language is crucial when discussing GBV to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or victim-blaming. For example, using active voice to focus on perpetrators rather than survivors (e.g., "The abuser used violence" instead of "She was abused") ensures accountability and clarity. Similarly, it's important to avoid euphemistic terms like "sex" when discussing GBV, as this can obscure the nature of the violence. For instance, organisations like [Raising Voices](#), which operates across 20 African countries to prevent violence against women and children, emphasise the importance of language in fostering supportive environments, which includes careful language use to avoid stigmatisation.

Raising Voices provides resources like the [SASA! Toolkit](#), which is widely used across Africa to address GBV and promote gender equality. This toolkit includes guidance on how language can shape attitudes toward GBV, urging practitioners to use survivor-centred and empowering language while discussing these issues. Their broader advocacy also challenges harmful stereotypes and cultural norms that normalise violence, aligning with the principles described in your text.



## Segment 5: Next Steps and Follow-Up

### AFTER A CONVERSATION



Effective communication about GBV and faith does not end with just one conversation or policy dialogue—it demands long-term commitment, collaboration, and accountability. A crucial next step is holding all partners in the process accountable by following up on their promises, leveraging community mobilisation, and demonstrating how addressing GBV enhances leaders' credibility and legitimacy.

In Malawi, the [Religious Leaders Network for Choice \(RLNC\)](#) has played a key role in advocating for the reform of the country's restrictive abortion laws. In 2020, RLNC publicly supported the Termination of Pregnancy Bill, emphasising the need to protect women's lives from unsafe abortions. Their advocacy, grounded in public health and human rights, urged lawmakers to prioritise women's health and safety. By leveraging their moral authority, the faith leaders successfully held policymakers accountable, ensuring that government commitments to women's health were fulfilled. This example shows how faith leaders can mobilise both the public and political entities, creating pressure for decision-makers to act in alignment with human rights and health imperatives.

Building inclusive networks for change is also vital. Collaborations across diverse faiths, genders, and sectors—between policymakers, faith leaders, civil society organisations, and affected communities—can amplify the voices of survivors and those often excluded from decision-making. In Kenya, over [50 faith leaders](#) gathered for a national roundtable dialogue in 2024 to address rising rates of femicide and GBV. Their collective advocacy reframed GBV not only as a social issue but also as a moral and spiritual concern, fostering shared ownership of the problem and community-driven solutions. These faith leaders used their influence to urge both governments and communities to take collective action, further exemplifying how inclusive networks can be built to address GBV, with ongoing efforts to foster collaboration and accountability.

Internally, they all committed to ongoing collaboration, integrating faith-based approaches with evidence-led advocacy, and holding themselves accountable to supporting survivors and promoting gender equity within their communities

Finally, recognising that meaningful change takes time, it's crucial to be patient and understand that shifting gender norms and enacting policy changes are gradual processes. Investing in long-term relationships is vital; maintaining a long-term vision in GBV-related conversations and building strong, lasting partnerships ensures sustained efforts and a unified approach to combating GBV. For example, [lpas](#) in Nigeria partnered with faith leaders to co-create a sermon guide on GBV, drawing from both the Bible and the Quran. It is now used in various religious settings to shift attitudes and inspire action through faith-based messaging. This is a clear example of how sustained partnerships between policymakers and faith actors can create lasting, context-specific tools that have a local relevance and long-term impact. The ongoing use of the sermon guide demonstrates the value of building trust over time and investing in meaningful collaborations rather than relying on quick fixes.



## **Final thoughts: What Happens If Policymakers and Faith Actors Don't Talk about GBV**

Meaningful and continuous communication between policymakers and faith actors is crucial when addressing GBV. Without clear and open dialogue, there is a significant risk that conservative, anti-rights voices will dominate the conversation, using religious arguments to further restrict women's rights and condone GBV. In such environments, policies aimed at protecting women's rights and preventing violence can be undermined by the co-option of religious teachings to justify harmful practices. Policymakers and faith actors should communicate proactively to ensure that religious arguments are not used to perpetuate discrimination or violence against women.

In many contexts, patriarchal religious leadership is closely intertwined with political power, creating a system where political leaders often rely on the support of conservative religious authorities and constituencies. This interdependence can hinder progress toward gender equality, as political decisions are frequently shaped by prevailing social norms. Development agencies, including UN bodies, typically engage with political decision-makers but often overlook the significant influence of faith leaders and constituencies who shape public opinion and policy. As a result, when religion, tradition, and culture are invoked as obstacles to reform or compliance with international gender equality conventions, these agencies lack a clear response or ways to counter. Simultaneously, religion can play a vital role for many survivors of GBV, offering them strength and support. Amplifying the voices of gender-sensitive faith actors and faith-based initiatives empowers survivors by providing them with tools and language to counter the use of faith and spiritual abuse to justify discrimination. To foster sustainable change, development initiatives must engage both political and faith actors, ensuring a more comprehensive approach to gender justice.

Without communication, conservative voices will continue to dominate, using religion to defend harmful practices and resist progress. Policymakers must create spaces for dialogue with faith actors who have worked hard, often risking their lives, to ensure that religious teachings align with principles of gender justice and human rights, preventing faith from being misused to justify GBV. Only through these open, informed discussions can policymakers and faith actors together to promote equality, challenge discrimination, and support survivors, ultimately fostering a more inclusive, rights-based approach to tackling GBV.

