



Engaging Faith-Based and Religious Leaders in the Spotlight Initiative

Photo: Spotlight Initiative Niger/Aboubacar Magagi

Introduction

The relationship between religion and gender equality is deeply complex. Religion plays a vital role in shaping cultural, social, economic, and political norms in many parts of the world. Similarly, gender roles and the status of women and men in society are deeply tied to the manner in which religious texts have been interpreted for centuries by those in positions of authority—positions held predominantly by men. The role of faith-based organizations and actors in the gender equality agenda is equally multifaceted - while often rooted in patriarchal traditions, they are also among the most powerful agents of social change. In many regions of the world, faith-based institutions, by virtue of their long-standing presence and service in diverse communities, have come to command the trust and respect of local populations. Many of these networks have the capacity to coordinate and execute large-scale social action. Faith-based actors have, for many years, engaged in various facets of gender equality work. In the area of gender-based violence, they have worked to raise awareness of the scale and wide-reaching implications of such violence; they have worked on violence prevention and provided survivors with services. In their efforts to eliminate harmful practices, including female genital mutilation and child marriage, they have worked with institutional and community-based religious leaders to influence attitudes and behaviors, and to advocate for girls' and women's health and security.¹

The Spotlight Initiative equally emphasizes the important role that traditional and religious leaders play in “moving the needle” to end harmful practices and transform cultural norms around violence against women and girls (VAWG). As custodians and gatekeepers of faith-based communities and cultures, engaging religious and traditional leaders in efforts to end violence against women and girls has been proven as a good practice as it has the power to influence entire communities and networks to stand in solidarity with women and girls' right to live with integrity, freedom, and safety, and in particular, reach men and boys in meaningful ways.

In particular, women faith leaders play a paramount role in ending gender-based discrimination and violence and influencing male religious leaders to address these issues vocally, in churches and in other spaces where faith-based leaders have influence.

Key Results and Promising Practices

Legislations, policies

Religious and traditional leaders represent key partners that the Spotlight Initiative continuously engages with, as customary or religious laws - regularly practiced through informal courts - provide the main avenue to address violence against women in numerous countries. Through these partnerships, the Spotlight Initiative works on advocacy and attaining commitments from traditional and religious leaders to **ensure the mainstreaming of a gender-responsive approach in laws and policies addressing violence against women and girls**. For example, in recognition of the common use of informal justice courts as a first recourse for communities in **Uganda**, the Initiative supported the engagement of the Council Courts, as well as cultural and traditional leaders in **gender-sensitive alternate dispute resolution techniques** that are aligned with normative human rights standards.

In **El Salvador**, the Spotlight Initiative partnered with religious civil society organizations to develop a course for pastors on the prevention and detection of femicide and child or teenage pregnancy, to contribute to the construction of non-violent masculinities and improve the responses of faith-based communities towards women and girls who face violence. This has **integrated the importance of addressing VAWG and femicide in the faith-based system, which traditionally never has been, until now**. Given the mistrust with public services, women and girls turn to churches to access essential care services and where there were once antagonistic views, open dialogue has now been established.

¹ See further details on background, challenges and recommendations here: [Religion and Gender Equality \(UN Women\)](#)

Similarly, in **Tajikistan**, the Initiative is supporting capacity development of religious leaders. A training module on Islam and Gender has been prepared together with the Committee on Religious Affairs and Regulations of Traditions to raise awareness of Muslim religious leaders of VAWG. This includes a comprehensive training module for high-level religious officials and a simplified training module for rural religious leaders of community mosques to incorporate tools to end domestic violence into their religious community work.

Mobilizing communities and promoting gender equitable norms and traditions

Spotlight Initiative programmes use traditional ways of mobilising communities discussing issues and thereby promoting gender equitable norms and traditions. In **Malawi, Mali, Mozambique and Samoa**, among others, Spotlight Initiative co-designed community conversation strategies with traditional and religious leaders. As custodians of culture, customs and traditions, Village Chiefs play a critical role in the sustenance and evolution of socio-cultural norms in communities. Involving them in these processes allows programmes to shift the paradigm, positioning traditional leaders as catalysts of social change and transformation. Through these activities, **6,169 influential decision makers**, ranging from parliamentarians to religious leaders, academics, activists and community leaders, were trained and supported to advocate for the implementation of legislation and policies on ending violence against women and girls and on women and girls' rights, gender-equitable norms, attitudes and behaviours with support from the Spotlight Initiative. As a result, in **Malawi**, up to **200 Chiefs are now engaged as champions of the Initiative** and in 2020 alone, their involvement directly contributed to **withdrawing 209 young girls from child marriages and facilitated access to services and the justice system for thousands of survivors of violence**. In **Mali**, the heads of the country's two main religions appeared in Spotlight-supported [television and radio messages](#) denouncing violence against women. In two months, reach included: TV – **over 40 million times**; radio messages – **over 4 million times**; and a social media campaign – **340,000 people**. The number of people visiting Bamako's one-stop centre to address health and domestic violence issues **increased by over 65%** in the following weeks.

In **Malawi**, the Spotlight Initiative supported the **mobilization of a thousand women faith leaders on addressing harmful attitudes in their communities**. A key outcome was their agreement to assist survivors with accessing counselling services through their religious institutions.

Service provision

To ensure effective access to the multi-service centres, the Spotlight Initiative ensured ownership and meaningful engagement of local populations and key community leaders. In **Niger**, the Spotlight Initiative enhanced the technical and operational capacity of four multi-service centres for survivors of violence against women and girls and harmful practices in the target regions of the programme.

