



Belief in Change

Engaging Religious
Actors to End Violence
against Women and Girls

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Belief in Change: Engaging Religious Actors to End Violence against Women and Girls

Guidelines and Recommendations



Belief in Change: Engaging Religious Actors to End Violence against Women and Girls — guidelines and recommendations

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Foreword

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains one of the most pervasive and persistent human rights violations, cutting across borders, cultures, religions and socio-economic class. Its impact is profound, damaging individuals, families and entire communities.

Many state bodies have recognized the urgent need to put measures in place to tackle this issue. However, much still needs to be done to fight VAWG effectively, and it needs the whole of society to engage. Few states have yet engaged systematically with religious actors. This oversight is important, because religious actors, communities, institutions and organizations perpetuate norms, attitudes and practices that affect the fight against VAWG; some of which are supportive, others harmful. Religious actors, therefore, have an influential role in either legitimizing or combating this type of violence and should be actively involved in efforts to tackle it.

This publication explores how engagement can take place. It looks at the different roles and contributions of religious actors in addressing VAWG. It includes examples of how religious actors are already engaged in fighting VAWG and outlines some ideas for constructive cooperation.

This publication was developed thanks to funding provided to ODIHR's "Capitalizing on Human Dimension Mandate to Advance Gender Equality" project (CHANGE). While mainly for state bodies, any stakeholders working to combat VAWG may find it useful, including service providers, law enforcement, policymakers, civil society, national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and equality bodies.

This publication also aims to inspire more religious actors to address VAWG as part of integrated, multi-sectoral approaches that align with national and international frameworks. We hope it will contribute to more effective strategies and tangible progress in eliminating VAWG to make a real difference in the lives of women and girls across the region. Dialogue and cooperation with religious communities will be essential to this effort.

Maria Telalian
ODIHR Director

1.

Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the publication

This guide explores how state bodies can better engage religious leaders, communities and institutions to prevent and combat violence against women and girls (VAWG). It highlights positive contributions by religious actors, identifies challenges and outlines opportunities for more effective and inclusive engagement between states and religious actors.

The publication aims to support states in fulfilling their human rights obligations by improving their understanding of the role of religion and of religious actors in relation to VAWG. It encourages dialogue and knowledge-sharing to promote multi-sectoral approaches, particularly in settings where religious actors are trusted sources of guidance to victims and survivors of violence.

The guide draws on the key findings of published studies as well as new insights from qualitative research. A diverse range of stakeholders took part in 37 meetings, which included semi-structured interviews, focus groups and expert consultations. These ranged from religious leaders, scholars, civil society representatives, women's rights activists, to law enforcement and equality bodies. Participants shared their perspectives on the trends and causes of VAWG, the role of religious communities in addressing it and the intersection of gender equality and religious beliefs in the context of VAWG.

Building on ODIHR's 2024 publication *Belief, Dialogue and Security — Fostering dialogue and joint action across religious and belief boundaries*,¹ this publication provides practical guidance to help states launch more structured, inclusive and

effective engagement with religious communities on preventing and countering VAWG. It underlines that engagement is not about shifting responsibilities from the state to religious actors, but rather about fostering coordinated responses, centred on the needs of victims/survivors.

Given the scale of violence that women and girls continue to face, the state needs to work with all relevant actors. This includes cooperation with religious actors, women's organizations and other civil society groups as well as cooperation between these groups. In order to end violence against women and girls, all stakeholders must be able to contribute meaningfully and responsibly, and in a manner that respects human rights and provides comprehensive, integrated support services.

1.2 Structure

The introduction outlines the purpose of the publication and summarizes the policy issues covered by subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on understanding and combating VAWG. It discusses the international and regional frameworks established to address this issue, and looks at the role of states in preventing and responding to VAWG. Chapter 3 examines the relationship between religion, religious actors and VAWG. It also explores how religious actors can play a role in both perpetuating and combating these practices, as well as why freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief should never be used to justify VAWG. Chapter 4 discusses how states can engage with religious actors to combat VAWG. It highlights different forms of cooperation, including dialogue, consultations and information-sharing between governments and religious groups. It concludes by presenting guiding principles for successful and ethical engagement with religious actors in addressing VAWG. Chapters 2-4 end with a short summary of key points. The two annexes contain practical resources for states wishing to engage religious actors in addressing VAWG.

1.3 Background

VAWG violates human rights and undermines peace and security. All OSCE participating States (pSs) have committed to preventing violence, to investigating, prosecuting and punishing perpetrators, and to providing victims and survivors with protection and appropriate remedies.² In line with its mandate, ODIHR supports pSs in their efforts to realize these commitments, especially as VAWG continues to be a major problem across the OSCE area.

The drivers of VAWG are complex. They are shaped by intersecting cultural, religious, legal, economic and political factors, and are typically grounded in historical power imbalances.³ While states are responsible for upholding their commitments on human rights, including the implementation of recommendations made by UN treaty bodies⁴ and/or the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO),⁵ addressing VAWG effectively requires coordinated efforts across different sectors.⁶

Several states have adopted ‘national coordinated response mechanisms’ (NCRMs) to strengthen cooperation across the health, justice and social services sectors and civil society. These mechanisms improve referrals, data sharing and survivor-centred support systems, some focusing on women from marginalized groups. Civil society actors play a critical role within these mechanisms, because they do much of the work on the ground with victims and survivors of violence. They fill gaps in services, build trust with survivors and develop expertise in both prevention and response. This being said, it is important to reiterate that, while including civil society in these mechanisms is critical, the burden of service provision should not fall on civil society. Allocating state resources to ensure such services are accessible to all, and at a minimum established standard, is a state duty.

Religious communities, institutions and organizations can complement these efforts by challenging harmful norms and offering contemporary approaches to the study of religion. They could seek to analyse and re-interpret traditional beliefs and texts in light of principles that are core to human dignity: recognition of the inherent worth and equal value of every person, regardless of background or circumstance; the right to respectful and fair treatment; the freedom to make choices and pursue a life with purpose and autonomy; and a general respect for human rights. When religious actors understand the challenges faced by victims or survivors of violence, they can help to provide spiritual support, as well as guiding people to appropriate support services to meet their other needs. Despite their valuable potential, religious actors are often left out of state and civil society responses. During the consultation meetings for this publication, ODIHR identified this lack of engagement as a significant gap.⁷

As a starting point, there can be a gap between states and religious actors simply because of the nature of the relationship between a state and its religious communities, including at the level of effective and even-handed FoRB protections by a state that enables religious and belief communities to operate freely. In some countries, for instance, majority faiths have institutional privileges, while minority religious or belief groups may face exclusion or repression.⁸ In others, all religious or belief communities have limited FoRB protections and face rights infringements.

Guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief for everyone is a basic requirement for inclusive engagement.

A gap can also arise between secular civil society organizations and religious actors due to perceptions that religious institutions are inherently patriarchal and, therefore, resistant to women's rights.⁹ Furthermore, where religious actors use religious arguments and/or human rights language to appeal, for instance, to the protection of freedom of conscience or freedom of religion in debates on issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, this can further muddy the waters of cooperation. Use of human rights language in this way has also led to misunderstandings as to what FoRB actually means, and to claims that FoRB de facto undermines actions to combat VAWG, whereas FoRB is actually needed in order to combat VAWG (see section 3.2 below).¹⁰ Mutual distrust or hostility often leads to fragmented approaches and blocks dialogue, knowledge sharing and exchanges of information and best practices.¹¹

Perceptions may be justified, but they are also often shaped by misunderstandings; e.g., stemming from limited religious literacy or lack of knowledge about human rights.¹² In reality, religious frameworks can either empower or constrain women; religion can be either a risk factor or a safe haven for survivors of violence.¹³ While some religious actors and communities offer support and protection, others perpetuate stigma and silence around abuse.¹⁴ On the one hand, scandals from across the world have shown that religious institutions, just like secular ones, often conceal abuse rather than confronting it. On the other, many religious actors are at the forefront of anti-VAWG efforts, mobilizing against harmful practices and, where requested, offering spiritual support, without proselytizing women and girls in vulnerable situations. Some also help women find the support they need with state-certified professionals and reshape attitudes to VAWG through their leadership and authority.

Making the assumption that religious actors are inherently and uniformly regressive on women's rights risks missing valuable allies. Regardless of their attitudes towards women's rights, ignoring such important actors in conversations and action against VAWG, fails on state duties to counter VAWG. As the International Executive Committee of Religions for Peace has noted, religion should never be invoked to support violence:

“Violence against women is prevalent. It occurs in public and in the privacy of the home. It is unspeakably hurtful to women. It also damages families, communities, and ultimately all of us.

Some have misinterpreted their religious traditions as supporting patterns of violence against women. Our respective religious leaders reject this. Honesty calls us all to acknowledge that violence against women is wrong.

Eliminating violence against women is a religious duty. Doing so will also nourish all for healthier, more fulfilling and dignified lives.”

— Restoring Dignity: A Commitment to End Violence Against Women: A Statement of the International Executive Committee, Religions for Peace.¹⁵

Sustainable change requires urgency and engagement, but for cooperation to be effective, roles and expectations must be clearly defined. States have committed to provide certain services in line with established minimum standards — health care, support for victims of domestic violence and abuse, legal aid, social services — prioritizing safety, security and confidentiality, with appropriately trained staff and accessibility for all women.¹⁶ Cooperation on VAWG between state institutions, women’s organizations and religious communities should be based on complementarity, not parallel religious systems catering to victims’ needs. All work should meet or exceed established minimum standards for survivor safety, accessibility and confidentiality.

Religious actors vary in their awareness of VAWG, the training they have received and the resources they have available to counter it. Effective cooperation involves recognizing good practices, finding ways to address gaps, building relations between religious actors and secular civil society organizations, and drawing on the strengths of religious and secular communities across the OSCE region.

2.

Addressing violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a systemic violation of their human rights, driven by gender inequality and sustained through cultural norms, legal gaps, and institutional failures. States are legally required to combat VAWG through comprehensive prevention, protection, prosecution and redress. Understanding the forms, causes and effects of this violence is the first step in shaping effective responses. This section gives a brief introduction to VAWG, the forms it takes and states' obligations to address it.

2.1 Violence against women and girls: key definitions and prevalence

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one form of gender-based violence (GBV).¹⁷ It is rooted in the gender stereotypes, social norms and power imbalances entrenched in society¹⁸ that aim to assert control over the person targeted.¹⁹ VAWG is distinct from other forms of violence, as it targets individuals because of their identity as women and girls; it begins before birth and runs throughout women's lives.²⁰ The violence can occur anywhere, in public or private, online or offline, at home, school or work, in refugee camps or in places of detention. Anyone can be a victim of GBV. VAWG is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and is often normalized or excused with cultural or religious justifications.

VAWG is defined under international and regional human rights law as follows:

- A form of discrimination that impairs or nullifies women's human rights and fundamental freedoms.²¹

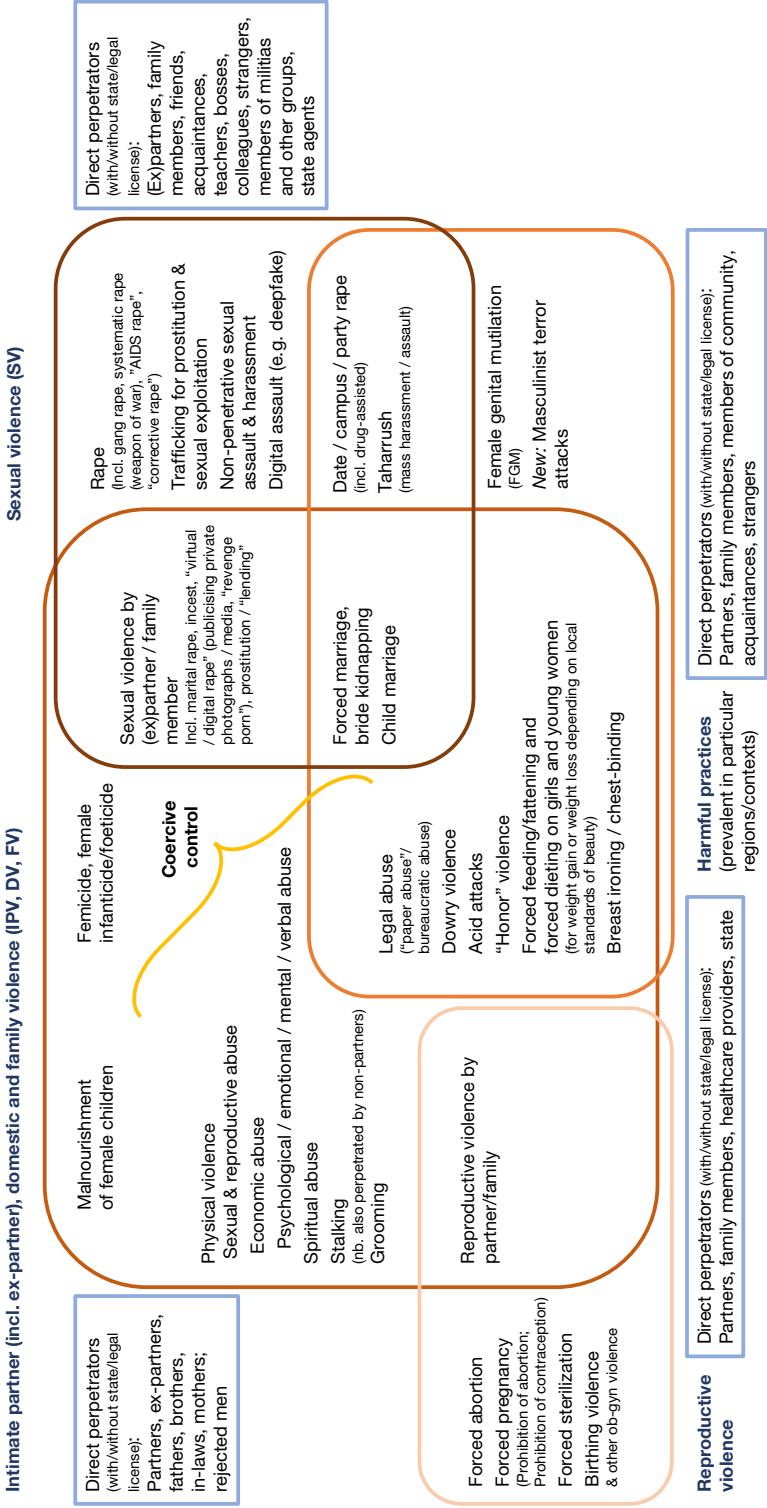
- “A violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”
— The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention, Article 3a.²²
- ‘Violence against women’ is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Definitions for physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence (see Annexe 1) often intersect.²³ For example, domestic violence can be simultaneously physical, sexual, economic and psychological²⁴ and involve threats or actions to frighten, manipulate, control or harm women and girls.

