

A Muslim perspective

Pertek, Sandra Iman

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A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

Religion as protective resource in violence against women and girls

Sandra Iman Pertek

Introduction

Islam didn't permit men to abuse us, but it's because they are unfair people. Allah said to us that we should be patient and encourage others to be patient, and Allah is so merciful.

(Emina from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:342)

The above statement was shared with me during my fieldwork in Ankara (Turkey), where survivors argued that violence was not part of their religion, and such a belief empowered them to resist violence. Refugee women, I interviewed, insisted that these were rather people who have distorted the true religious beliefs and ideals, which has led to violence against women and girls (VAWG). In this chapter, I explore ways in which religious resources can operate as protective factors in VAWG and support survivors. The discussion is again structured around Ter Haar's religious resources, centring on those resources that protect women's and girls' dignity. Drawing on data collected in Turkey and Tunisia (Pertek, 2022a), I begin by highlighting the vital functions of religious beliefs in meaning-making and resistance building; religious practices in

enabling survivors to cope with violence; and religious experiences in empowering and healing of survivors. I explore how religious organisations and communities deploy their different religious resources to counter VAWG by drawing on my practical experience from a gender policy advisory role and programming in international development.

Religious ideas: Meaning-making and resistance building

Religious beliefs can help women survivors make sense of their experiences and build resistance to gendered violence. Levantine refugee women I met in Turkey relied on their religious thinking frameworks, and faith-inspired narratives of justice, to deal with the VAWG they were experiencing or had experienced. With their support networks destroyed or ruptured due to displacement, they described their religious beliefs and traditions as their only ‘weapon’ against abusive husbands and non-partner perpetrators. Religious beliefs helped these women to resist violence and challenge patriarchal religious interpretations that enabled discrimination and abuse.

Women deployed their beliefs in three powerful ways. First, there were those who used religious sources – *hadiths* and Qur’an – to argue against women’s submissiveness and secondary position in society. Syrian women, for example, reinterpreted the contentious Qur’anic verses (e.g. 4:34 discussed in Chapter 4), contesting male interpretations which may imply women’s subordination. They resisted submissiveness and challenged abuse by reverting to their own reading of the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition, wherein they found a sacred value of women and interpretations condemning violence against them. Such processes of critical reinterpretation empowered survivors to imagine for themselves and their spouses a non-violent future in honourable relationships in line with their beliefs. As one respondent shared:

The prophet said: “Take my advice with regard to women: Act kindly”...If the woman did something wrong, then religion says: “[a woman] must be retained in honour or released

in kindness”. This is what should happen if we can no longer tolerate each other...

(Zainab from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:226–227)

Second, there were some women who understood and explained men as misusing religious sources. Survivors who felt literate in their faith (by knowing religious teachings, ethics and the religious scriptures) questioned men’s ability in the wider community to correctly interpret sacred texts. Some women described men from their religious and ethnic communities as reading sacred texts literally, without the knowledge, and being unwilling to engage in the needed processes of interpretation. A number of survivors challenged, specifically, the contentious Qur’anic verse 4:34, which was used by men out of context to reinforce patriarchal social norms:

This Surah [Chapter], they didn’t complete the Surah until the end, they just took these three words ‘*Alrrijalu qawwamoona Aala alnnisai*’ [men are the protectors/maintainers of women] and make their religion rule to control women. Also, the Prophet PBUH said, ‘the best of you is the best for their family’ and that means his wife, and he said in his last sermon, ‘you should do the best for your women’.

(Sara from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:227)

Some survivors described their spouses as non-practising, irreligious men who in the process of misunderstanding scriptures were enabled to perpetrate harm. These women interpreted that the violence being experienced actually has nothing to do with religion, but is due to not practising religion. Respondents often recalled the religious concept of ‘*haram*’ – prohibited acts – when referring to a woman’s mistreatment and argued to protect women’s rights enshrined in Islam. They believed that a return to ‘pure religion’, that is, the fundamental Qur’anic principles and the Prophetic guidance, would lead to an end in VAWG.

That [VAWG] is because our community is very behind the times and very tough one...I think the cure is to go back to the true *Sunnah* and the true meaning behind the *Surah*

[chapter] in Qur'an...But at this time, with songs, nightclubs, television, and the internet it is very hard.

