

Joint reflections on religion countering violence against women and girls

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JOINT REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION COUNTERING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Elisabet le Roux and Sandra Iman Pertek

The preceding two chapters explored how two religions, Christianity and Islam, are contributing positively to preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) and responding to it. Relying on findings and case studies from various studies conducted by the authors in different countries, and on the analysis of literature relevant in the field, the chapters offered a rich reflection on the potentially positive contribution of religion to addressing VAWG. Here we use these chapters as the starting point for a more general reflection on the positive contribution of religion to VAWG prevention and response.

First, we recognise the potential of a scriptural approach to resisting VAWG. Both Christianity and Islam have a central sacred text and rich narrative tradition with much authority. This can be leveraged for VAWG prevention and response in different ways, for example, by promoting scriptures and interpretations that call for non-violence and gender equality. A scriptural approach aims for social transformation through re-interpreting scriptures and countering interpretations that lead to gender inequality and VAWG, using scriptures that discuss VAWG to counter the taboo

on speaking out about VAWG and relying on sacred texts' call to charity and support for the oppressed as a motivation for care for survivors.

The challenge is that re-interpretations of scriptures can always be countered by others who offer opposing interpretations. This risk points to the need, especially with religious leaders, to not only offer specific re-interpretations of scripture but to also capacitate the individual to reflect and engage with the sacred texts which matter to them. Many religious leaders (at different levels of the religious hierarchy) have had little or no theological training and/or are often only exposed to the teachings of conservative groups. Therefore, interventions that not simply enforce new ways of reading scriptures, but actually capacitate the individual to be able to read and interpret sacred scriptures in light of wider religious ethics and hermeneutics, is an important step. If a person of faith is only convinced of the importance of gender equality and non-violence based on a certain interpretation of scripture promoted by another person, and not based on their personal engagement with and understanding of sacred scriptures, it is easier for them to be swayed again. What is called for here is a kind of personal transformation, where the individual is internalising alternative interpretations of sacred text and how it applies to contemporary life.

This leads to a recognition of the important role of religious actors, not only as the target group of interventions, but as implementers and partners in VAWG interventions. It requires a person that knows the religion and sacred scriptures well, and has the authority to speak on and about it, to engage and guide other people of faith in such a journey of personal, alternative engagement with sacred scriptures. Secular development organisations and practitioners do not have the knowledge, skill or authority to do so.

Engaging with religion and religious actors, especially when using a scriptural approach, often requires significant theological resources. In this regard, faith-based organisations (FBOs) potentially have a unique contribution to make. Especially larger FBOs may have the staff and resources to develop the needed theological resources, which can then in turn be used by local religious actors. In the case of interfaith efforts, FBOs may be better positioned to

collaborate and develop the needed materials. As was illustrated in the examples from Islamic Relief Worldwide in Chapter 8 and World Vision and Islamic Relief Worldwide in Chapter 7, considerable time, effort and money go into engaging with sacred scripture on gender equality and non-violence. If such theological resources can be developed by FBOs, they can be used widely with and by local religious actors. Such partnerships can be especially valuable for international FBOs, who do not (necessarily) have relationships and trust at local level. By developing tools and offering support, they can capacitate the local religious actors that are better positioned to mobilise communities around re-interpretations of sacred text and transformation of religious practices at local level.

We also see that engaging around sacred scriptures can potentially be a meeting point for interfaith collaboration on addressing VAWG. Where people of different religions have a sacred scripture in common, or where there is respect for all sacred scriptures, there is potential for such collaboration, which can in turn contribute to interreligious cohesion and cooperation. Such interfaith collaboration contributes to recognising VAWG as a common, community-wide problem, rather than a secret, taboo issue that must be kept quiet or blamed on the religious other. A community-wide attempt to address VAWG has a much better chance of succeeding in changing the dominant norms and practices within the community. The feasibility of such interfaith engagement around sacred scripture will depend on the setting and will be exceedingly challenging where there is already interreligious distrust and conflict. For example, such an approach may work in South Africa or Senegal, but arguably not in Nigeria or Pakistan.

What we also see illustrated in the preceding two chapters is that sacred scripture can empower women, including survivors. Through individual reading, listening to and even re-interpreting sacred scriptures, women find the strength and motivation to resist and overcome harmful and violent circumstances. Using a scripture can be an act of empowerment, where the survivor claims the right to read and interpret it as a life-saving, violence-resisting text that prioritises women's safety. For victims who are unable to leave violent relationships, such use of scriptures may even be their only

weapon or act of resistance, yet one that strengthens them and offers them refuge. The case studies in the preceding chapters counter the common belief that sacred scriptures necessarily subjugate and disempower women, due to the patriarchal norms and beliefs propagated in these religious texts. As presented in Chapter 8, women drew immense strength from their engagement with religious texts to cope with violence and displacement. Women can also, through the reading and claiming of certain scriptures, use and experience these scriptures as empowering and liberating. In some cases, it may mean that some women intentionally move away from institutional religion, finding its application as patriarchal and misused to justify VAWG. In other settings, such individualised religious practices may develop as circumstances prohibit engagement with institutional religion (e.g. when a survivor loses touch with her religious community during forced migration).