VAWG is widespread, under-reported and persists because it is normalized or tolerated in many societies.²⁶ Statistics offer a sobering insight into the size and shape of the phenomenon:

- One in three women globally have experienced physical or sexual violence; only half seek help and fewer than ten per cent file a police report.²⁷ They may have multiple experiences that accumulate over a lifetime. Barriers to reporting include shame, stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of trust in institutions and a cultural acceptance of certain forms of violence.
- 51,100 women in 2023 were killed by intimate partners or family members; in most cases the perpetrators are known to the women.²⁸
- Within the European Union (EU), one-third of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime; only one in eight women who experienced violent incidents reported them to the police.²⁹
- A 2023 UN Women study found that, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 53.2 per cent of adult women present online had experienced technology-facilitated violence at least once.³⁰
- A 2019 OSCE study found 70 per cent of women in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (c. 16 million women) had experienced some form of sexual harassment, stalking, intimate partner violence or non-partner violence (including psychological, physical or sexual violence) since the age of 15.³¹

Overview: Forms of gender-based violence against women and girls (GBVAWG)



Source: Noa Nogradi, *Global Gender-based Violence Against Women as a Matter for Global Justice Theory: Pervasive Patriarchal Structures and Responsibility for Harm*.²⁵ Adapted from updated 2025 version of the chart by original author, received directly.

- A 2018 OSCE study revealed:
 - Psychological violence was often seen as ‘normal’ or not serious.
 - Sexual violence within marriage was often misunderstood or denied due to societal taboos.
 - Physical acts like slapping were considered ‘minor’ and socially/culturally acceptable.³²

“When a man slaps his wife, it is considered unimportant. He slapped her. He didn’t do anything horrible. He didn’t beat her up.”

— Female, aged 18–37, rural, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnia and Herzegovina.³³

The term ‘gender-based discrimination’ is closely connected to VAWG, meaning both the result of gender inequality and a way to perpetuate it.³⁴ This type of discrimination supports and sustains violence by reinforcing unequal power dynamics. Narratives that women and girls are ‘fragile’ or ‘helpless’ reinforce the view of those trapped in VAWG cycles that they are passive victims, ignoring their own agency and capacity for self-advocacy and change. Attitudes like these undermine efforts to address and prevent violence effectively.

For a variety of reasons, only a minority of women and girls seek help or report incidents of violence to the police. One reason, in addition to the fear of what a perpetrator might do should they report, is that victims fear the reaction — or lack of reaction — from their family, the community or the authorities.³⁵ Another reason might be that the police are perceived to be agents of repression and control or to share societal biases against women or minority groups.³⁶ If women do not feel they are able to report violence against them, then neither communities nor the state will be able to respond effectively, which creates a climate of impunity for perpetrators. This is why police training, including on gender-based biases, and zero tolerance for inappropriate police responses are crucial in strategies to counter VAWG.

The social acceptance of various forms of VAWG is compounded by a worrying backsliding on gender equality.³⁷ Political and economic crises, a reversal in democratization, populist politics and appeals to certain patriarchal values around the world are undermining state policies on gender equality, emboldening perpetrators of VAWG and creating a hostile environment for those seeking to protect human rights.³⁸ In 2019, the OSCE Secretary General noted the “grim picture” of systematic and widespread threats to gender equality.³⁹ There needs to be a paradigm shift; VAWG is unacceptable.⁴⁰

Certain groups are at greater risk of VAWG due to intersectional discrimination. For example:

- Refugees, migrants, ethnic/religious minorities⁴¹
- Women and girls with disabilities, or from rural/underserved areas
- LGBTI individuals⁴²
- Economically marginalized women and girls⁴³
- Women and girls engaged in prostitution
- Women and girls living in institutions.

People belonging to these groups often lack access to justice and support services due to language barriers, fear of the authorities, experiences in their countries of origin, in transit or arrival, or social stigma, especially in tight-knit communities. Women from minority communities may also choose to rely on individual and community-based resources because of their religious beliefs.⁴⁴ Similarly, perpetrators may specifically target their victims in tight-knit religious communities based upon their real or perceived beliefs or taboos related to sexuality.⁴⁵

VAWG carries profound short- and long-term individual and societal consequences, including in the following areas:

- Health: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, chronic pain, permanent fatigue, sleep disorders, higher risk of substance abuse, reproductive harm
- Social: Isolation, lost support networks, continued dependency on abuser⁴⁶
- Economic: Loss of income, restricted mobility, long-term poverty⁴⁷
- Structural: Erosion of trust in institutions, persistent inequality⁴⁸
- Intergenerational trauma: Negative psychological and social effects on whole families, including older and younger generations⁴⁹

When multiple forms of violence are experienced simultaneously, the effects are compounded.⁵⁰ Obtaining justice is not always straightforward, and attempts to do so, without a victim-centered approach, may cause trauma. A growing challenge is the weaponization of the justice system: abusers threaten victims with defamation or libel suits if they speak out, knowing that a woman may not have the time or money to fight a court battle and, in this way, manipulates the victim into continuing to put up with the abuse and/or remaining silent.

War and conflict also increase the risks of VAWG, as documented both within and outside the OSCE region. In conflict situations, VAWG — in particular, sexual violence as a weapon of war — is often employed as a strategy for the displacement, ethnic cleansing, elimination or ‘contamination’ of a community, or as a tool for humiliation, retaliation and revenge. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s was characterized by widespread and systematic rape, alongside other forms of sexual violence. A reliable estimate is that some 20,000 women and girls were subjected to sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone. There are no estimates of the number of men and boys subjected to such violence.⁵¹ More recently, in Ukraine, the UN documented 376 verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence between February 2022 and August 2024, affecting 262 men, 104 women, ten girls and two boys, with many of the men having been tortured in detention centres.⁵²

Victim or survivor?

The terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ are often used interchangeably, but carry different connotations:

Victim:

- An individual in a situation where they face violence
- Often used in the legal and medical sectors, recognizing that many forms of VAWG are crimes
- Focuses on the injury or loss, highlighting the injustice suffered
- Can imply a passive role⁵³
- Accounts for the severity and criminal nature of acts of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)⁵⁴

Survivor:

- A woman or girl who has been subjected to gender-based violence and who has managed to exit violent situations
- Generally preferred in psychological and social support sectors, as it implies recovery, overcoming trauma, resilience and healing
- Highlights agency and empowerment in service provision⁵⁵

The choice of term should reflect an individual's preference and context. Moreover, it is important to treat survivors of violence as experts on their own experiences and recovery, acknowledging their ability to shape their own future and their role in holding perpetrators accountable.⁵⁶

2.2 International and regional frameworks for combating VAWG

VAWG is widely recognized as a severe violation of human rights that states are legally obliged to prevent, protect against, investigate and redress.⁵⁷ The 1993 Vienna Declaration⁵⁸ affirmed VAWG as a human rights violation, prompting the 1994 appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women. The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action⁵⁹ reinforced the calls for co-ordinated, multi-sectoral government efforts to eliminate violence and harmful practices.

Whilst the 1979 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Convention does not explicitly mention VAWG, it has become a cornerstone in recognizing and addressing such violence as a profound violation of human rights and a form of gender-based discrimination. Indeed, in 1992, the CEDAW Committee identified that such violence falls under its scope, as per Article 2 on non-discrimination.⁶⁰ The CEDAW Committee's guidance on VAWG not only authoritatively clarified the scope of human rights law, but was the catalyst for more effective policy to tackle gender-based violence under both international humanitarian⁶¹ and international criminal law.⁶² CEDAW's General Comment 35⁶³ underscores that the prohibition of gender-based violence is part of customary international law. It obligates states to address the root causes, including discriminatory norms and justifications for violence based on tradition, culture or religion.

Complementary international treaties reinforcing human rights protections include:

- **The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**⁶⁴ (Article 7) prohibits torture and inhuman treatment. **UNHRC General Comment No. 20** confirms that states must protect individuals from such acts, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a public or private actor, and includes combating impunity.⁶⁵
- **The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)** does not explicitly mention VAWG, but the UN Committee

has interpreted its provisions, particularly on non-discrimination (Article 2), gender equality (Article 3) and the right to health (Article 12), as a requirement for states to prevent and address gender-based violence as a barrier to women's full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.⁶⁶ General Comments 14 and 16 affirm that VAWG is a form of discrimination that states must eliminate through legal, policy and institutional measures.⁶⁷

- **The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** requires states to protect all children, including girls, from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation (Articles 19, 34, and 39). It recognizes that girls are at specific risk of gender-based violence and obliges states to adopt laws, policies and support systems that prevent and respond to such violence in both public and private settings.⁶⁸
- **The 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** (Article 16) recognizes the heightened risk of violence faced by persons with disabilities and calls for inclusive policies that ensure the prevention of exploitation and abuse, access to justice and recovery services.⁶⁹

Complementary regional standards reinforcing human rights protections include:

- **The Council of Europe's 2014 Council of Europe Istanbul Convention** is the most comprehensive treaty addressing VAWG. As the Istanbul Convention notes, such violence includes domestic violence, sexual harassment, stalking, rape, forced marriage, forced abortion, sterilization, so-called 'honour' crimes and genital mutilation, as well as structural obstacles that lead to discrimination against women and the prevention of their full advancement. It mandates victim protection, prevention efforts and prosecution of offenders, while affirming that VAWG is a public issue and not a private one.⁷⁰
- **EU Directive 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence** establishes the first binding EU-wide legal framework to address VAWG and domestic violence. The directive obliges EU Member States to criminalize specific acts, including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, cyberstalking, online harassment and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. It mandates enhanced penalties for aggravated cases and requires accessible reporting mechanisms, emergency protection measures and comprehensive victim support services, such as rape crisis centres, sexual violence referral centres and 24/7 helplines.

The directive also places strong emphasis on prevention, mandating public education on consent, awareness campaigns and professional training. Member States should adopt coordinated national action plans, establish dedicated bodies for implementation and ensure systematic data collection to inform evidence-based policy. The directive came into force on 13 June 2024, with full transposition into national law required by 14 June 2027. It marks an important step towards harmonizing protections and ensuring greater accountability on VAWG across the EU.⁷¹

OSCE commitments

OSCE pSs have committed to combat VAWG in a body of **OSCE commitments**, which encompass prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership, in line with other international human rights standards. Notably, **the OSCE's 2004 Gender Action Plan**, part of the 2004 Ministerial Council Decision No. 14/04 (Sofia), aims to promote gender equality and empower women across pSs, focusing on areas such as political participation, economic empowerment and addressing VAWG. The plan recognizes VAWG as a severe barrier to gender equality, emphasizing the need for comprehensive legal frameworks, prevention programmes and support services for victims and survivors. It encourages pSs to adopt gender-sensitive policies, strengthen data collection and ensure access to justice for survivors.⁷² A number of other commitments have followed. In Decision No. 15 (2005),⁷³ the OSCE's Ministerial Council acknowledged the role of civil society organizations in combating VAWG and encouraged their active participation in policy development and implementation. In Ministerial Council Decision No. 7/14,⁷⁴ OSCE pSs committed to preventing and combating violence against women, emphasizing the need for comprehensive legal frameworks, effective implementation of laws, and the provision of support services for survivors. Decision No. 4 (2018)⁷⁵ underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of VAWG, including gender inequality and discrimination, and called for OSCE pSs to enhance cooperation, including sharing best practices and strengthening institutional responses.

Prevent, protect, prosecute and redress/compensate

The bullets below present the action states should take in four key areas: prevention, protection, prosecution and providing redress or compensation to survivors.⁷⁶ States should implement robust monitoring and data collection systems across all four areas to ensure that policies are evidence-based and survivor-centered. Many pSs have adopted national action plans and frameworks on gender equality and/or combating violence that take this framework into account.⁷⁷

Prevent

- Tackle root causes that sustain violence by addressing harmful social norms and gender stereotypes;⁷⁸
- Conduct public education and awareness campaigns to shift attitudes and behaviours;
- Embed equality and anti-violence content in school curricula, especially targeting youth, including boys and girls, and shaping healthy relations and respectful attitudes;
- Apply a transformative, intersectional approach involving women and girls, but also boys and men, and ensuring no one is left behind; and
- Design all interventions around the principles of non-discrimination, do no harm and the inclusive participation of girls, boys, women and men, but also accounting for intersectional identities and backgrounds.

Protect

- Ensure accessible, quality support services (e.g., shelters, health care, legal aid, mental health and sexual violence referral centres);
- Tailor services to survivors' age, language, cultural and other needs, maintaining confidentiality and privacy;
- Provide specialized support for high-risk groups (e.g., survivors of FGM, sexual violence or people with disabilities);
- Guarantee service continuity during crises (e.g., pandemics) when risks of violence increase;⁷⁹ and
- Regularly review and evaluate services for effectiveness and reach.