(Fardous from Syria, interview in 2019)

Most women subjected to domestic abuse argued that Islam protected them from violence, condemned violence and promoted gender equality. This finding is supported by Ghafournia's (2017) study with Muslim immigrant women in Australia who believed that their experiences of abuse and violence stem from breaching religious concepts and not practising one's religion. One respondent in her Australian study said: "I just know that I feel what people are doing in the name of Islam is different from what God or his Prophet really want and say... Now they use whatever is beneficial for them" (Zeinab from Iraq in Ghafournia, 2017:155). Although most interviewed women in Ghafournia's study (2017) differentiated between the Islamic values and cultural beliefs that delayed their response to abuse, some women equated culture with religion and blamed both as barriers to help-seeking. Such findings highlight that VAWG interventions should deploy accurate analysis of the religion-culture and gender nexus with other socio-economic drivers of violence to address VAWG's root causes effectively.

Third, drawing upon the Prophetic traditions (*hadiths* – narrations of Prophetic sayings), religious refugee survivors in Turkey contested patriarchal interpretations of 'abused verses' and did not equate men's responsibility for women's protection and maintenance with control. Several survivors, drawing upon their religious knowledge, reminded their abusive husbands about the Prophetic advice of how to treat women:

...when he beats me, I ask, "does your religion permit you to do this?" and he says yes and that God made it obligatory for women to obey their husbands, but they forget that God ordered husbands to be good men and treat their women fairly...I told him that the Prophet never hit his wives, but he told me I am not the Prophet...

(Maya from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:150)

Many Muslim communities believe in the liberatory properties of the Qur'an which aimed to end the oppression and injustice against women in the 7th-century Arabia, where Muslims believe the Qur'an was revealed. While the widespread misogynist and historical Islamic interpretations cannot be denied, contemporarily the Qur'an is perceived by many Muslim women through feminist and rights-based perspective (e.g. Musawah Movement), emphasising their legal, socio-economic and family rights as important provisions granted to them 13 centuries before feminist movements. Islamic feminists and contemporary Muslim scholars believe that strong emancipatory feminist strains present within Islamic scholarship can revive the concept of gender equality in Islam, based on a faith-inspired framework of gender justice (see Mernissi, 1991; Ahmed, 1992; Ashrof, 2005; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Wadud, 2006). Their efforts contest patriarchal influences and traditionalist interpretations that may produce and legitimise violence against women with the independent analysis of religious sources (*ijtihad*) and interpretation of the Qur'an (*tafsir*) (Minganti, 2015).

Religious practices: Praying and reading scriptures to cope

Among the women I met in Turkey and Tunisia, reliance on religious practices – individual prayers and reading religious scripts – were frequently discussed as an important part of survivors' coping strategies (Pertek, 2022a, 2022b). Refugee religious women relied especially on prayers and the recalling of religious texts to build their mental resistance against violence. Several studies have demonstrated how religious women resist gendered violence in their lives with the help of their religious beliefs (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Ghafournia, 2017). For instance, in the study of Zakar et al. (2012), survivors of domestic violence in Pakistan used prayers and communal religious places to seek protection from violence. In one respondent's account her abusive husband suspended abuse during her prayers due to the respect for this religious practice (*ibid.*).

Prayers enhanced victims' coping capacities and buffered against psychological distress, helping them relieve anxiety and stress (Rutledge et al., 2021). Survivors prayed for protection, to exit from abusive relationships, and for life change because they believed only prayers can change their situations. Obligatory and voluntary prayers, at different times of the day and night, provided women with comfort, stabilised their emotions and relieved anxieties. Prayers also helped women to manage their stress by distracting themselves from their daily worries about their past and future. Sending blessings on the Prophet multiple times and keeping an ablution (*wudo* – ritual purification) helped Muslim respondents to feel at peace. A prayer, especially when bowing (*sujūd*), helped women to gain clarity in their thoughts, comfort and find solutions to their problems. Also, in sadness and anxiety Muslim women reported reliance on bead prayers (*dhikr*) to help alleviate their painful recurring memories, for example, of trafficking or deceased family members. They followed a daily routine of supplications and Qur'an recitation, the daily morning and evening devotions to occupy and pass time with positive spiritual effects, which helped to manage their anxiety, as source of peace:

