

## Joint reflections on religion contributing to violence against women and girls

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# 5

## JOINT REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION CONTRIBUTING TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

*Sandra Iman Pertek and Elisabet le Roux*

In the preceding two chapters, we discussed how Christianity and Islam can adversely contribute to violence against women and girls (VAWG) perpetration, vulnerability and victimhood. Drawing upon the authors' findings, evidence from research and analysis of relevant literature in different countries, the chapters shed light on the negative impacts of religion on experiences of VAWG. Here we offer joint reflections on how religion becomes practically implicated in VAWG and what this means for VAWG policy and practice.

First and foremost, we observe that both religions, influenced by patriarchy, can contribute to VAWG. Gender norms, as a root cause of gendered violence, are often maintained and mediated by religious ideas, expressed as faith-based gender 'schemas' and 'ideals' (Manji, 2018:212). Clearly, then, transforming gender norms will, in such settings, require engaging with religion. Yet, illustrated in both empirical chapters, culture and religion are deeply entangled and mutually co-constitutive. Social and cultural norms and practices blend and merge with religion. Efforts to disentangle culture and religion may be counter-productive against the reality of how deeply emmeshed religion and culture are. For example, in some

communities certain practices such as FGM/C or early marriage may be perceived as religious and as cultural practices in other communities. Numerous interpretations of religious texts (Bible and Qur'an) across time, communities and geographical locations show us how deeply religion and culture are intertwined.

In Le Roux's Chapter 3, we see early marriage as associated with religious practices, while some practices may have no religious justification but manifest cultural expressions, as in the case of marriage by inheritance and honour-based violence, as discussed in Pertek's Chapter 4. Therefore, we suggest that VAWG prevention and response embrace a mixed reality and develop tools to deconstruct these multiple layers of the conditions around which religion manifests. As various practices can mix cultural and religious justifications, initiatives to delink harmful practices from religions, as in the case of female genital mutilation and/or cutting (FGM/C) (discussed in Chapter 4), are essential to mitigate harm efficiently. In practice, the engagement with religion to end VAWG needs to undertake an intersectional approach and develop faith-sensitive tools that could recognise how religion interacts with other factors, such as culture and gender norms, in shaping VAWG experiences, and help reflect these lived experiences in 'ending VAWG' programmes. For example, developing intersectional analysis tools accounting for the role of religion in VAWG would be important (Pertek, 2022).

As both chapters also help us learn more about the entanglement between culture and religion, in our reflections we consider what this means for VAWG prevention and response. We hope that our reflections help inform what VAWG programming in faith settings could look like. We highlight the need to explore the religious, cultural and gendered expressions and understandings of religions in local communities. Practitioners should engage with cultural understandings of religion and misused verses of the scriptures when working with faith communities on VAWG. Thus, we suggest that religious literacy and gender sensitivity among practitioners and policymakers are essential competencies to engage with the most frequently cited controversial interpretations of religious texts and practices that often underpin VAWG in religious settings. Developing gendered religious literacy can help increase awareness

of gendered issues in local religions and challenge stigmatisation of the interactions between religion and VAWG. In doing so, engaging with the insiders of faith communities can facilitate access to local guidance enabling adequate contextualisation of interventions, as discussed by Le Roux in Chapter 3.

Second, currently male-dominated interpretations of sacred texts continue to dominate mainstream understanding in communities, and egalitarian perspectives are rare. Patriarchal systems of religions have direct and indirect influences on VAWG perpetration. Patriarchy impacts religious views through permeating and twisting religious interpretations – as shown by Le Roux in discussion on religious organisations and by Pertek on religious communities. We need to go beyond simply blaming patriarchy to developing approaches that deconstruct and address the patriarchal influences in religion. Such approaches will allow us to challenge the status quo, recognising the diverse factors underpinning patriarchy and gender inequalities. One of the key factors upholding patriarchy is imbalance of power. To help balance power in faith communities, initiatives aiming to dismantle religious misconceptions and harness egalitarian teachings in faith spaces can be a source of transformation for some communities.

Third, reflecting on the last two chapters, we discern that religious beliefs can hinder and impede engagement with the sensitive topics and taboos related to VAWG in religious communities. Le Roux's Chapter 3, in discussing the sex taboo, illustrates how hegemonic views within churches dominate and dictate how sex is perceived, vilifying sexuality, establishing men as in control and encouraging wifely submission. Such attitudes can lead to coercive sex within marriages, often stemming from the lack of awareness of the sexual religious ethics present across different religious traditions. Sexual religious ethics do not condone coercive marital relationships but rather encourage healthy and safe intimacy. In faith communities, sex is mostly not seen as a religious matter. When it is discussed, it is usually in relation to the control of sexuality, focusing on topics such as virginity, chastity and fidelity. Viewing sexuality as taboo has real-life impacts on VAWG programming, reducing entry points for prevention of intimate-partner and

non-partner sexual violence, and requires extensive groundwork to sensitise communities to tackle these violations from within.