Prosecute

- Criminalize all forms of VAWG and enforce laws effectively;⁸⁰
- Eliminate legal and structural barriers that prevent survivors from seeking justice;⁸¹
- Ensure justice systems are survivor-centred, protecting against secondary victimization, intimidation and retaliation;
- Continue legal and policy reform, aligning with international standards (notably 47 OSCE pSs now criminalize domestic violence, but gaps persist);⁸² and

- Pursue prosecution consistently to create accountability and deterrence.

Redress/Compensate

- Provide clear pathways to redress and compensation, including:
 - Access to criminal injuries' compensation schemes
 - Support to navigate legal proceedings
 - Referrals to specialist services;
- Ensure safe processes are trauma-informed, uphold survivors' dignity and support recovery; and
- Ensure that survivors' experiences and needs inform how redress mechanisms are designed and delivered.

To be effective, it is important that states adhere to certain principles.

Cross-cutting principles for all VAWG measures should:⁸³

- Centre around the victim/survivor, acknowledging women as right holders and promoting their agency and autonomy;
- Prioritize the safety, security and well-being of the victim/survivor and of those involved in assisting them;
- Ensure perpetrators are held accountable for their actions;
- Be designed and implemented with the participation of women and girls;
- Take an intersectional approach to discrimination; and
- Be rooted in the protection and promotion of women's human rights as state duties.

Key takeaways

VAWG is a widespread human rights violation causing physical, sexual, psychological and economic harm in both public and private spheres. Rooted in patriarchal systems, economic inequality and discriminatory norms, it requires a whole society approach to address effectively. VAWG disproportionately affects individuals belonging to vulnerable groups due to intersecting discrimination.

States have the ultimate responsibility to monitor, prevent, protect and ensure justice through legal, social and educational measures; a duty that cannot be delegated. They must ensure accountability and appropriate penalties for perpetrators and appropriate redress for victims/survivors, whilst making broader societal changes to dismantle harmful practices and prevent reoccurrence.

International standards for working with both victims and perpetrators of violence emphasize the need for regulated, professional interventions, operating to clearly established minimum standards. Without strong state involvement, these services risk becoming sub-standard, fragmented, inconsistent and potentially unsafe.

Key international frameworks such as CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention set standards for criminalizing VAWG, addressing its causes and providing survivor-centered support. While states bear primary responsibility, effective action requires coordinated, multisectoral cooperation, engaging education, health, justice, law enforcement, economic development, civil society and religious and other conviction-based organizations to achieve lasting change.

3.

Religion, religious actors and VAWG

While the state has the ultimate duty to address VAWG, partnerships and cooperation with non-state actors are necessary for effective interventions. Religious actors are indispensable for this; not only because religion can influence how VAWG is understood and experienced, but also because many religious actors have strengths and qualities helpful in addressing VAWG. This chapter discusses how religion relates to VAWG, identifies different types of religious actors and presents some of the ways they can contribute to combating VAWG. It includes examples of good practice from organizations and institutions across the OSCE region.

3.1 Religion and VAWG

Religion plays a significant role in many peoples' lives, with an estimated 75.8 per cent of the global population affiliated with a religion.⁸⁴ Religion shapes societal norms and values, how people understand violence, and the responses of individuals and communities to VAWG. Religious actors may face violence due to their religious adherence, particularly where their freedom of religion or belief and other rights are not protected. Ignoring the relationship between religion and VAWG overlooks a critical factor in how people understand VAWG and in assessing possible responses.⁸⁵

When engaging with religion, remember that:⁸⁶

- Religion and/or belief is an integral part of life for many people; for survivors of VAWG as well as perpetrators.

- Depending on the context of the violence, some women exposed to violence may need to distance themselves from religion, while others may find comfort and relief in religion.
- Religions are internally diverse. Even members of the same religious community may interpret and practice their religion in different ways.
- Religions develop over time. What today seems to be an indispensable norm or practice might be reinterpreted and changed over time.
- Religions are embedded in, and shaped by, their context. A particular religious tradition may be interpreted and practiced in very different ways in different cultural, social or geographic contexts.
- Religious and cultural worldviews shape family structures, identity and the experience of harm and healing.
- Religious leaders' actions and claimed beliefs may not be fully shared, or even rejected by followers of the same belief, and more formal positions may be very different from the 'lived religion' of lay people.

In some cases, certain interpretations of religious norms and traditions inform violent practices in very concrete and direct ways, e.g., in the form of so-called 'honour' killings, female genital mutilation, customary practices for widows or other harmful practices. Likewise, religious or cultural norms may not recognize marital rape nor consider child marriage, forced marriage or marital captivity to be forms of VAWG.⁸⁷ The following are examples of how religious structures and actors can interact to cause or prevent forms of VAWG. It is important to note that states have an obligation to act against such practices, both through prevention and ensuring justice to victims.

'Honour' crimes

These are acts of violence primarily committed against women and girls, because family members consider that the family will be dishonoured by the suspected, perceived or actual behaviour of the victim (e.g., committing adultery, entering into sexual relations before marriage, seeking divorce, refusing to enter an arranged marriage). Such acts of violence can go as far as murder. These crimes are considered a means to preserve and/or restore the integrity of the community's cultural, traditional, customary or religious norms the victim has allegedly transgressed.⁸⁸ Religious leaders bear an important responsibility to speak out against such practices and cooperate with state authorities and victim support services to end them.

Child marriage

Child marriage is any marriage where at least one of the parties is below the age of 18. Marriage no earlier than 16 may be allowed in exceptional circumstances defined by law, based on the decision of a judge, taking into account the level of maturity of the child and without deference to culture or tradition. Child marriage is considered a form of forced marriage and a harmful practice violating the child's human rights.⁸⁹ Approximately one in five girls get married during their childhood across the globe.⁹⁰ There are various causes of this practice. In some countries, religious law is (mis)used to support or allow child marriage, often based on specific interpretations of religious texts. In other cases, religious law is seen to explicitly forbid it, leading to lower rates of child marriage.⁹¹ Even in secular states, where religion is separate from law, child marriage rates can also be high and persist due to cultural and religious influences on social norms and socio-economic pressures.⁹² Where such practices are limited to diaspora or immigrant communities, it is important that any interventions do not stigmatize entire communities.⁹³ In such contexts, religious leaders can choose to refuse to bless or officiate any marriage of children.⁹⁴

Religion and early/child marriage

A study by the Turkish Havle Women's Association found that religion is not a factor that causes early marriages in itself, but religion is believed to leave an 'open door' that legitimizes early marriages.⁹⁵

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM is the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons. In some places, it is a requirement prior to marriage and practiced to control the sexuality of women and girls. It has short- and long-term health consequences, including on girls' and women's mental health. It is considered a harmful practice that violates girls' and women's human rights.⁹⁶ As of 2024, over 230 million women had been cut worldwide.⁹⁷

While religious texts do not directly mandate FGM, many people believe it is linked to certain religious doctrines or cultural practices. Religion can influence its continuation, as some communities view FGM as part of their faith or cultural

identity. Local religious leaders are often best-placed to challenge these practices, including by publicly stating that this is not part of religious doctrine. Because of the legitimacy and authority religious leaders enjoy in the local community, they are often able to separate FGM from religion credibly and educate community members about the harms of this practice.⁹⁸ In some cases, religious actors have encouraged the creation of alternative, non-violent rites to substitute violent ones, such as FGM, to ensure the latter are abolished.⁹⁹

Forced marriage and marital captivity

In certain communities, women and girls are at risk of being forced into marriage due to social and religious pressures tied to control of extramarital behaviour and fears of sexual violence. Any perceived breach of the prevailing ‘rules’ can lead to forced marriages aimed at restoring honour or avoiding social and legal consequences. Under threats of violence or public shame, women frequently have little choice but to marry against their will.

This situation is further complicated when religious marriages occur alongside civil ones,¹⁰⁰ especially where religious doctrines either do not permit divorce or require the husband’s consent to end the marriage.¹⁰¹ Women in such unions who face abuse often remain trapped, as religious and social norms emphasize obedience and discourage divorce. The stigma attached to seeking separation often forces women to stay in harmful relationships, while the lack of recognition for religious divorce can expose them to further harms, including ‘honour’-based violence.

Marital captivity arises when women are bound by religious marriages that are also legally recognized and that are often necessary to access rights like residence or inheritance. These marriages may be difficult or impossible to end unilaterally, leaving women vulnerable to ongoing violence, discrimination and prosecution for adultery or remarriage outside their faith. In some cases, women fleeing forced marriages abroad risk losing their citizenship under laws penalizing extended stays abroad, leaving them stateless and without consular support.¹⁰² The limited power of religious courts to annul marriages reinforces these traps, depriving women of freedom and legal protection.¹⁰³

Criteria for identifying harmful practices:

“a) They constitute a denial of the dignity and/or integrity of the individual and a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in the

two Conventions; [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child]

b) They constitute discrimination against women and children and are harmful insofar as they result in negative consequences for them as individuals or groups, including physical, psychological, economic and social harm and/or violence and limitations on their capacity to participate fully in society or develop and reach their full potential;

c) They are traditional, re-emerging or emerging practices that are prescribed and/or kept in place by social norms that perpetuate male dominance and inequality of women and children, on the basis of sex, gender, age and other intersecting factors;

d) They are imposed on women and children by family members, community members or society at large, regardless of whether the victim provides, or is able to provide full, free and informed consent.”

— Joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practice.¹⁰⁴

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA)

Religion can influence violence between intimate partners in different ways. Certain interpretations of religious teachings that emphasize unequal roles in marriages and relationships, such as male dominance or absolute prohibitions on divorce or separation, can be misused to enable abusive dynamics. Some abusers misuse religious texts to justify control or force conversion, which are both forms of spiritual abuse.¹⁰⁵

“Individuals of particular ethnic or religious backgrounds may only feel comfortable discussing issues of SGBV with persons of similar backgrounds.”

— ODIHR’s *Integrating the Issue of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Detention Monitoring: A Guidance Note for Oversight Mechanisms*.¹⁰⁶

Even when religious actors, and especially leaders, look to support survivors, they may not be trained to address intimate partner violence effectively, leading to inadequate or harmful advice, e.g., focusing on relationship counselling despite the power asymmetries in the relationship, rather than prioritizing the safety of the victim.¹⁰⁷

“It is also well-established that clergy and religious mediators, more broadly, are often the first to hear disclosures of DVA from survivors, but often provide harmful advice or are unsupportive.”

— Romina Istratii et al, *Integration of religious beliefs and faith-based resources in domestic violence services to migrant and ethnic minority communities: A scoping review*.¹⁰⁸

Notably, in some contexts, religiosity has also been associated with greater marital satisfaction and lower rates of domestic violence, highlighting the complexity of religion’s role.¹⁰⁹

Online violence

Some women, especially from religious/belief minorities, are specifically targeted due to their (perceived) religious affiliations.¹¹⁰ They may face online violence such as stereotyping, hate speech, different forms of discrimination, cyberbullying or sexualized violence, based on religious attire, practices or comments. In some cases, religious identities are exploited by traffickers or abusers online to manipulate and control women.¹¹¹ Additionally, religious women may experience exclusion from online platforms or self-censor for fear of damaging their image or reputation, or bringing shame on a family/community.¹¹²

Girls, too, are exposed to such violence. A 2025 global meta-analysis of 123 studies from 57 countries found that 8.1 per cent of under-18s had experienced at least one form of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and 16.6 per cent had experienced it at some point in their lives.¹¹³

Legal and systemic harm

In some OSCE pSs, laws exist that condone or minimize VAWG in different ways. For instance, some pSs impose a discriminatory burden to establish the crime of rape, e.g., requiring evidence of resistance, or treating the testimony of a woman as less important than a man’s.¹¹⁴ Gender discriminatory laws are sometimes legitimized by reference to certain patriarchal interpretations of religious norms and values, whether implicitly or explicitly.

Stigma and silence

Certain interpretations of religious norms and practices can, and do inspire non-violence and the empowerment of women and girls (see below). However, certain religious and cultural norms consider what occurs in the ‘domestic sphere’ to be private, to be solely between a husband and wife, and thus contribute to legitimizing violence. Religious taboos and stigma can also make it difficult to talk about and react to VAWG. Religious taboos around sex, gender and honour can justify violence, silence survivors and discourage reporting.¹¹⁵ In some contexts, survivors are met with denial, suspicion or blame.

Certain religious or cultural interpretations that portray women as inferior or hold them to stricter moral standards than men can cause women to internalize blame and feel isolated, ashamed, fearful or a failure.¹¹⁶ When religious leaders emphasize reconciliation, perseverance or preserving family ‘honour’, or offer teachings about revered religious figures who endured suffering, women may feel pressured to stay in abusive relationships or to downplay their suffering.¹¹⁷

“Recently, in a year of record femicides, the country’s [main religious leader] chose to emphasize the need for female subservience in their Christmas address [and said] nothing on the murders. It was a pity that he chose to use his platform in this way.”

— Participant in ODIHR’s 2024 expert consultations.

Psychological violence

This can include spiritual abuse, such as manipulating religious teachings to justify harm, isolating someone from communal worship, ridiculing them to break their self-confidence or forcing them to act against their beliefs or to convert. These practices contribute to distress, social isolation, negative feelings about one’s identity and increased vulnerability to further violence.¹¹⁸

Human trafficking

The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Reem Alsalem, reports that certain actors misinterpret, misappropriate and exploit religious norms, usually invoking a mix of marital norms, including so-called ‘temporary marriages’, patriarchal obedience and/or spiritualist magic or spells, in order to facilitate the trafficking of women and girls and justify their enslavement or sexual exploitation.¹¹⁹ Some traffickers may exploit religious and belief convictions to exercise

control over those being trafficked, including spiritual coercion and threats of divine punishment.¹²⁰

Interview with Jane Lasonder, Vice-chair of ODIHR's International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (ISTAC)

Jane Lasonder is chair of the Hope for Justice Survivor Leadership Council and lived experience advisory panel member of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (MSPEC). She sits on the UK interparliamentary task force on human trafficking. A survivor of child sexual exploitation and trafficking, Jane works to raise awareness about modern slavery and human trafficking with governments and healthcare workers. As a Christian, Jane also has experience of training actors within Christian communities in the UK and further afield.