When I am in *Sujūd* [bowing] I feel a connection to Allah... Every morning when I wake up, I say: "*La Hawla Wala Quwwata Illa Billah*" [there is no might nor power except with Allah]...400 times, and seeking forgiveness 100 times, and sending blessings upon the Prophet 100 times, and I like reading *Ayat Al-Kursi*; when I read it, it brings me peace and relief. It became like a daily habit, I'd recite all of these with the prayer beads, and then I'd feel comfortable afterwards...
(*Lotifa from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:231*)

According to service providers that were interviewed, the ritual daily prayers (that occur five times every day) were for many forced migrant survivors their only lifeline in their extreme hardships. A service provider in Iraq explained that women may delay disclosure and help-seeking for years, but that this did not mean they did not disclose to anyone. They disclosed the abuse to God, seeking justice, protection and prayed against their perpetrators. Connecting

with God, through prayers, helped survivors put their life into perspective with hope:

The religion is like a rope for them to hold on and it gives them peace, it gives them hope, it keeps them be alive, and it keeps them going...their faith and belief plays a very important role in holding themselves together...Most of the cases are reported after maybe one year...or maybe three to five years...in this period, they are managing these things on their own...and this is the point when they are having faith and are believing in God – ‘that person will be punished by God...’

(Zara, GBV Coordinator in Iraq, FBO-INGO, interview in 2019)

Moreover, the Levantine respondents relied on the memorised verses or reading certain chapters of the Qur’an daily, finding therein comfort, confidence and peace. Many sought guidance and hope in the religious text when coping with abuse and when working to rebuild their lives. Some sought protection within the Qur’an, for example, by playing its audio recordings while they slept or by reciting the Qur’anic chapters for their protection properties (e.g. Chapter ‘*Al-Kahf*’ and ‘The Cave’). For many Muslims, the melodic nature of Qur’anic recitation inspires comfort and was used by survivors of violence for healing (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). Respondents who engaged with a religious text believed they talked to God directly, as if they were reading/hearing God’s own words. Some even rejected institutionalised mediators:

Because my book is here, my religion is here, and when you read the Qur’an and you understand that you’re talking to God and these are God’s words, and if you understand what’s written in the Qur’an, you won’t need to go to any Masjid or any Imam...

(Shukri from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:233)

Most of the women said they drew incredible strength from their religion and managed their stress with the help of their religion,

known as religious coping (Pargament, 1997). While religious coping is known to modify emotions (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), overall emotional focused coping is considered less helpful in finding solutions than problem-focused coping (Zakar et al., 2012). Some may argue that religious coping tactics, as dominantly emotion-focused, deprive women of agency because it facilitates them staying in violent relationships. In fact, I argue the opposite. Reflecting on the lived experiences of the women I interacted with, religious coping was to them an agential act of co-opting with God to actively seek to change their situations. Finding strength in religion was an agentic act of survivors, often in powerless situations, seeking to change their situations, using resources (e.g. supernatural power) within their reach and control. Within their religious belief systems, they believed the power of God was able to change their circumstances, and this is the power they called on. Many respondents felt that their prayers, answered by God in some ways, manifested in positive life changes. While it is true that some displaced survivors, in extremely precarious circumstances, did not have access to other avenues to bring change, simply dismissing survivors' religious coping resources would mean undermining their strengths and what mattered for them during their hardship. It would also mean not supporting their coping mechanisms. Moreover, claiming that religious coping in response to VAWG experiences is a passive response (rather than an act of agency) is an act of epistemic violence against survivors, for their worldviews are questioned from the perspective of an outsider's worldviews. In my study, religious coping was crucial for psychological survival of religious women survivors and deeply related to their immense personal strength, too (Pertek, 2022a, 2022b).

There is plenty of evidence demonstrating an association between patterns of religious coping, based on religious beliefs and practices, and mental health constructs. For instance, the fact that many respondents in my research experienced feelings of safety due to their relationship with God corresponds to the claim that the perception of divine control (i.e. the belief that God controls the course of one's life) is reported to have a strong association with positive psychological reappraisal coping, buffering the adverse effects of traumatic events of individuals (DeAngelis and Ellison, 2017).