Moreover, we observe that faith communities silence victims with religious practices and experiences, directly and indirectly, and in the process normalise abuse. For example, certain narratives in faith communities encourage victims to keep family secrets and stay in abusive relationships, while the imagined protection of family honour through defending women's chastity and reputation can violate women's freedoms and autonomy. Religious ideas and beliefs, alongside social and cultural norms and knowledge systems, shape attitudes to VAWG that may delay help-seeking or even lead to the perpetration of VAWG, as was illustrated in Pertek's chapter with FGM/C and domestic violence in the Dekasuftu Woreda. Divorce is not desirable and often stigmatised. Survivors are expected to forgive perpetrators, change their own behaviours and be good wives. Women's sacrifice in marriage, through enduring abuse silently, can be compared with religious martyrdom, in which victims expect a reward for their suffering hereafter. Perpetrators can use a range of religious beliefs to sustain the cycle of violence.

We also see that faith communities and religious organisations can embody gender imbalances in their structures and certain practices, such as stigmatising survivors, encouraging endurance of abuse and male-dominated leadership, which can seem strategic in upholding social order. Faith spaces can often exclude women from decision-making and make survivors of VAWG feel unsafe and condemned. Faith organisations and communities, as they overwhelmingly remain patriarchal institutions, can reinforce the status quo and men's domination to maintain their power, inadvertently perpetuating patriarchy. Yet they also have an ability to challenge injustice, as we discuss in Chapters 7 and 8. Therefore, efforts to work with religion to address VAWG need to engage with religious structures to help promote women's participation and support a balance shift.

Furthermore, the two empirical chapters illustrate the importance of accounting for religious experiences, such as revelations, dreams, visions and miracles. These can play an important role in the lives of believers and should not be dismissed, for they can affect

the cognition and emotions of both survivors and perpetrators. We noted that in both religions, religious experiences could create spiritual struggles and tensions, for example, around beliefs in redemption, patience, being tested by God, emulating Prophets and other key figures who faced hardships in their lives, often leading victims to minimise their own suffering. Religious experiences may therefore be a part of the 'religious toolkit' that keep women trapped in abusive relationships. Examples of different religious experiences, as discussed in the preceding chapters, show they can help women justify violence and draw strength to endure violence, hindering these women from actually leaving violent situations.

In addition, our empirical chapters highlight the importance of working with women survivors around shame and self-blame to help them to rupture the cycle of violence and transform their feelings of powerlessness. As we noted, women survivors who are religious may tend to rely on religion, as a palliative measure, which can help them to endure abuse and avoid change. This may be counter-productive, as it delays help-seeking. Proactive, religiously inspired tactics are needed to help survivors move on with their lives safely from harmful relationships. Women's empowerment programmes need to raise awareness about VAWG in religious spaces, too. Furthermore, drawing upon female role models featured in religious traditions can help to inspire ambition, confidence and faith-informed resistance to VAWG among religious survivors.

We also see that ambiguous and subjective interpretations of religious texts can shape the vulnerability of women and girls to abuse. Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic religions, although there are theological overlaps and differences. However, the ways in which the scriptures may be (mis)used by survivors and perpetrators to justify VAWG are similar, with the selective use of texts which constantly evolve in the process of interpretation (Askeland and Døhlle, 2015). Verses of the Bible and Qur'an can be misused or taken out of context, while alternative interpretations or forgotten apocryphal texts (narrated by women) are ignored. Even when religious texts are originally narrated, as heard from Prophet Muhammed, and reported by learned women across

centuries (Nadwi, 2013), women's authority can still be undermined. This is the case in Islam, where over half of the religious sources (hadiths) are narrated by women, especially Ayesha bint Abu-Bakr – yet patriarchal readings and interpretations continue to dominate in religious communities.

Finally, both preceding chapters emphasise that religion and gender are socially constructed, embodied and enacted by social actors. Religious constructs that drive VAWG are diverse and located in a social context. Although religion may carry different meanings for different people, it commonly affects people's thinking, feelings and behaviours. Yet, religion carries substance and material basis of religious faith, which may be unknown to outsiders. These transcendent notions of religion intertwined with religious experiences play a meaningful role in shaping the lived realities of survivors of both religions. Such religious influences should be reflected in interventions aimed at responding to their needs.

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