What challenges exist in religious or belief communities when it comes to raising awareness about modern-day slavery and human trafficking?

The challenges vary. In some communities, there are visible efforts, such as helpline numbers posted on walls or safeguarding policies in place, which is a start. In others, there is a culture of silence and shame, especially when it comes to issues like exploitation or abuse. Many communities struggle to acknowledge that human trafficking and exploitation could happen internally or involve their own women or girls. There's often a reluctance to recognize such realities, because they are seen as embarrassing or shameful, making it harder for individuals to come forward and get the help they need. Breaking these taboos is crucial, and for that, greater awareness is needed, especially around the lived experiences of trafficked women and girls.

Let me give you an example. I met a young woman from a strict religious community who was rescued from forced prostitution in the Netherlands. She returned to her church in Hungary hoping for support, but instead, the priest pointed at her and said, "You're a prostitute. Get out." This incident highlights how religious leaders, who hold significant influence, may not understand the complexities of human trafficking, especially for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In some cases, their lack of awareness can lead to families abandoning survivors, believing them to be beyond help.

Do you think religious leaders have an important role to play in countering violence against women and girls (VAWG)?

Yes, religious leaders are influencers in their communities and can be either a help or a hindrance in addressing issues like human trafficking and gender-based violence. I've met many religious leaders who are genuinely kind and want to help. They offer practical support, meals, prayers and a sense of community to those in need. However, when someone comes to them saying, "I'm being exploited", a simple prayer or words of comfort are not enough.

While offering spiritual support is important, it doesn't solve the immediate problem. If someone is being trafficked, they need practical guidance on how to escape, where to report it and how to get help. Sending someone to a psychologist isn't enough if the underlying danger is not addressed. It's like leaving the taps on in a house and, when it starts to flood, using towels to mop up the water when you need to turn off the taps. We need to address the root cause. Religious leaders should be equipped to recognize the signs of trafficking and know how to take the next steps, whether that's going with someone to the police or connecting them to the right kind of support services.

What advice would you give to communities wondering where to start in the fight against human trafficking?

The first step is to break the silence. Keeping such issues hidden only protects the perpetrators. Denying that trafficking exists within a community is like turning a blind eye to child abuse. If you know something is happening, don't hide it. Acknowledge it and take action. Ignoring the issue out of pride or embarrassment only enables the perpetrators to continue so that those who did nothing can now share their guilt.

Communities need to be proactive in raising awareness, through training, education and open discussion of the risks of human trafficking and vulnerabilities to exploitation. Leadership should be trained to identify the signs of trafficking, to understand the trauma of victims and the proper steps to take. This includes knowing how to report it and what resources are available for support. Even if leaders recognize the problem, they might not know who to call or what steps to follow. So, making sure that everyone involved knows their responsibilities and has access to the right information

is key. Leaders could play a proactive role as members of multidisciplinary teams in identifying and referring both victims and potential victims, serving as part of the referral mechanism at the community level.

Educational materials and resources should be widely available, and there needs to be a collective will to use them. For example, offering training in religious communities about how to spot the signs of trafficking or providing materials in places of worship could be life-saving. Training can be facilitated or conducted in partnership with religious leaders.

It's also important for religious leaders to build relationships with local law enforcement and social services, so when a situation arises, they know how to respond. One practical challenge I've seen is that, even when religious leaders know how to report trafficking, they may encounter hurdles linked to internal policies and protocols. Even when they know to go to the police, they also need to know what the police should do. I've met law enforcement officers unfamiliar with their own national referral mechanisms for human trafficking. There needs to be better coordination between faith communities, the police and support services. If everyone knows their role and follows clear procedures, it will be much easier to address trafficking in a holistic way.

How can the state best engage with religious communities to counter VAWG?

Engagement between religious communities and state actors is crucial. The state should look for opportunities to build trust and foster collaboration. I recall a positive experience in the UK when, during a period of heightened tensions surrounding refugees, police officers visited multicultural churches to introduce themselves and open lines of communication. They stayed for tea and conversation, asking community members if they felt safe and whether they knew how to access support services.

This small, informal gesture helped bridge the gap between police and the faith community. Initiatives like these break down barriers. People in faith communities might fear the police, because they associate them with punishment. But if the police are seen as partners in safeguarding, rather than authorities to be feared, it becomes easier for religious actors to report cases of exploitation or abuse.

Religious communities need to know they can rely on the state for support, and vice versa. So, fostering these kinds of relationships, through community events, shared training and open conversations, can help create a more collaborative approach to tackling VAWG and human trafficking.

3.2 FoRB and VAWG

Effective engagement with religious and belief communities on VAWG requires a clear understanding of the right to FoRB. This helps navigate the complex issues at the intersection of religion, gender equality and FoRB, whilst also building trust in partnerships with religious or belief communities by ensuring FoRB is protected in line with international human rights law.

This right has been claimed to permit the practice of FGM, honour killings, domestic violence and other forms of VAWG. Such claims about FoRB have been condemned by successive UN Special Rapporteurs (SR) on Freedom of Religion or Belief as false. While protecting FoRB is essential for empowering women and reducing vulnerability to coercion, it must be interpreted within the broader human rights framework to prevent misuse. In response to such claims, SR Heiner Bielefeldt, for example, stated, “freedom of religion or belief clearly does not protect such cruel practices.” He added, “as a human right, freedom of religion or belief can never serve as a justification for violations of the human rights of women and girls.”¹²¹

Going beyond his predecessors’ condemnations, SR Ahmed Shaheed, stated he is “alarmed by the persistence of harmful practices and the fact that those who engage in them ‘justify’ such acts on the grounds that they are permitted or required by religious beliefs, including female genital mutilation, dowry killings, rape, polygamy, early and forced marriage, beatings, coercive gender reassignment surgery and so-called ‘honour’ crimes.” He noted that governments have an obligation to prohibit such practices in law and to ensure that perpetrators of gender-based violence — including violence perpetrated by individuals claiming a religious ‘justification’ for their actions — are held accountable and their victims provided with adequate redress.¹²²

From a legal standpoint, ICCPR Art. 18(3) states “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”¹²³ Notably, any restrictions must be narrowly applied, prescribed by law, necessary for a democratic society, proportionate, non-discriminatory and pursue a legitimate aim.¹²⁴

In cases of ‘conflict’ between FoRB and gender equality, particularly in instances of VAWG, the ICCPR provides the legal basis for the limitation of FoRB. The legal assessment should be clear in cases of VAWG, as they are a form of violence. Since the provision allows restrictions on the manifestation of religion when necessary to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, it can be invoked to ensure that religious practices or beliefs do not justify gender-based violence or discrimination.

FoRB is a universal right that protects everyone, regardless of who they are or what they believe. It protects the right to choose, practice and change one’s religion or belief. In practicing a religion or belief, it also enables the practice of FoRB in community with others. This collective dimension of the right also includes the autonomy of religious communities on matters such as organizational life, internal structure, the performing of religious rites and holding of ceremonies.

“In the regime that governs access to legal personality, states should observe their obligations by ensuring that national law leaves it to the religious or belief community itself to decide on its leadership, its internal rules, the substantive content of its beliefs, the structure of the community and methods of appointment of the clergy and its name and other symbols.”

— ODIHR’s *Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities*.¹²⁵

Although a community is entitled to hold beliefs that may (not) be in accordance with international standards on VAWG, the right to FoRB does not permit religious practice that incites or condones VAWG. Additionally, lived religion, as protected through the right to freedom of religion or belief, cannot conceptually include VAWG, as FoRB must be understood as being part of a larger human rights framework.

Efforts to limit women’s rights using FoRB are often based on unfounded assumptions, so it is problematic to accept at face value attempts to limit one right at the expense of the other. It is important to note that:

- FoRB does not, in principle, trump gender equality, non-discrimination and the right to live free from violence.
- The relationship between FoRB and gender equality, non-discrimination and freedom from violence is complex and context-dependent. In cases of conflict between FoRB and VAWG, Article 18(3) of the ICCPR provides a clear legal basis for limiting FoRB, which implies its precedence in such

circumstances. However, this does not mean that gender equality, as a broader concept, which does not reach the threshold of violence, always prevails over FoRB in every real or apparent conflict between the two.

- Indeed, as SR Bielefeldt notes, “The reasonable assumption that promoting equality between men and women always constitutes a legitimate purpose does not in itself suffice to justify restrictions; such restrictions must also have a legal basis, they must actually be conducive to pursuing the said purpose and one has to demonstrate that less restrictive means are not available.”
— UN Special Rapporteur 2013, para. 31.¹²⁶
- FoRB is not a right granted to religions or beliefs in opposition to individuals or groups. Rather, it is people — not religious or belief systems in themselves — who are protected under international human rights law.
- FoRB does not establish a hierarchy of religious or belief interpretations, placing certain beliefs above others.
- States must simultaneously combat intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against people based on religion or belief and on gender.
- While VAWG is rooted in coercion and control, FoRB opposes coercion, and its protection can reduce vulnerability to VAWG.

An environment that enables this freedom benefits religious communities, who are able to meet and organize, and individual women and girls. It reduces women’s and girls’ vulnerability to coercion and violence, including psychological violence. Recognizing and promoting the empowering aspect of FoRB can help state actors to combat the coercive and controlling attitudes that underpin VAWG.

For a short video introduction to FoRB see [FoRB: A universal human right](#) and the ODIHR factsheet on [*Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief*](#).

3.3 Religious actors

Religious actors, be they leaders, institutions, organizations or others, often play an important role in formulating, communicating and sustaining norms and practices around VAWG, in OSCE pSs, as well as elsewhere in the world.¹²⁷

Many religious organizations are engaged in education, health care and other service provision, indirectly or directly assisting survivors and engaging in prevention and awareness-raising. Often, religious institutions and organizations have a long

history of engagement; they know the context in which they work, and they have vast networks and established relationships. They may also enjoy a high degree of trust and legitimacy in their community; people listen to them. Religious communities can offer a place of sanctuary, healing and comfort for survivors of violence.

Different kinds of religious actors¹²⁸

Religious leaders are individuals who play influential roles within their religious institutions as well as in broader society, whether at local, national or international levels. They include formal religious leaders such as priests, imams, rabbis and others, as well as other influential actors such as scholars, teachers or leaders of faith-based organizations. While women and youth are not always in positions of formal religious leadership, they may nonetheless be influential informal leaders.

Faith-based organizations are civil society organizations that define themselves as religious. This is a very diverse group of actors that include, for example, faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), associations and charities; interfaith networks and councils; missionary organizations; education and health institutions; local community organizations; religious minority groups and many others.

Religious institutions include churches, mosques, temples and other places of worship. In many places in the world, religious institutions are also engaged in other activities, providing health and education services; caring for children, the elderly, those experiencing poverty or homelessness, people with disabilities; collecting and distributing donations; or serving as sanctuaries during disasters.

Religious communities are groups of individuals who come together based on shared religious beliefs, practices and values. Members of a religious community typically engage in religious practices and engage with teachings that can form the basis for their spiritual and social lives. These communities may also provide social support, guidance on moral and ethical matters, and a sense of belonging among members. Religious communities vary greatly in size, structure and beliefs, and they may be local, regional or part of a global religious network.

Religious scholars are academics who study, interpret and critically analyse religious texts, traditions and practices. Many find reasons for religious

structures to justify or reject certain behaviours through critical academic inquiry that examines and challenges interpretations of sacred and other important texts. By grounding their scholarship in widely accepted religious principles such as compassion, justice and human dignity, they can also offer reinterpretations that align with core ethical teachings, opening pathways for reform from within the tradition itself.

Women of faith may exist in each of the categories above, depending on the context and religion in question.

Importantly, not all religious actors may want to engage in efforts to combat VAWG. There are many reasons for this, including a lack of knowledge¹²⁹ or fear. For example, a leader may decide not to speak out against VAWG, for fear that they will not know what to do if women approach them for help or if faced with a (violent) perpetrator.¹³⁰ VAWG is also a sensitive topic, and it can be uncomfortable discussing issues related to sex and gender, including in public, or engaging in discussions that may challenge traditional gender roles and models of masculinity.¹³¹ Internal and external political or social pressures can also deter certain religious leaders from engaging in VAWG discussions, especially where abuse comes from within a religious community, organization or institution.¹³²

In the next section, we look in more depth at those religious actors that *do* engage in efforts to combat VAWG and present an overview of the kinds of activities they typically engage in, exploring some of the strengths and challenges associated with each. More specifically, we will look at religious actors' engagement in:

- Changing norms and behaviours
- Service provision and signposting
- Healing and reconciliation
- Representation and advocacy
- Networking and cooperation

Note: Religious actors are an incredibly diverse group, not only in terms of their religious identities and affiliations, but also their organizational forms, size, staff, constituencies, approaches, knowledge and expertise on VAWG. The examples given here do not present a comprehensive mapping of the field, but rather a tentative sketch of *some* of the ways in which *some* religious actors engage in combating VAWG.

3.4 Engaging religious leaders

Changing norms and behaviours

“We [religious actors] need to reclaim the messaging around freedom of religion or belief and ‘family’ or ‘traditional’ values. Religious leaders can confirm there is nothing ‘traditional’ or ‘family’ oriented about violence against women and girls.”

— Participant in ODIHR’s 2024 expert consultation.

Religious leaders and organizations significantly influence the formulation and communication of religious norms about violence. They can challenge patriarchal interpretations of religious norms and/or values that create the conditions for VAWG, and advocate against VAWG, or they may perpetuate norms that support or encourage it.