Religious experience: From empowerment and survival to healing

With the survivors from Syria and Iraq interviewed in Turkey, their religious ideas and practices manifested in lived religious/spiritual experiences. Holding tight to religious ideas and intense religious practices led some survivors to undergoing deep religious and spiritual experiences. These experiences manifested in certain attitudes, moods and motivations, enhancing their coping with exploitation and sometimes encouraging inner transformation, such as mobilising strength to leave abusive relationships. Such experiences arguably also prevented survivors/victims from more serious mental health conditions. Subjective religious experiences – spiritual events, feelings and emotions – shaped respondents' lives through night-time dreams, the realisation of prayers and sensing God's presence before and during forced migration.

Some of the women, I interviewed, reflected on spiritual experiences of survival. Recalling the Qur'an or Bible and praying shaped their spiritual experiences in which they felt God's 'touch' and 'protection' in their lives. This, in turn, deepened their faith. Experiences of safety or survival not only strengthened their faith but also were often described as religious experiences in itself. Through their religious belief, trust in God and envisioning escape and survival, respondents found 'power within' which they attributed to their faith. As religious beliefs and practices made them stronger, a faith-inspired 'power within' grew that was often mentioned in relation to their inner strength:

It's in the Mediterranean Sea that I saw people drowning, I am not a good swimmer, but that day I had the strength to swim and to even save another life. Right in front of me I saw people going down and never showing up again...God has a reason for me to be alive...he is the reason why I am alive, actually my religion got more stronger because I am not scared of death, when it comes, I know I have to go, but God gave me another chance to live, so this made stronger connection with him...

(Ayesha from Sierra Leone, interview in 2019)

Women's continued prayers and invocations shaped their religious experiences by engaging their emotions and feelings which often led to uplifting their spirits and creating sense of safety beyond material reality. Many respondents felt God's protection during life-threatening situations. African survivors described feeling safeguarded by God (in response to their prayers) from kidnapping, sex trafficking and detention (Pertek, 2022b), while Levantine survivors talked of being shielded from war violence, atrocities, honour-based violence, domestic violence and sexual exploitation (Pertek, 2022a).

For many, VAWG experience took on a spiritual meaning-making and itself became part of religious experience, in which survivors' thinking framework centred on the connection with God and the invisible powers. Deep existential meaning-making made them interpret their worldly hardship as part of religious experience which would admit them to heaven. In practice spiritual meaning-making allowed them to positively reappraise their stressors and resist hardship. For instance, a Syrian religious survivor residing in Turkey rejected transactional sex offers in exchange for money based on *hadiths* promising paradise for those resisting illicit sexual relations:

Seven shall be shaded by Allah under his shade on a Day [of Judgment] in which there is no shade except His Shade...a man [woman] invited by a woman [man] of status and beauty, but he says: 'I fear Allah, Mighty and Sublime is He'...

(Mira from Syria, citing a *hadith* narrated by Abu Hurairah¹,
Pertek, 2022a:228)

Second, most respondents came to terms with the situations they were facing through the patience and inner strength they derived from their faith. Three of the survivors interviewed in Turkey explained that the faith-inspired patience and acceptance were what prevented them from committing suicide. These women interpreted their experiences as God testing their patience, and with the desire to be found worthy and good, they restrained from taking their lives. Among the women I met, many lost close family

members, including their own children. One of them, Kameela, lost her son in the ‘Bakery Massacre’ (bombardment on Aleppo), and before that had lost her brother and father. Her spirituality soothed her pain and enabled her to continue her life in faith:

From Allah, he granted me patience. I lost my son, so if it wasn't for Allah's help, I'd have broken down and given up... When my son died, I thought I'd commit suicide, but Allah gave me peace of mind, and prayer and Qur'an helped me become more patient. After I buried my son, I looked up and cried that Allah grants me patience...If Allah hadn't granted me patience, I'd have cried every time I looked at my son's photos...but now...I speak about him proudly, thanks to Allah.