The engagement of traditional and religious leaders has been crucial to ensure an effective referral mechanism toward multi-service centres and mobile services and destigmatize the experiences of survivors. Their successful engagement is demonstrated by the fact that among the 124 survivors who visited the clinics, a third were referred by **traditional chiefs and religious leaders**. In **Mozambique**, the programme has worked closely with community and religious leaders, who in the past accepted and even promoted traditional harmful practices but are **now agents of change** to prevent early unions and gender-based violence and serve as links between families and referral services. In one district, community and religious leaders supported the rescue of **15 girls from forced unions**.

Networking, coalition building and new partnerships

Furthermore, the Initiative is supporting networking and coalition building of faith-based actors and other stakeholders to engage in joint advocacy and dialogue and scale up efforts in ending harmful practices. For example, the Initiative in **Uganda** has implemented a good practice through opening the national chapter of the Council of Traditional Leaders in Africa (COTLA) – **a pan African movement of progressive traditional leaders that engages in advocacy, policy dialogue, and supports the scale-up of efforts to transform cultural practices and social norms for the elimination of child marriage and FGM in Africa**. COTLA has already demonstrated results elsewhere and the opening of this new chapter aims to spur impact in Uganda and can inspire wider adoption of this practice across the continent. Historically, cultural institutions have been seen as a problem in Uganda – **the Initiative instead recognizes and respects the rights of indigenous cultures and institutions as part of the solution**. As such, cultural leaders from **14 cultural institutions** committed to incorporate ending violence against women and girls into their institutional agenda.

In the Pacific, churches have a critical role of being key influencers and agents of transformation for communities, and there has been a recent paradigm shift where church leaders and theologians have made conscious efforts to decolonize harmful theology. Thus, the **Pacific Regional Programme** is partnering with the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) to use a spiritual framework for the prevention of violence against women and girls, an innovative practice that **enables churches to become safe spaces and communities for vulnerable populations**. Using the influence of faith networks and innovative collaborative approaches to address the issue, high rates of violence against women and girls and abuse in Christian homes and communities is being recognized, and for the first time, PCC's Strategic Plan includes clear outcomes for religious leaders and faith communities to urgently address the high rates of violence against women and girls in the region. This practice has provided a new solution to accelerate the prevention of violence against women and girls in the Pacific through creating **innovative partnerships with new stakeholders to carry this work forward**. In **Niger, Nigeria, El Salvador and Zimbabwe**, community mobilizers worked with local religious and traditional leaders and state actors to influence their attitudes and practices toward violence against women and girls and to strengthen their response.

This integration of engaging religious and traditional leaders as part of a comprehensive approach across sectors has resulted in **community leaders and service providers joining as advocates** within community dialogues and mobilization activities, as well as through male networks. In **Liberia**, the Spotlight Initiative programme, in consultation with the National Traditional Council of Chiefs and Elders, identified key economic interventions such as climate-smart agriculture and business development skills that could provide alternate source of income for FGM practitioners. **Over 300 FGM traditional practitioners are benefiting from these initiatives.** The Initiative also provided motorbikes to the National Council of Chiefs and Elders to facilitate the monitoring of bush schools that were used for practicing FGM. This has increased their ownership of the fight against FGM, and as a result, a **gradual abandonment of the FGM practice in communities has been observed.**





Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite the level of commitment and engagement across a range of issues by religious and traditional leaders, a number of significant challenges remain. **Cultural norms and harmful traditions continue to threaten progress in addressing gender-based violence.** Though faith-based actors have influenced significant progress across specific contexts, overall, they have not yet succeeded in challenging the patriarchal structures, beliefs, and practices that continue to perpetuate inequality and discrimination against women and girls. They have not always fully engaged in the work of **structural transformation required to secure equity and justice for all.** Furthermore, despite the widespread engagement of women in their religious communities, **women faith leaders remain largely excluded.** These long-standing challenges have been further exacerbated by the global regression in progress on advancing gender equality due to **COVID-19.** For example, conservative pushback to laws penalizing gender-based violence and raising the age of marriage in **Mali** has threatened progress in legislative protection. In **Liberia and Uganda**, cultural and religious sensitivities around ending FGM and resistance on sexuality education and related key bills persist. In order to address these challenges, in **Mali**, the Spotlight Initiative intensified advocacy efforts with religious communities and held information sessions with religious leaders to discuss the danger of gender-based violence on women's and girls' health, while in **Liberia**, the programme has prioritized consultative dialogues with traditional and religious leaders, cultural elders and community members to ensure their voices are heard and to maintain their buy-in. Going forward, it will be critical to reinforce efforts with traditional and religious leaders.

In particular, strengthening the role of women faith leaders, building coalitions among faith actors, feminists and social justice movements, forging new partnerships at all levels, and finally, strengthening advocacy and community strategies to interrogate existing power structures and address barriers to gender equality are important.

Engaging religious and traditional leaders has the power to reach men and boys differently in meaningful ways and influence entire communities and networks to stand in solidarity with women and girls' rights. By working with traditional and religious leaders, the Spotlight Initiative aims to meaningfully partner with powerful agents of social change to shift underlying structures of power within communities, end harmful practices, and transform cultural norms around violence against women and girls. The sustainable elimination of violence against women and girls requires approaches that are community-led and that embrace decision-makers and leaders as allies.

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