Religious leaders often hold important authority in their communities, making their views on violence significant. Their teachings about women’s status and gender-based violence can influence how a community responds to VAWG. When they speak out against violence, they can help empower survivors and encourage accountability for offenders.¹³³

Across the OSCE region, many religious actors engage in awareness-raising, education and other activities to change gender-discriminatory and harmful social norms and practices, finding inspiration in their religious texts and traditions to argue for gender equality and non-violence.¹³⁴ In all pSs, there are religious actors who actively work to challenge harmful interpretations of religious norms and practices around VAWG, whether in their own, local community or in wider society. Concrete examples include youth groups, community education and marriage preparation.¹³⁵

Drawing on values of dignity, compassion, justice and equality, they advocate for non-violence and gender equality from a religious standpoint. Many religious teachings condemn violence and emphasize the importance of protecting vulnerable and marginalized members of society, providing moral and theological grounds for speaking out against VAWG. When interpreted inclusively, religious norms and traditions can inspire positive social change and counter the harmful gender norms and stereotypes that perpetuate VAWG.

“Religious principles of the world’s major faiths affirm the position of religion as a force for good and human dignity. These can be

used in services or events with religious communities to show that violence against women is of particular concern for the community because it goes against their held beliefs... Religious leaders can search through their own sacred texts and teachings as well to find examples that show the need to respect and value women.”

—*Restoring Dignity: A Toolkit for Religious Communities to End Violence Against Women*, Religions for Peace.¹³⁶

Using religious texts to challenge VAWG

In Kyrgyzstan, under the framework of the UN's global Spotlight Initiative to eliminate VAWG, Ms. Lolakhon Nishanova, Chairwoman of the Local Women's Council in Nurdor, developed *Life Without Violence*, a bilingual (Kyrgyz and Uzbek) guide that aligns constitutional law with Islamic principles to address gender-based violence. With support from UN Women, the guide was created in cooperation with legal experts, theologians and community leaders and distributed widely through local networks to promote inclusive dialogue and empower women and communities with accessible information.¹³⁷

“In a community like ours, where radical views on women were not uncommon, this initiative became a beacon of hope. [...] Before these efforts, there were no accessible materials or sources that could enlighten the population, especially women, about their rights under both secular law and the teachings of Islam.”

— Lolakhon Nishanova quoted in a Spotlight Initiative report.¹³⁸

Encouraging religious communities to tackle the internal root causes of violence

Based on the idea that change should come from within, which requires intra-religious dialogue and a cross-disciplinary approach, the academic project¹³⁹ *New Directions in Islamic Thought*, spearheaded by the Oslo Coalition, offers a critical examination of how religious tradition is constructed. It uses modern lived situations as lenses through which to view old texts and assesses practices and challenges in different countries, while exploring avenues for reform from within.

In certain OSCE pSs marital rape is not explicitly recognized or criminalized in national legislation. In some cases, certain patriarchal interpretations of religious norms about women's inferiority underpin and legitimize such practices. Religious actors can challenge these norms, encouraging behavioural change among potential perpetrators of violence.¹⁴⁰ VAWG can be addressed pre-emptively in various formats used within religious communities, such as women's meetings, men's meetings and youth programmes.¹⁴¹

The UN #Faith4Rights Toolkit

This toolkit helps religious leaders and faith-based actors engage in human rights advocacy, including combating VAWG. It aligns human rights principles with religious teachings, promoting gender equality and protection for women and girls. The toolkit advises on how to raise awareness, engage communities, and take action through sermons and educational programmes. It highlights public statements by religious leaders who categorically reject the misuse of religion to vindicate any form of VAWG and commit themselves to ensuring that VAWG is recognized and condemned, and that there are legal frameworks and institutions capable of dealing with it.

“We specifically commit to revisit, each within our respective areas of competence, those religious understandings and interpretations that appear to perpetuate gender inequality and harmful stereotypes or even condone gender-based violence. We pledge to ensure justice and equal worth of everyone as well as to affirm the right of all women, girls and boys not to be subjected to any form of discrimination and violence, including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, child and/or forced marriages and crimes committed in the name of so-called honour.”

— 18 Commitments on Faith for Rights.¹⁴²

The CEDAW has raised the #Faith4Rights framework in several dialogues with States Parties since 2017, and in its General Recommendation no. 40¹⁴³ the Committee recommended them to engage with “religious leaders and faith-based actors in the process of addressing areas of possible tensions between some interpretations of religious traditions and human rights, such as through the Faith for Rights framework of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights”. Furthermore,

the 2020 European Union Gender Action Plan III¹⁴⁴ notes that “the EU should support [the] mobilisation of religious actors for gender equality in line with the Faith for Rights framework”.

The strong and unequivocal condemnation of VAWG by religious institutions, leaders and other actors can be a powerful tool to challenge and dismantle deeply entrenched justifications of violence under the guise of religious teachings. Aligning religious messaging with the principles of dignity, equality and justice can empower survivors to seek help and assert their rights while encouraging communities to stand in solidarity against violence. Furthermore, it communicates to perpetrators that their actions are unacceptable and subject to accountability, both legally and spiritually. This contributes to creating a more supportive and protective environment for women and girls.

Engaging in normative change can be a challenge for religious leaders and other religious actors. Religious actors who courageously challenge certain patriarchal interpretations of gender roles that contribute to violence and advocate for women’s rights may face accusations of heresy or blasphemy from voices defending ‘traditional’ family values. However, their efforts represent a powerful commitment to justice, equality and the transformative potential of religion. Indeed, when religious actors do push for change on issues related to VAWG, they can also spark dialogue and transformation within religious communities that can lead to such problems being addressed.

FoRB as a tool to encourage and protect alternative interpretations

FoRB protects the right of all individuals to believe what they want and to practice and manifest this belief, as long as they do not harm the rights and freedoms of others. This also includes religious interpretations that challenge or go against the orthodoxy of the majority. As such, supporting FoRB can be a way to protect the space for alternative interpretations, ensuring that members of a religious community are free to reinterpret their religious traditions and speak out against VAWG.

Service provision and signposting

Across the OSCE region, religious organizations, institutions and other religious actors engage in various kinds of service provision for survivors of VAWG. Religious actors often have extensive infrastructure that can be used to support individuals facing violence.¹⁴⁵ This includes healthcare services, safe houses and shelters, financial support and legal aid. They help women and girls in different ways to escape abusive situations and providing long-term solutions to their problems.¹⁴⁶

As noted by religious actors during the 2024 ODIHR consultations, many of those organizations engaged are highly professional and have substantial experience in working with survivors of VAWG, with formalized responses towards the support offered to victims/survivors. Small volunteer associations also exist that can raise awareness and steer victims towards support. A number of publications and tools, prepared by religious actors, explain how support should take place or steer readers to other sources of professional support.¹⁴⁷

Religious actors often have well developed networks, including in the most remote areas and among the most marginalized groups in society, such as refugees and migrants, people with disabilities, the elderly, minorities and those experiencing poverty. Religious actors can play an important role in reaching out, for example, to survivors of domestic servitude, human trafficking or forced marriage. In some cases, religious actors can establish contact with victims and survivors of VAWG who state authorities may not be able to reach, potentially ensuring a higher degree of inclusion in efforts to combat VAWG.¹⁴⁸

Charter of engagement to fight against domestic violence

This Charter was adopted by a number of French Jewish Organizations in 2007. It aims to address domestic violence in the Jewish community.

“Article IV – Formalizing the process of assistance

IV-1. The signatories undertake to provide a warm welcome to victims of domestic violence, to guarantee their anonymity and to direct them to appropriate professional support.

IV-2. The signatories’ professional and volunteer associations undertake to assess the individual’s situation and respond to their needs to the best of their ability. They also undertake to provide

comprehensive and reliable information on the rights and support available to the individual.

IV-3. The professional and volunteer associations undertake to provide support throughout the social, psychological and legal process, defined in agreement with, and at the pace of, the individual victim of violence.”¹⁴⁹

Importantly, when providing any service, religious organizations must ensure that it is aligned with international standards and national policies and practices. There can be no room for ‘free-styling’ without oversight, as this may do more harm than good. State authorities have a duty to establish and oversee compliance with a minimum standard for services that guarantees they are appropriate, and it is essential, in this context, for religious organizations to cooperate with the authorities to ensure that services are of a sufficiently high standard.

The EU’s regulatory framework, for instance, includes the Victims’ Rights Directive and the Directive on Combating Violence against Women, which establish minimum standards for services and a comprehensive framework describing these services. It is very important for professionals to conduct individual risk and needs assessments, to establish, together with the victim/survivor the right course of action.

“Article 25 – Specialist support to victims

1. [...] Specialist support services [...] shall provide:

- (a) information and support on any relevant practical matters arising as a result of the crime, including on access to housing, education, childcare, training, financial support and assistance to remain in or find employment;
- (b) information on access to legal advice, including the possibility of legal aid, where available;
- (c) information on and, where appropriate, referral to services providing medical and forensic examinations, which may include comprehensive healthcare services, and information on and, where appropriate, referral to psychosocial counselling, including trauma care;

(d) support to victims of cybercrimes [...], including on how to document the cybercrime and information on judicial remedies and remedies to remove online content related to the crime;

(e) information on and, where appropriate, referral to women's support services, rape crisis centres, shelters and sexual violence referral centres; and

(f) information on and, where appropriate, referral to specialist support services for victims at an increased risk of violence, which may include services for rehabilitation and socio-economic integration after sexual exploitation.

4. (...) The services referred to in the first subparagraph shall include at least first-hand medical care and referral to further medical care, as provided in the national healthcare system, as well as social services, psycho-social support, legal services and police services, or information on and direction to such services.”

— EU Directive on combating violence against women.¹⁵⁰

Good practice: Exodus Refugee Immigration, United States of America

Exodus Refugee Immigration partners with local imams and pastors from the refugees' countries of origin. The organization has held joint training with them on intimate partner violence. Its Mental Wellness Counsellor reports that many women facing domestic violence have found support, with imams and pastors helping to build trust and openness.¹⁵¹

Religious actors play an important role in reporting and facilitating access to legal aid. Depending on the national legal framework, religious leaders may have a legal obligation to report all forms of violence, but they have a strong ethical responsibility to ensure individuals' safety and encourage them to seek outside help. The importance of reporting has been highlighted by various religious communities in publicly available statements and guidance.

Texts from religious communities about reporting VAWG

“Confidentiality laws pertaining to professionals are designed to provide a venue for individuals, as clients, to be able to share personal information with professionals qualified to provide some kind of legal, medical, psychological or other assistance. But state laws also establish legal requirements for professionals such as physicians, lawyers, educators and sometimes clergy to report abuse of certain kinds. Accordingly, Bahá’í professionals who receive confidential information in their capacities as professionals must comply with civil laws as well as ethical standards pertaining to their profession.”

— *Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence: A Supplement to Developing Distinctive Bahá’í Communities*, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States.¹⁵²

“Silence or failure to communicate about abuse gives the message that abuse is something that is not to be spoken about. One achievement attained in communicating to children as Church is breaking that silence. Children need to hear from the Church that we want them to report abuse even if the perpetrator is one of our own. They need to hear that we, as Church, want them to be respected and protected, and that we will take actions to keep them safe.”

— *We need to talk: Why children need to hear from the church about abuse prevention*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.¹⁵³

“KEEPING SECRETS: «Τί θά πεί ό κόσμος;» (“What will people say?”)

REFRAMING THE CONCEPT: Many of us believe that disclosure is a betrayal of the entire family. They also believe that by revealing their problems – secrets – they will be the subject of community-wide gossip. As a result, our domestic violence victims would “rather feel-the-pain than the shame”. Our abused women can be helped to recognize that reporting a crime – which is what domestic violence is – is neither shameful, nor a betrayal. It should not be kept a secret but must be exposed and opposed.”

— *Domestic Violence. Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence in the Greek Orthodox Community*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.¹⁵⁴

“The myth that domestic abuse does not occur in Jewish households is also one that needs to be dispelled. Current statistical evidence reveals that violence within Jewish families occurs at a rate that correlates with our representation in the general population. [...] The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), according to its 1991 resolution ‘Violence Against Women’, supports the ‘promotion of vigorous enforcement of existing laws prohibiting all forms of violence against women.... [and] promotes the formation and governmental funding of local programs to aid women who are survivors of violence and to prevent further violence’.”

— *Gender-based Violence: Jewish Values & Positions*, Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism.¹⁵⁵

At community level, formal and informal religious leaders can play a hands-on role in empowering and encouraging survivors to report violence, and in referring them to specialist support services. As noted above, many choose not to report violence to the police, as they are ashamed, fear reactions from their family and wider community, or because they do not trust the police and are afraid to report. Some prefer to direct their case towards religious adjudication. While professionals such as doctors sometimes cite confidentiality as a reason not to report, in many countries they have an obligation to report.

Religious actors can also help with access to justice and effective remedies by directing women and girls towards civil society organizations offering legal aid or to other support, simultaneously sending a strong signal that violence is unacceptable and that support is available.¹⁵⁶ Across the OSCE region, authorities, religious organizations and institutions have established hotlines and other forms of legal aid, encouraging and empowering members of the community to report and react to instances of violence, whether as survivors or bystanders.

Saint Joseph's Foundation reporting mechanism

The Polish web portal zgloskrzywde.pl, launched by the St. Joseph's Foundation, encourages religious actors and survivors to recognize harm, report sexual and gender-based violence and seek help through state institutions and, where appropriate, church structures. It provides advice, support service contacts and details of safeguarding officers, with resources translated into Ukrainian, Czech and Croatian.