(Kameela from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:238)

For some respondents, profound religious supplications (invocations to God) and framing their personal experiences within religious narratives known from religious scriptures, supported healing from severe psychological distress. Spiritual experiences, such as feelings of empowerment, often reframed survivors' cognitive processes and activated positive emotions in them, such as feelings of peace. Women often talked to God and those who were literate usually read the religious texts too to engage with divine guidance. Many were inspired by stories of their role models (i.e. their Prophets and other key figures) in the Qur'an. Night-time dreams carried different meanings and symbols in their lives and were often interpreted by several survivors as signs from God that gave them courage. For one survivor reading the Qur'an served as a timekeeper for her forthcoming divorce, requesting God that by the time she finishes to read the entire script, she would be already divorced. Such an action operated as a claim on God and an act of belief that brought her resilience. She compared her divorce to, and drew strength from, one of the chapters of the Qur'an:

I read the Qur'an a lot, and patience, I had no doubt that I could be strong to leave my husband. Sometimes, I see my

divorce like Surah [chapter] Youssef; it started with a dream, a vision, and ended with reality.

(*Shukri from Syria, quoted in Pertek, 2022a:228*)

Hypothetically spiritual experiences can also impact perpetrators' attitudes, who may find in their spiritual beliefs an explanation for conflict in their relationships, which may be useful for preventing and responding to VAWG. Anecdotally, for instance, if a perpetrator finds that marital discord is a result of interference from the invisible (spiritual) world (e.g. spells, evil eye and black magic), he may believe that exorcism (removing evil spirits or 'jinns') can help address and manage potential tension points that lead to violence. A wife's disobedience may be seen as spiritual possession which requires interventions to support healing and reconciliation. When seeking alternative religious healing practices, one such practice is *ruqayyah* – a cure method based on the power of the Qur'an recited by religious leaders and traditional healers – which victims and perpetrators may apply in order to remove spirit possession of affected individual and alleviate family conflict. Such religious healing methods rely on the healing from the invisible world by reciting the verses from the Qur'an and was reported in use in various settings, for example, among Rohingya refugees (Tay et al., 2018). Religious healing methods play a significant role in treating mental health conditions in the Muslim world. Further research should explore the role of religious/spiritual experiences in VAWG perpetration and prevention and seek to understand traditional and religious help-seeking behaviours and healing practices. This is needed to inform development of culturally and faith-sensitive psycho-social support and treatment for religious populations.

Religious organisation: Mobilising policy for faith anti-VAWG practice

In this section, I explore how religious organisation can be crucial to opposing VAWG by drawing on work I conducted as a gender practitioner with Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), and in collaboration with Islamic Relief Ethiopia (IRE). I argue that religious organisations and communities can mobilise to oppose VAWG

by leveraging their religious ideas. The communal dimension of religion allows people to organise themselves on the basis of their belief – and I argue that this organisation can be directed against VAWG. Below, I first explore the IRW's faith-sensitive integration of gender into its policy and programmes, followed by an exploration of programmatic examples from IRE enabled by IRW's policy.

A crucial component of the anti-VAWG communal organisation by IRW was the Qur'an, which is a source of guidance in Muslim communities. As a text with authority, the Qur'an remains an important resource which can operate as a foundation for organisational policy development in faith communities. Such process somehow manifested in case of IRW and its global federation in around 40 countries where faith-based imperatives encouraged action for the protection of women and girls. First, in mobilising to oppose VAWG, IRW developed a comprehensive gender policy which encouraged its national offices to develop faith-sensitive VAWG programmes. The global Gender Justice Policy (the development and implementation of which I led between 2014 and 2018) clearly was anchored in the religious values of the organisation, but had a practical imperative to meet humanitarian standards and commitment to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. This policy drew upon an understanding of gender equality that combined Islamic and secular human rights perspectives.