Religious coping is often dismissed as depriving women of agency or an avoidance of personal responsibility by delegating it to a divine figure. Yet the preceding chapters have explored the importance of religious coping as an agential act by survivors and women at risk of violence. In a situation of great powerlessness, these women seek to change their circumstances through their relationship with their God. By using religious resources such as prayer, fasting or scripture reading, these women actively seek to change their circumstances. For these women, religious coping is a powerful and even political act which does not require institutional religion, thus holding the potential for revolutionary change at an individual level. Such personal engagement with religion highlights the importance of VAWG interventions that work directly with religious women, creating and allowing safe spaces for them to discuss religious matters and drawing on their (and not necessarily on institutional) religious perspectives.

Reflecting on how religious women experience their religion in challenging circumstances, including when experiencing VAWG, emphasises that the international development sector has to stop dismissing the role and impact of religious experiences. The impact of experiences such as prayer, dreams and faith healing is easily dismissed as esoteric, unreal or imagined. However, the experiences

of especially survivors show us that these are critically important resources for religious women, especially in providing mental health and psycho-social support and when working on the healing, reintegration and resilience-building of survivors. Ignoring religious experiences means ignoring a potentially impactful resource for VAWG prevention and response.

The preceding two chapters have also highlighted the importance of respecting and responding to context when engaging religion and religious actors around VAWG prevention and response. The beliefs, norms and practices that can be leveraged for non-violence and gender equality are distinct to each community and depend on context, as do the harmful beliefs, norms and practices that need to be addressed. Practitioners working to end VAWG will need to explore and understand the varying nature and roles of religious resources *within their specific context* and engage appropriately. For example, the language and terminology used when engaging on VAWG will need to be appropriate to the context and will require piloting and testing with communities, taking into account how religious norms inform local terminologies being used. It may even require rethinking terms that have negative associations in that particular setting, such as ‘gender equality’ or ‘women’s rights’. The aim is to find the entry points and framing that invite religious actors and communities to support non-violence and gender equality, allowing them to use their religious resources and integrate their worldview sensitively for joint collaboration and partnership on an equal footing.

The importance of respecting context challenges international development actors to embrace comprehensive conceptualisations of religious literacy. Those who wish to engage with religion and religious actors on VAWG need to know and understand more than only the basic tenets of the specific religion. They need to understand the different and changing religious beliefs, norms and practices in the specific setting and how these generally impact the wider community, but also specifically VAWG in the domestic and public spheres. When striving to develop such an understanding, it is important to be mindful of where such insight and knowledge is found. Informants of various social backgrounds (e.g. in terms of

gender, class, race and sects) with different perspectives will offer a more balanced account of local religious practices and beliefs. In addition, learning about the egalitarian principles and interpretations of religious texts can be important entry points to help forge meaningful relationships with religious actors and develop faith-sensitive VAWG programming. Furthermore, engagement with formal and informal organisations of women of faith can be particularly insightful in the process of recognising existing local resources and actors to address VAWG.

The role, authority, influence and importance of religious leaders in addressing VAWG has been highlighted. They are a critical dimension of working with religion and religious communities and serve as gatekeepers to religious communities. In many religious groups, especially ones with strict hierarchical structures, it is impossible to engage with religious communities without going through their leaders. Their support for VAWG interventions and the messaging of such interventions are often critical to its success. At the same time, the reality is that religious leaders are most often men. Yet, when working on VAWG, the inclusion of the voices and leadership of women is paramount. If only male religious leaders represent a religious community and mediate between the community and outsiders, this means that, once again, only male perspectives are represented. This can lead to women's rights and needs being ignored. Such 'unintentional' exclusion highlights the need to be intentional, strategic and creative to also identify and work with women religious leaders. In many religious communities, this may mean engaging with informal religious leadership and women's groups.

Ultimately, what we see when reflecting on the two preceding chapters as a whole is that religion and religious actors carry great potential and resources for contributing to VAWG prevention and response. Due to the various religious resources that are uniquely connected to religion, religion potentially offers a unique and much-needed contribution to VAWG prevention and response. But for this potential to be leveraged and form part of holistic efforts to address VAWG, the international development community has to be open to recognising and acknowledging the extensive resources

that religion has, and the unique contributions it can make to VAWG prevention and response, in parallel to existing anti-VAWG efforts. Especially in terms of religious experiences, there is often a hesitancy to recognise the impact they have, and therefore the value of religion is excluded in the design and implementation of VAWG interventions, ignoring the lived realities of many survivors. A key prerequisite for fully engaging religious resources for VAWG prevention and responses is for the international development community to recognise their potential as assets and develop adequate capacities for constructive engagement and integration to end VAWG.