For some religious actors, their service provision is linked to their religious mission or duty. However, mixing aid with religious outreach can raise concerns about autonomy, fairness and trust. Proselytism — sharing one's faith with the aim of conversion — by a service provider can be particularly problematic in vulnerable situations, e.g., in a shelter for survivors of VAWG or during trauma-healing sessions. Even when services are freely and inclusively provided by religious organizations, this raises questions about the potential to exploit survivors' circumstances in a context of power imbalance, or undermine their autonomy while they are receiving support. As such, it is important that religious actors who work with survivors of VAWG, or who otherwise do missionary activities and encounter survivors in their work, have clear and transparent guidelines for their activities. These should comply with international standards and foster a safe environment, prioritizing the autonomy and best interests of survivors, including on how to approach situations where survivors may wish to discuss religion.¹⁵⁷

FoRB and proselytism

Proselytism and missionary activities are protected under FoRB, which allows individuals to freely express and share their religious beliefs with others. However, FoRB does not protect the right to coerce or otherwise force people to adopt, change or leave a religion or belief. FoRB ensures that people are free to engage with religious ideas voluntarily, preserving their dignity and protecting them from forced conversions or undue influence.

Standard three of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct on non-manipulation is an industry standard for a number of religious-ethos humanitarian organizations:¹⁵⁸

“Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint. Humanitarian aid will be given according to the need of individuals, families and communities. [...] We will not tie the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to the embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed.”

— *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*, IFRC.¹⁵⁹

Healing and reconciliation

Religion is an important source of comfort and strength for many people, and those who experience VAWG may seek spiritual support to cope with the trauma they have endured. Religious leaders are sometimes the first point of contact for women and girls seeking spiritual support,¹⁶⁰ and they have an important responsibility to create safe spaces for survivors.

Research shows that religious beliefs and practices can influence how people behave in relationships and how victims respond to intimate partner violence. In some contexts, religion can be protective, helping to buffer women against the harmful psychological effects of violence.¹⁶¹

The case of Ukrainian women fleeing war

Many Ukrainian women have joined religious communities in their host countries since fleeing the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Some fled with trauma from domestic or sexual and gender-based violence. These religious communities have given them spiritual, emotional, psychological and practical assistance, serving as a lifeline during periods of extreme vulnerability.¹⁶²

Religious actors can offer emotional and spiritual counselling to help survivors cope with their trauma and rebuild their sense of self-worth,¹⁶³ processing experiences in light of their faith, especially if religious beliefs were manipulated to minimize, deny or justify the violence. They can also help to reassure survivors that they are not to blame for the violence they have endured. It is important that

religious actors engage in these processes without coercion and with full respect for the survivor's autonomy, ensuring that people can heal on their own terms and at their own pace.¹⁶⁴ This includes full respect for survivor's potential choices to have nothing to do with religion. Religious actors must also avoid pressuring survivors into reconciliation that could see women return to abusive relationships and ensure that neither proselytism nor missionary activities are part of healing processes.

"In my experience within my Christian community, challenges about emotional, economic or physical violence at home or with intimate partners are first communicated among women, within trusted prayer groups or women's groups. Women seek a solution and consolation, and it can be a long process. There have been numerous cases where such disclosure has led to spiritual, legal, financial and other support, as well as safeguarding reports where relevant authorities have been notified. In such cases understanding what constitutes violence against women and girls or boys is critical, so it can be recognized for what it is [violence]. The leadership's role is important, but it is through the whole community where we encounter victims or people at risk and oppose violence and support those at risk. Safeguarding courses, knowledge about who can guide victims about legal matters and aid have been very empowering for our community."

— A member of a women's prayer group, Poland.

Religious leaders also encounter perpetrators. With appropriate training, religious actors can help perpetrators recognize the harm they cause and, together with other measures, help reduce the risk of violence. While behavioural change is complex, spiritual practices can motivate perpetrators to reflect on their actions, acknowledge harm and work towards attitudinal change. This work is not without challenges, however. For example, in certain Christian traditions, the seal of confession prevents clergy from disclosing certain information. This presents a difficult tension between confidentiality and the moral duty to protect life and prevent further harm. Despite such complexities, clergy often hold a unique and influential position. They engage with believers across different settings and are in contact with support services and local authorities. Stronger reflection on how clergy can help to prevent violence against women and children, followed up with concrete policies, can do much to prevent harm.

It is important to note that mediation, or other forms of couples therapy, are not appropriate when there is a significant power imbalance — for example, between a perpetrator and a victim. The often-used practice of reconciliation is generally harmful in situations of VAWG, where it could be used as an argument for women and girls to remain in abusive situations. Furthermore, spiritual intervention is no substitute for formal legal proceedings, accountability or proper safeguarding mechanisms, such as protection orders or restraining measures.

It is also important to remember that healing and reconciliation processes will differ, depending on the different structures of religious and family life. Not all religious traditions, for example, are centred on the nuclear family. For example, in Dharmic traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, individuals are often embedded in extended, or joint, family systems. Survivors in these contexts may additionally face complex social obligations and layered pressures and dependencies. Ensuring the safety of an individual survivor and her children may involve navigating increased obligations to other dependents or addressing complex patterns of abuse that extend beyond the ‘conventional’ notion of family. Without an understanding of these dynamics, intervention risks isolating survivors or inadvertently increasing harm to them and/or their dependents.

Effective interventions must, therefore, be grounded in an awareness of how religious, cultural and family relations and values intersect. Instead of imposing one-size-fits-all models of care, religious actors are well placed to advise others within support systems on how to intervene in respectful, culturally literate ways that align with survivors’ lived realities.

Advocacy and representation

Religious leaders and other religious actors often have large networks and close ties with local communities. They may also feel a strong responsibility to speak up for these constituencies, making them well-positioned to engage in advocacy and representational activities.¹⁶⁵ Throughout the OSCE region, many religious actors are engaged in a wide range of such activities, often locally, but also nationally, regionally and even internationally. Indeed, a number of religious actors engage with civil society forums, including at OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meetings and UN Human Rights Council sessions.

While some use their position to influence political decision-making processes, advocating for policy and legislative improvements in accordance with international standards, (e.g., on VAWG legislation and policies) others choose to abstain. Still others work to weaken instruments that protect against VAWG.

Religious actors have access to a variety of communication channels and can use sermons, teachings and public statements — online and offline — to support gender equality and denounce all forms of VAWG. In relation to ‘honour’ crimes, FGM, child marriage or domestic and sexual violence, for example, senior religious leaders have published joint statements, denouncing them as harmful practices with no foundation in religious teachings.¹⁶⁶ They can also offer their platforms to non-profit or academic voices on issues of concern.

Religious actors can also use their outreach and local networks to amplify survivors’ voices, sharing their platforms and networks to enable survivors to share their experiences and contribute to broader awareness-raising. This outreach not only empowers survivors, but also contributes to a broader cultural shift, challenging harmful norms and promoting respect for women’s dignity.¹⁶⁷

Good practice: Restored survivors’ network

Restored is a British faith-based charity working to raise awareness of domestic abuse, support survivors and equip Christian churches to do the same. Its Survivors’ Network supports over 600 female survivors of domestic abuse and its *Survivor’s Handbook* is a resource for those navigating the challenges of leaving an abuser.¹⁶⁸

Networking and collaboration

Not all religions or beliefs are centrally organized; some religions have a wide institutional and congregational diversity, which is important in terms of establishing who a religious actor represents or does not represent. Understanding the distinctions in ways in which different religious communities are organized is essential when engaging with religious actors in broader social initiatives.

Because of their position, relationships and networks, religious actors are well-positioned to engage in broad-based collaboration on VAWG, whether in the form of interfaith engagement or with secular (state and non-state) actors. This can help improve VAWG responses, facilitating synergies and avoiding duplication. Exchanging best practices can inspire progress elsewhere. Cross-community outreach initiatives that foster dialogue and trust are essential to addressing persistent challenges within vulnerable communities. ODIHR’s *Belief, Dialogue and Security* guide discusses this in detail.

In countries where religious structures are heavily state-controlled, however, the scope for genuine dialogue and cooperation may be restricted, to the detriment of FoRB and other fundamental rights, but also to gender equality. However, where partnerships can be built, VAWG can be more effectively tackled.

Good practice: The Pink Ladoo — amplifying messages on VAWG through religious media platforms

Excerpt from Ramadan: Mosques need to be accessible to mothers & children



Female foeticide, driven by a cultural and socio-economic preference for sons, has long been a problem in some parts of the OSCE region and has spread to other parts through migration, particularly from South Asia, where it is more widespread. The Pink Ladoo project was founded as a grassroots initiative to tackle this and related issues, by promoting gender equality from birth within South Asian communities. This initiative has enjoyed widespread media coverage in several countries,¹⁶⁹ and although not religious in nature, the initiative addresses the norms underpinning the continuation of this practice by certain religious minorities and has been featured on religious media platforms; for example, SikhNet and Kaur Voices¹⁷⁰ and news networks such as PTC News,¹⁷¹ which caters to the Punjabi Sikh Community globally, or the New Arab, directed at Muslim communities.¹⁷² The project challenges the tradition of celebrating only the birth of sons, typically marked by distributing yellow sweets called ladoos, and encourages families to celebrate also the birth of daughters in the same way by distributing pink ladoos. The sweets are now associated

with a boy or girl child; yellow ladoos for boys and pink for girls. This act sparks early conversations about gender equality and empowers parents to reject sexist norms from the very beginning of their daughters' lives.¹⁷³

A number of religious actors also engage in cooperation across religious and belief boundaries on VAWG.

Good practice: ODIHR/CHANGE consultation on engaging male allies from religious and traditional communities, North Macedonia, July 2023

The consultation piloted an approach to engage new male allies from religious and traditional communities in countering VAWG. Its primary goal was to deepen understanding of the common ground between religious and traditional communities and the women's rights community in North Macedonia around the issue of VAWG. During the event, strategies were devised to support male allies in their efforts to combat VAWG.

Good practice: Global Women of Faith Network

The Global Women of Faith Network, run by Religions *for* Peace, enables women from different religions and cultures to coordinate strategies and pool their resources and capabilities for cooperative action. The Network is comprised of more than 1,000 Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Indigenous, Sikh and Zoroastrian religious women's organizations. One of the Network's priorities is combating violence against women.¹⁷⁴

Interview with Helena Martinović, Ajša Mahmutović-Kasumović and Slađana-Sarit Ninković Lekanić

Helena Martinović, Ajša Mahmutović-Kasumović, and Slađana-Sarit Ninković Lekanić are all expert advisors at the Interreligious Council of

Bosnia and Herzegovina (MRV BiH), where they lead various initiatives aimed at fostering interreligious dialogue and mutual respect, and highlighting shared values amongst different religious communities. Helena Martinović has a strong background in social projects, family counselling and charitable work with Caritas at the Catholic Archdiocese of Vrhbosna. Ajša Mahmutović-Kasumović has experience as a lecturer and educator in mosques and the Elča Ibrahim-pašina Madrasah. Slađana-Sarit Ninković Lekanić has worked for many years in the Jewish Municipality of Sarajevo, where she leads a small school to help foster a sense of belonging among young people. Together, these three women are leading efforts to combat VAWG through the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Please tell us about your cooperation on combating VAWG through the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina and why you decided to work to counter VAWG.

Guided by the principles of our faith, together with religious officials, youth and women activists, we contributed to changing harmful behavioural practices and established norms in local communities. With them, we developed an action strategy that we implemented in ten cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Research¹⁷⁵ conducted with 1,636 respondents showed that 14.7 per cent of respondents believe that violence against women and girls is a family matter.

We held various meetings, educational workshops, seminars and roundtables — including experts from various fields such as mental health centres, safe houses, prosecutors' offices, police, social work centres, religious officials and our activists in committees — where we emphasized the importance of the work of all structures in society and their connection in working to prevent violence. We also formalized our Network of Women Believers of the MRV in BiH, [the members of which] have made a great contribution to organizing these activities in their local communities.

Every year, the Interreligious Council in BiH contributes to the protection of peace and human values, respect for human rights, freedom of religion or belief, prevention of hate speech and prevention of all forms of violence. We work on mutual understanding of believers, protection and respect for religious buildings, religious leaders and believers, and overcoming prejudice.

Have you faced any challenges in mobilizing religious communities to speak out against violence and, if so, how have you overcome them?

Our country is still patriarchal and lacks sufficient education. There is noticeable discrimination against women, and their role in society is limited. This challenge can gradually be overcome through the joint efforts of all institutional structures in society, including churches and religious communities, but it will take a significant amount of time to address this issue fully.

How do you see the role of religious leaders/actors in changing societal perceptions of gender-based violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina? In your experience, how receptive are people to messages from religious leaders about the importance of condemning VAWG?

In our work so far, we have observed that religious leaders have a significant influence on believers, considering the trust of believers in such leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Religious leaders here contribute to the prevention of violence and have even launched a media campaign entitled, “A Call from Religious Leaders in BiH Against Violence”¹⁷⁶ urging all believers to foster good relationships with women and children.

What successes have you noticed within the communities since you started implementing the frameworks for preventing violence? What are the next steps?

Our activities have contributed to strengthening capacities, connecting and informing religious leaders about the actions of all institutions in the local community that work to prevent, protect against and process reports of violence. The Interreligious Council in BiH (IRC B&H) has connected women, children, youth and religious officials from local communities with institutions involved in violence prevention, thereby establishing a platform for the promotion and protection of human rights.

We have educated a large number of religious leaders, believers, young people and activists in interreligious cooperation committees across ten cities in BiH. The Network of Women Believers has a vision of working towards the respect of human rights, including violence prevention.

MRV BiH has also established a Youth Network, consisting of young individuals eager to learn, foster trust, maintain peace and embrace diversity.

We conduct educational programmes for young people, and last year we proudly released a video showcasing our diversity and beauty.¹⁷⁷ We plan to use this approach to promote 18 cities where our interreligious chapters for cooperation operate. This will provide an opportunity for interaction and collaboration towards building a safer and better environment for all generations.

What message would you like to convey to religious leaders and community members who may still be hesitant about addressing these issues openly?