While many consider gender justice as compatible with the Islamic tradition (Carland, 2017; Chaudhry, 2017), some critics may argue the opposite. Yet, IRW's policy makes an organisational commitment to draw upon Islamic teachings for condemning VAWG and dismantling misconceptions around spousal discipline and harmful practices (IRW, 2015). In the process of developing the IRW's Gender Justice Policy, three principles enshrined in the Qur'an served as reference points: dignity (Qur'an 17:70²), equality before God (Qur'an 4:1³; 49:13) and justice in social relations, rights and responsibilities (Qur'an 4:135; 5:8; 16:90). Besides, the international human rights instruments, the policy also mentioned some faith references to women's rights, such as access to resources and education (Qur'an 96:1–5), distribution of inheritance (Qur'an 4:7), property and land rights (Qur'an 4:29), control over earnings and

right to work. In addition, it built on faith traditions that encourage fairness in treatment, care and empowerment of women, for example, partly drawing upon the Qur'an's chapter dedicated to women (Chapter 4, '*al-Nisa*', 'Women'), which calls for unconditional justice: "You who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives" (Qur'an 4:135). In addition, IRW's Gender Justice Policy leveraged Prophet Muhammed's (PBUH) narrations to protect women's rights, emphasising the equal value of women, for example, drawing on the *hadith* narrated by imam Abu-Dawood: "Assuredly, women are the twin halves of men".

Since the adoption of the gender policy, IRW embarked on various initiatives to promote gender justice and end VAWG. This included efforts to develop an Islamic Declaration on Gender Justice (Ashraf and Abukar, 2020), integrated GBV and Child Protection programme (Pertek et al., 2020), joint Channels of Hope programmes with World Vision (see Le Roux, this volume) and IRE's VAWG project (2016–2017). It is this IRE VAWG project that serves as a further illustration of how religious organisation can address VAWG, demonstrating how religious communities can organise themselves to counter it.

In 2016–2017, IRE implemented a VAWG pilot project entitled 'Combating Gender-Based Violence of Women and Girls in the Dekasuftu Woreda of Liben Zone' in the Somali region of Ethiopia. The project was developed based on the findings of a gender assessment, which I coordinated during IRW's gender policy development (some findings of which I have outlined in Chapter 4). This pilot project used a community conversation approach and aimed to (a) engage religious leaders in combating discriminatory norms and decreasing tolerance of VAWG, (b) increase safety of women and girls and (c) promote access to health services for survivors. First, IRE organised theological and human rights training for local religious leaders from the remote areas of Dekasuftu Woreda. Upon their return to their villages, these leaders, together with community volunteers, recruited and trained by IRE, worked to challenge harmful practices and discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls in their communities, by clarifying religious and cultural misconceptions.

A key component of religious leaders' and volunteers' engagement on VAWG in their communities was through facilitated, single-sex and mixed conversation groups. One of the central issues discussed in women's and men's community conversations was domestic violence. To challenge dominant attitudes in local communities that condone and tolerate domestic violence, religious leaders developed Friday sermons to share religious teachings on non-violence and women's rights in the family, encouraging their congregations to restrain from inflicting harm. They, alongside the volunteers, used an Islamic perspective to condemn spousal violence and rape by referencing the Qur'an and the *hadiths* (Prophetic narrations) and emphasised the Islamic traditions of honouring and treating women kindly. For example, they recalled: "The best of you are those who are the best to their wives, and I am the best of you to my wives" (Prophet Muhammed narrated by Sunan Ibn Majah). This very same teaching was mentioned by Sara from Syria (earlier in this Chapter).

In line with the Islamic pro-women ethos, some community members during community conversations stated that women had equal or superior rights to men, referring to the position of a mother in the family. The religious concept which assigns a triple priority of mothers over fathers, as coined by Prophet Muhammed in a *hadith*, served as a key argument in conversations on protecting women's status and interests. This *hadith* explicitly discussed the importance of mothers:

A man came to the Prophet and said, 'O Messenger of God! Who among the people is the most worthy of my good companionship? The Prophet said: Your mother. The man said, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Then your mother. The man further asked, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Then your mother. The man asked again, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Then your father. (Prophet Muhammed narrated by Imam Al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim, Hadith no. 316, An-Nawawi, 1999)

Faith-inspired anti-VAWG messaging was accompanied by a range of behavioural change communication methods to raise public

awareness, including dedicated discussions in school clubs and community role-plays. As a result, the community observed increased reporting of violent incidents and women claiming their social and economic rights, such as the right to dowry:

Previously before the intervention if a marriage gift (mahr) is given to a woman during her marriage lifetime we used to perceive it as a divorce (or sign of it). After the intervention we have learned that marriage gift (mahr) and divorce are not related; and we start to request or accept our mahr at any time.

(Amina, a female group representative, Sero Kebele, IRE quoted in Pertek, 2020:144)

Women, some of whom previously used to tolerate abuse, were reported by IRE to start opposing VAWG, declaring their determination to combat misconceptions and tolerance of domestic violence locally. IRE reported that male group members participating in the community conversations also condemned spousal violence and promised to restrain and raise awareness of others (Pertek, 2020).

Finally, drawing on the religious traditions, some myths concerning violence against women and girls were dismantled in local community and helped several participants reclaim their dowry rights, report abuse and enter education (*ibid.*). One of the myths dismantled by religious leaders was the belief in ‘marriage by inheritance’ (Chapter 4), a form of socio-cultural violence enforced upon widowed women, where they are forced to marry their deceased husband’s brother. During community conversations, religious leaders tackled such beliefs from a religious perspective, explaining that Islam did not allow such marriages. Another practice challenged was female genital mutilation and/or cutting (FGM/C), through raising awareness of the associated health harms and by discussing the *hadiths* opposing the cutting of female genitals. Upon realising FGM/C was a sinful act, dissociated from Islam (Lethome Asmani and Abdi, 2008) and against Islamic teachings, women and FGM/C practitioners cried and sought repentance from God.

Women FGM/C practitioners also questioned why previous religious leaders did not tell them that FGM/C is a forbidden act. Local women, including FGM/C practitioners, declared that they will seek to stop FGM/C in their communities and requested training sessions that will enable them to develop grassroots advocacy capacities. According to IRE reports, the local branch recorded a gradual shift from the severest forms of FGM/C to a complete FGM/C rejection by some practitioners (*ibid*).

In sum, IRW's and IRE's examples illustrate how religious organisations can be crucial to countering VAWG due to their policies and programmes. In their experience, integrating humanitarian and faith-based discourses produced quite unexpected avenues for promoting gender justice and upholding women's rights in local religious communities in ways that were contextually sensitive and arguably more impactful. The case study of Islamic Relief shows that gender policies in FBOs that are grounded in their inherent beliefs and traditions of justice can bring about positive change. The IRE case study also shows the power and potentials of religious organisations to organise on the basis of their belief in effective ways countering VAWG, through mobilising faith-inspired policy and practice.

Conclusion

Religion can operate as a protective resource in VAWG. Religious resources can provide survivors with intellectual and spiritual tools to buffer the effects of VAWG, while the Qur'an as a source of guidance and authority to transform the way religious organisations operate. I identified a range of functions of religion from meaning-making (religious ideas), coping (religious practices), empowerment and healing (religious experiences) and faith-sensitive organisation of communities. Overall the chapter demonstrates that leveraging religious resources can mobilise resistance against VAWG among survivors and from within religious organisations. Findings point to the importance of adapting a faith-sensitive approach to working with religious survivors and religious communities and a continued engagement with religious factors in the

intersection with cultural and socio-economic factors. IRE's project demonstrates how faith communities can organise to counter VAWG based on their religious beliefs and religious practices by engaging with the religion and culture nexus which may engender vulnerability (as discussed in Chapter 4) but also create space for positive social change.

The above findings also highlight the importance of recognising and supporting religious coping strategies among survivors and victims of VAWG to help facilitate their healing. A holistic support includes recognising impact of religious coping on the wellbeing of survivors and helping to resolve spiritual struggles which may undermine recovery. Moreover, religious experiences, rarely considered in VAWG interventions, have profound implications on violence prevention and response and need better integration into interventions. Subjective experiences of religion are deeply personal expressions and observations of the inner and outer world, inspired by invisible world, which profoundly intricate with mental health of religious survivors. Effective responses would require to engage with the religious thinking frameworks of survivors and perpetrators to rupture VAWG effectively.

Notes

- 1 Abu Hurairah (Abdur-Rahman ibn Sakhr Al-Dawsi Al-Zahrani) was one of the companions of Prophet Muhammed.
- 2 All Qur'anic quotations used in this chapter refer to Abdullah Yusuf Ali (2013) translations.
- 3 "People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide..." (Qur'an, 4:1).

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