Religious leaders play a significant role in society, and they should not be excluded from social affairs. Of course, religious leaders should not be expected to solve these problems by themselves, but they can provide support to believers. It is important to emphasize how crucial it is to help victims of violence, but it is equally important to work with perpetrators of violence. However, work with both victims and perpetrators should be left to professionals.

From our side, the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina will remain committed to its mission of promoting interreligious dialogue, strengthening human capacities, respecting human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, preventing hate speech and preventing all forms of violence.

Interview with Noa Nogradi, an anti-VAWG practitioner

Dr. Noa Nogradi is a gender (in)equality expert, focused on GBV and harassment against women and girls. Her academic research explores the international legal framework to assess GBV and discrimination as persecution and potential grounds for asylum, and the structural causes of GBVAWG (Nogradi's portmanteau), and the duties and responsibilities of various state and non-state actors in its eradication. For over a decade, Noa has worked with Hungarian victim support and advocacy NGOs on campaigns, research, advocacy and services. She also leads self-defense courses for women, focused on empowerment.

What role, if any, do you see religious actors playing in combating VAWG?

Religious actors hold immense influence in society and especially so in their communities. As such, they are well-placed to affect positive change in eradicating VAWG. Perpetrators that have already committed their first offence tend to hold such deep beliefs regarding their entitlement to master women that it is unlikely their mindset would simply change overnight (unless they are deeply committed to changing and are willing to engage in decades of therapy and self-work). One approach to prevent them from engaging in repeated offences is deterrence: instruction by people they respect and/or the fear of negative consequences. Legal consequences are one instrument for the latter, but another lies in religious conviction, if individuals believe that VAWG violates their faith, their leaders' teachings, community values or the principles of their spiritual beliefs. Religious leaders are well-placed to make potential and past perpetrators know that VAWG is not in accordance with the religion they hold, and that it is against the will of the higher entities the community believes in.

Do you see any challenges in bringing religious actors together with secular civil society actors working on VAWG? If so, how could these be overcome?

Scientifically speaking, and as also recognized in international conventions such as the CEDAW, violence against women and girls is gender-based. This means that it is an outcome of differentiated and hierarchical social norms and roles attributed to and expected of women and men. Thus, insofar as such norms and roles are maintained, women and girls will continue being trapped in vulnerable and disadvantaged positions vis-a-vis men and boys, and this violence will keep being reproduced.

With this in mind, I see a potential gap between religious actors and civil society, in that members of civil society might see religion as contributing to maintaining problematic roles and norms, and consequently try to address any religious causes underlying the continued prevalence of VAWG. Trust could then become an issue. Religious actors might feel offended, or feel that their culture is under threat when secular actors challenge these norms and roles. Some religious actors may even find the hierarchical norms and roles assigned to men and women justified, and look to defend them.

I believe that there are different ways to overcome this, but CSO actors and religious actors can only successfully collaborate in these efforts if they can set aside negative prejudices against one another and if the parties share their resources and focus on the common basis of condemning VAWG and their joint commitment to combat it.

Once trust is established through dialogue, if such a shared basis can be agreed upon, civil society actors could offer methodological and technical support in whatever way their tools and capacities permit doing so (including consultancy/facilitation of processes and financial support to intra-community initiatives).

***What advice would you have for religious actors looking to engage?
At what point should they refer someone to outside help?***

If one wants to serve members of their community to the best of their abilities, it is very important to learn about the dynamics, characteristics, prevalence, causes and consequences of VAWG, since there is statistical certainty that a number of community members have suffered or are currently suffering from it, and that future cases will also emerge. When noticing that a member of the community might be affected or involved, either as a victim or as perpetrator of violence, it is important to act in accordance with one's competencies and capacities. In order to have a toolbox of options and decrease pressure on the particular religious actor having to make a decision when confronted with a VAWG situation, it is a good idea to think through internal policies in advance and create protocols, including the community's leadership in the process. This helps outline tangible steps and actions that can be implemented when a case or situation emerges. CSOs active in this field can help to prepare such internal protocols and policies, and can be involved in processes in relation to future cases as well.

It could be that the leadership/community is not well-prepared to address the situation and the victim's needs. By this I mean that no prior thinking about handling cases and supporting victims has taken place. As a result, there are no effective internal mechanisms in place that one could follow. Therefore, no intra-community services or systems of support exist that could be mobilized; and there is no one in the community leadership with knowledge, competence and capacity to consult. In this case, it is best to immediately refer any victims to victim support organizations, while

reassuring her that she has the religious leaders' support, and fostering support for her within the community. Alternatively, if there are policies and protocols prepared in advance — and a leadership-member with expertise in this matter if there is one — these will help identify the areas in which internal resources and procedures can be mobilized, and the areas or points at which involving external support will be useful/necessary.

Another action that religious actors can take is to implement a process of reflection within their community about views on men's and women's roles and the norms that they apply to each sex. Through this process, they can update the norms and the stringency with which they are upheld within the community. Even if a difference of roles continues to be mainstreamed, there should be an emphasis on the *equal value, capacities and importance* of those roles and the people fulfilling them, including an *equal voice and power in decision-making processes* at both family and community level. Religious actors might try to find and highlight a basis for this in their scriptures and traditions, focusing on passages, practices, admonitions and ways of worship that support the equal values and mutuality-based relations between the sexes.

It is important that actors, and especially leaders, within religious communities who oppose VAWG make the community norms prohibiting it explicit and widely known, and, through their authority, create a culture in which these norms are upheld. That is, that they ensure that community members who perpetrate violent acts against women and girls are held accountable. They should understand the negative consequences of their actions, and face the legal consequences. Should they continue to pose a risk, (even to members of their own family), their temporary or long-term exclusion from the community would also be a warranted measure of accountability. This could have a significant deterrent effect. Meanwhile, religious actors must avoid expelling or marginalizing women and girls experiencing, resisting and speaking out against violence.

Creating an intra-group ethos where violence is not tolerated and its perpetrators face communal consequences is important. This is not work that NGOs could do, but faith-sensitive women's organizations could be invited into such processes to offer training and capacity building that helps communities to develop internal processes to this end.

Key takeaways

The state bears the primary responsibility for addressing VAWG, but effective and sustainable solutions require collaboration with non-state actors, including religious leaders, institutions and other religious actors. Religion deeply shapes how individuals and communities understand and respond to violence, influencing values, gender norms and societal expectations. Whilst religious teachings can promote non-violence and the empowerment of women, they can also reinforce patriarchal practices that justify or enable VAWG, such as early marriage and marital rape or harmful traditions like female genital mutilation or even ‘honour’ crimes. Taboos and stigmas within religious contexts can further silence survivors and discourage reporting.

Religious actors — leaders, institutions and faith-based organizations — are uniquely positioned to influence change due to their deep community roots, trust and historical presence. Their involvement can support survivors, especially from marginalized groups, by raising awareness, challenging harmful gender norms, offering material aid and providing sanctuary and emotional support. When engaged appropriately, they can also help to direct survivors towards critical services such as shelters or legal aid, provided these are inclusive and non-discriminatory. Moreover, religious advocacy can be a powerful driver of policy reform to enhance protections and services for survivors of VAWG. However, to do this they need to be aware of the issues, the available professionals and the roles they can play, and be engaged.

4.

State engagement with religious actors to combat VAWG

The previous chapter shows that religious actors can and do contribute to combating VAWG in important ways, presenting state actors with obvious possibilities for cooperation. Despite this, there is often little dialogue between states and religious actors, and national action plans on VAWG often overlook the role of religious actors. This chapter provides an overview of the ways states can engage with religious actors and presents a set of principles to guide such engagement.

“What is absolutely missing is for people like me to say that these three actors — the Church, state and civil society — work together. There is no point at which they meet.”

— Lecturer, University of Warsaw.

Before engaging with religious actors in combating VAWG, a state must first properly assess its record, identify gaps and determine what institutional capacities it needs to build for effective collaboration. For example, some pSs have weak or no criminal penalties for domestic violence, falling short of the standards set by UN human rights bodies/mechanisms or regional instruments such as the Istanbul Convention. Some have no legislation on domestic violence (four pSs).¹⁷⁸

When assessing capacities, states need to acknowledge their limitations in outreach, trust-building and cultural sensitivity. It is essential to recognize the diversity of religious actors across traditions, denominations and levels of authority and develop tailored strategies to engage them appropriately. Engagement must be grounded in respect for the rights of these individuals and communities to enjoy their right to freedom of thought conscience, religion or belief. This includes the right to religious autonomy and the ability to exercise their right without harassment. Engagement

should ensure that cooperation strengthens, rather than undermines, both democratic principles and community-based efforts to prevent VAWG.

4.1 Forms of engagement with religious actors

As noted above, religious actors are all different and work to combat VAWG in very diverse ways, with distinct strengths and weaknesses. This diversity is further shaped by the models of state-religion relations in place, which range from secular models to state religions and differing views on the separation of church and state. In more secular countries, religious actors tend to operate more independently, often advocating for societal change from the margins. Whereas in countries with state religions or closer ties between religion and state, religious institutions may have greater influence over policy and social norms, which can either facilitate or hinder progress on VAWG. These varying models significantly affect the strategies, priorities and effectiveness of religious actors in addressing VAWG. As such, the form of engagement will necessarily have to be context-specific, based on careful analysis of, among others, the specific issue being addressed, the purpose of the engagement and the characteristics of the potential partners.

That said, different types of engagement fall loosely into three categories:

- Dialogue, consultations and information-sharing
- Mutual training and awareness-raising
- Funding and partnership

Guidance on engagement with religious actors

The checklist given in Chapter 6 of ODIHR's guide, *Belief, Dialogue and Security — Fostering dialogue and joint action across religious and belief boundaries* contains practical advice for states in engaging with religious actors. This checklist has been updated for cooperation on VAWG and can be found in Annexe 1.

UNFPA's 2009 *Guidelines for Engaging FBOs as Agents of Change* also provide a framework for engaging with faith-based organizations.

Interview with Nahla Haidar, a CEDAW member

Nahla Haidar El Addal is a jurist with over 30 years of international experience. She currently serves as a member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and as a Commissioner of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). She has worked in various roles within the United Nations, both at headquarters and in the field, focusing on social development, humanitarian action, peacebuilding and human rights.

What are some of the main challenges in the area of VAWG today?

There are several key challenges in addressing VAWG. One significant issue is the manipulation of religious texts and traditions by abusers to justify their violence. This misuse silences victims who fear religious backlash, masking the violence within seemingly righteous frameworks and hindering recognition and response from communities and legal systems. Cultural norms and gender stereotypes also normalize VAWG, making it socially acceptable, especially in conflict situations where women are more vulnerable to sexual violence and forced marriage.

Additionally, weak legal frameworks and poor enforcement mechanisms allow VAWG to persist, with victims and survivors facing barriers to access support services. Finally, the stigma surrounding VAWG, fear of retaliation and lack of trust in authorities result in significant under-reporting of cases. The rapid pace of technological and social change also introduces new challenges such as online violence and discrimination, which are not always addressed by existing laws.

What role should religious or belief communities, leaders and actors play in combating VAWG?

Religious communities have a profound impact on societal norms and gender dynamics. They possess valuable resources — social, psychological and material — that can be used to address VAWG. Religious leaders can raise awareness by confronting harmful customs, advocating for gender equality and emphasizing that VAWG is incompatible with religious teachings. They can also foster support by creating faith-based groups to offer safe spaces and material assistance for survivors.

Crucially, religious leaders can challenge misinterpretations of religious texts that justify VAWG and promote those that uphold the dignity of women. Empowering women within religious communities, including promoting them into leadership roles, can help dismantle gender stereotypes and create a more inclusive environment.

What is the potential impact of involving religious or belief communities, leaders and actors in combating VAWG?

The potential impact is profound. Religious communities have vast influence and can spread anti-VAWG messages effectively, especially in deeply religious societies. Leaders can challenge harmful traditions and offer alternative interpretations of religious texts that support gender equality. For example, a big campaign in Lebanon saw major religious leaders denouncing VAWG and using billboards throughout the country to spread this message.

Religious leaders can also mobilize communities to engage in VAWG prevention, ensuring that interventions are culturally sensitive and aligned with community values. By advocating for non-violence and equality, they can foster behavioural changes that reduce VAWG. Empowering women of faith and promoting them to leadership positions breaks down gender barriers and encourages solidarity, offering safe spaces for victims and survivors to seek support.

However, literal interpretations of religious texts can sometimes perpetuate domestic violence, with some religious leaders advising women to endure abusive relationships. In certain cases, religious leaders might prioritize preserving marriages over the safety of victims, or perpetuate gender inequality, which can hinder efforts to combat VAWG.

How can state actors encourage positive action by religious actors in this area?

State actors should first understand the religious and cultural context when engaging religious leaders, recognizing how faith influences women's experiences of violence. Empowering women of faith in leadership roles can foster solidarity and collective action, but it's important to avoid framing VAWG solely as a women's issue. Promoting religious literacy and encouraging a deeper, contextual study of religious texts can help reconcile faith with gender equality. Open dialogue and collaboration between religious

leaders, civil society and government are essential for developing effective, culturally sensitive interventions.

Training religious leaders on gender equality, human rights and VAWG dynamics enhances their ability to intervene. State actors should also provide financial and logistical support for VAWG-related initiatives within religious communities. States can also provide platforms for religious and non-religious messages that condemn violence.

What should they not do?

State actors should avoid discriminating against or favouring specific religious communities. It is important not to challenge or criticize religious doctrines directly, but focus on promoting interpretations that align with gender equality and human rights. In addition, state actors should neither endorse harmful interpretations of religious texts that justify violence against women nor exploit religious figures for political gain. They should also not accept harmful practices within religious communities nor, on the other hand, assume uniformity among different faith groups.

For all those interested in the above-mentioned issues, I strongly recommend the OHCHR Faith for Rights initiative.

Dialogue, consultations and information-sharing

Multi-stakeholder dialogue is a precondition for success in preventing and combating VAWG. At its most basic level, engagement with religious actors can take the form of dialogue, consultations and other forms of information-sharing. States should offer religious actors the opportunity to engage in consultations alongside other actors when developing policies, legislation or other initiatives on VAWG to ensure a comprehensive approach. Creating platforms for dialogue can allow religious actors to exchange information, experiences and best practices with state actors in combating and addressing VAWG. The insights shared will strengthen community-based responses, thereby assisting pSs in their efforts to respond better to the needs of survivors and those supporting them.

Research shows that discriminatory attitudes towards those with religious faith can create new barriers for survivors attempting to access support. It may leave

them exposed to fear of judgement, verbal harassment or other discrimination. However, inclusion of religious and belief considerations “in the GBV sector remains taboo and a point of tension and discomfort”.¹⁷⁹ For example, Muslim survivors of domestic violence in one OSCE participating State reported facing derogatory comments when seeking support, such as, “Doesn’t your religion allow a husband to hit his wife?”, showing that support services can lack not only religious literacy, but also the necessary sensitivity to engage with religious survivors, leading to concerns around the appropriateness of the care provided.¹⁸⁰ A toolkit by the Safehavens Interfaith Partnership against Domestic Violence notes:

“Because faith may be central to a victim’s understanding of the situation and decisions about what to do, a victim’s needs may not be fully met if faith is not addressed. Victims tell us they are uncomfortable when they go to a sexual and/or domestic services agency and ‘have to check their faith at the door’.”¹⁸¹

Addressing these challenges requires culturally attuned project planning from the outset. Members of religious communities may have to navigate a delicate balance between adapting to contemporary social expectations and the risk of cultural erasure or their religious identity being silenced, highlighting the importance of support frameworks that are not only inclusive, but also culturally and religiously literate.

As we have seen, religion often plays an important role in shaping perceptions of, and reactions to, VAWG. Through concrete initiatives, religious actors can contribute to strengthening state actors’ understanding of religious norms and practices and how these interact with VAWG. This can enable state actors, working within democratic processes, to design interventions that resonate with diverse populations and are more likely to be effective in practice. It also encourages reflection on VAWG within communities and may increase buy-in to government initiatives; consulting with these voices fosters inclusivity and trust, greater cooperation between religious and belief communities and peer learning. In the area of community policing, for example, consulting religious community actors can strengthen public trust in law enforcement and improve the overall effectiveness of crime prevention and intervention strategies. Communities can also educate police about the religious sensitivities at play when women are targeted for their religious identity or what to consider when interviewing women survivors, as well as encouraging survivors to report abuse and seek justice.¹⁸²

When engaging religious actors, it is vital that women and girls are included in consultations on VAWG. To facilitate the participation of women and girls, it is, therefore, important to include religious scholars, religious women’s groups, community

actors and other religious representatives alongside formal religious leaders. State actors should pay particular attention to women-led religious organizations and religious organizations that work for women's rights and gender equality. They should also include women and girls who have themselves been subjected to VAWG, where this is possible and appropriate.

Patterns of female subservience and silence surrounding VAWG continue to persist in many parts of the OSCE. Survivors of psychological violence, rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, forced sterilization or human trafficking from religious backgrounds must have the opportunity to access spaces to have their story heard, to signal to others in the community that they are not alone and improve awareness about how religious actors can best respond.¹⁸³ At the same time, it is important to note that such spaces and opportunities are not a substitute for appropriate redress for victims and accountability for perpetrators, including action taken by religious institutions to this end.

Dialogue, consultations and information-sharing should not be restricted to religious actors who are already engaged constructively in combating VAWG, but should also include those actors who are reluctant to engage, or who are critical of state efforts in this area. This can help state actors to understand their thinking and motivations, while keeping all religious actors engaged. However, engaging with those who oppose efforts to combat VAWG should be done in a way that avoids giving the impression the state supports their positions. On the contrary, the state should make clear its commitment to combat VAWG, including through such engagement.

States have a duty to act against VAWG, including harmful practices, which includes its condemnation, as well as engagement with important societal actors, such as those religious actors that may be directly or indirectly condoning it.

"Article 5

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: (a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women;"

— UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

“Culturally sensitive interventions that reinforce human rights and enable practising communities to collectively explore and agree upon alternative ways to fulfil their values and honour or celebrate traditions without causing harm and violating the human rights of women and children can lead to sustainable and large-scale elimination of harmful practices and the collective adoption of new social rules. Public manifestations of a collective commitment to alternative practices can help to reinforce their long-term sustainability. In this regard, the active involvement of community leaders is crucial.”

— Joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices.¹⁸⁴

Mutual training and awareness-raising

Engagement can also take the form of mutual training and awareness-raising. Religious actors can play a valuable role in sensitizing state actors and strengthening their religious literacy. For some state institutions, striking a balance between secularism and engagement with religion may be a challenge,¹⁸⁵ especially with lesser-known religious communities, often due to a lack of internal religious literacy.¹⁸⁶ A better understanding of the role of religion in society should help policymakers to tailor interventions that align with both the religious values of religious actors and the goals of combating VAWG. Many traditions emphasize human dignity, peace and the wrongness of violence. Recognizing and speaking to these frameworks allows states to create culturally sensitive, effective solutions and build trust to address VAWG.

“Given the central role faith plays in the lives of many women, perhaps faith-sensitized social workers would be a good response strategy.”

— Anjali Rawat, University of Oxford.

State actors can engage with religious organizations to improve their own understanding of different religious contexts. They can also work on building trust and enhancing gender equality and VAWG prevention within particular religious communities, including through training and capacity building. ODIHR also facilitates religious literacy training and helps OSCE pSs to identify points of entry and engagement with religious organizations, institutions and communities.

While some religious leaders are well-trained, others could benefit from training to ensure they prioritize women and girls' well-being and respond appropriately. Trauma-informed training and training on the dynamics of VAWG is essential for anyone involved in VAWG services, to ensure proper care, safety and access to support for victims. Their safeguarding and well-being must be the priority, so that they are empowered to exit and never advised to return to abusive situations.¹⁸⁷

State actors can provide VAWG training for religious leaders, educating them on legal frameworks, safeguarding practices, survivor support, and how to handle violence reports. National human rights institutions (NHRIs) and equality bodies can also offer capacity-building opportunities to improve religious leaders' understanding of legal frameworks, gender equality and VAWG prevention. Resources and toolkits for faith leaders can further support these efforts.

“The way you convince [religious leaders] needs to be the way they can convince others. [...] You need to give them theological tools and language for these issues.”

— Interview with trainer Benjamin Kalkum, project dld/፩፡፩፡፩, 29 July 2024.

VAWG resources for religious and belief communities

Resources designed to help religious or belief communities address VAWG have been developed around the world. They include toolkits for religious and belief community leaders, communities and interreligious or interconfessional councils and bodies to carry out awareness, prevention and advocacy programmes to help bring an end to VAWG.¹⁸⁸ In some cases, toolkits for faith leaders aimed at preventing VAWG have applied an ‘experiential learning’ model to help participants reflect critically on their own conceptions of gender and power.¹⁸⁹

Santa Marta Group Model

The Santa Marta Group model promotes the engagement of local communities and diverse religious actors with their statutory agencies to develop trusted partnerships in response to modern slavery and human trafficking. The Group's *Guidance and Awareness for Communities and Parishes*

contains examples of letters that communities can consider sending to local politicians. This resource is supplemented by a 50-minute educational video.¹⁹⁰

The role of theologically-engaged trainers

Research indicates that religious leaders are most responsive to trainers who are theologically engaged on VAWG issues, particularly when theological responses are embedded within the religious traditions that faith communities consider authoritative. This effectiveness is further strengthened when trainers are well-versed in the cultural context, theological traditions, language and realities of violence that religious leaders encounter in their everyday lives.¹⁹¹

Funding and partnership

Lastly, state engagement with faith-based civil society organizations, NGOs that work on religion and VAWG or interfaith coalitions working to combat VAWG can also include short- or long-term partnerships and funding for projects and programmes. Larger religious institutions may also be sources of funding and could be matched with worthy initiatives to address VAWG.

However, states can also intervene and, for instance, support practical research and capacity-building initiatives to assist religious communities in developing their own initiatives, policies and protocols on VAWG that are in accordance with international human rights standards and best practice, both as part of congregational settings and in broader teaching or awareness-raising activities.

States can also engage with religious actors on one-off initiatives, e.g., awareness-raising campaigns focused on the values of respect, equality and non-violence, drawing on religious teachings to challenge harmful attitudes that contribute to VAWG. By engaging with younger community members, religious leaders can help prevent the intergenerational transmission of violence and empower future leaders to advocate for gender equality.

Criteria for funding

Partnerships with interconvictional platforms can be a helpful way to combat VAWG, but require careful consideration of a range of sometimes complex issues, such as the inclusion/exclusion of certain religious and belief actors, their reach within the communities they (claim to) represent and their reputations and experience of working on the subject. These issues are discussed further in ODIHR's *Belief, Dialogue and Security — Fostering dialogue and joint action across religious and belief boundaries* and also in the checklist in Annexe 2 below.

4.2 Principles for engagement

Engagement with religious actors, regardless of the form it takes, should be guided by a set of general principles that align with OSCE values and commitments. These principles are:

- Human rights and gender equality
- Do no harm
- Even-handedness and diversity
- Participation and inclusion
- Non-discrimination and equal access
- Respect and openness
- Victim/survivor-centred approach

Human rights and gender equality: Engagement with religious actors should always aim to contribute, directly or indirectly, to strengthening human rights and gender equality. This also means that engagement should be based on a strong rights-holder perspective, ensuring that efforts to address VAWG always centre on women and girls, ensuring their access to justice, health care, psychosocial and other support, and economic assistance.

Do no harm: Engagement should not re-traumatize, worsen vulnerabilities or create new risks. All initiatives should avoid reinforcing harmful cultural practices and prejudice or undermining women's agency, while focusing on empowering survivors, ensuring their safety, dignity and access to justice.

Even-handedness and diversity: Engagement with religious actors should reflect the diversity of actors, not only in terms of different religious traditions, but also organizational and institutional forms, size, geographic origins, ideological standpoints and minority/majority positions. Religious actors may have very different values and beliefs; including and embracing this diversity will contribute to a richer understanding of the context and development of initiatives that resonate. Religious actors may also have more collectivist or individualistic worldviews, which can affect the way they view different forms of violence. At the same time, respecting such diversity does not mean compromising on the commitment to address VAWG. Instead, it means drawing on the rich diversity of values, principles and practices to strengthen efforts to address violence.

Knowledge of religious forms, structures and hierarchies

Ensuring diversity when engaging with religious actors requires religious literacy and knowledge of the different ways in which religious communities are organized, as well as putting in additional effort to ensure such diversity. Not all religious communities have official leadership, for instance, and it can be difficult to identify representatives. Others may be very hierarchical, and lower-level leaders may not be able to engage freely. Many religious communities only have male leadership, and it might be difficult, and not immediately obvious, to identify female religious leaders or representatives.

Participation and inclusion: Engagement with religious actors must go beyond what is generally considered religious leadership, ensuring the participation and inclusion of a wide variety of voices. Most importantly, engagement should always ensure the participation of women and girls who have faced VAWG themselves, alongside women in more marginalized positions. This can include refugees and migrants, people with disabilities, LGBTI people and women of different ages and social status.

Non-discrimination and equal access: Neither religious nor state actors should exclude or give preferential treatment to any religious group or community, impose conditions as to particular religious affiliation, beliefs or practices of participants, or otherwise engage in discriminatory practices in their activities.¹⁹² Where religious communities engage in providing services, — for example, shelters — these should be available to all regardless of their religious or belief background or other identity characteristics, and provided in a trauma-, gender- and age-sensitive manner.

Respect and openness: Engagement should be based on mutual respect between state actors and religious actors. Both parties should do their utmost to respect each other and recognize each other's values and world views, distinct expertise, experiences and responsibilities. They should be open about their own principles and values and not avoid open and frank discussions about difficult issues.

States cannot interfere in religious communities' doctrines, but can decide not to use harmful religious narratives in public discourse, giving platforms instead to voices that do not advocate gender inequality.

“Authorities or state actors sometimes decide to perpetuate “family values” discourses, not to promote positive values, but to use it for propaganda for their political purposes, oppression, and authoritarianism.”

— Human Rights Defender, ODIHR consultations, 2024.

States do have a duty to condemn VAWG, including when advocacy for it comes from religious actors.

Survivor-centred: A survivor-centred approach places the human rights, dignity and agency of survivors at the core of any interventions and calls for survivors to be actively involved in shaping policies, programmes and services — from design to evaluation — based on their lived experiences. It prioritizes trauma-informed, gender-sensitive and age-appropriate support that addresses the specific needs of women and girls affected by violence, ensuring that survivors are not re-traumatized or penalized for actions resulting from their victimization, and that they receive comprehensive care. More broadly, it recognizes survivors as agents of change in combating VAWG and requires inclusive cooperation, where their voices are heard.¹⁹³

Key takeaways

Religious actors can play an important role in addressing VAWG, yet there is often limited dialogue with state actors, and national action plans on VAWG frequently overlook their role. States have a duty, however, to condemn VAWG, including by engaging with religious actors who condemn or condone it. States could consider the following types of engagement with religious actors:

- Sensitization of religious leaders to gender-based violence enables them to recognize potential victims and perpetrators, to offer guidance and to offer an appropriate reaction and response.
- Inclusive dialogue, consultations and information-sharing with religious actors on VAWG facilitates policy development and strengthens community-based responses.
- Research by (feminist) scholars of religion to improve knowledge about VAWG within religious contexts and develop new strategies of engagement.
- Mutual training and awareness-raising enhances religious literacy, enabling better cultural alignment in VAWG interventions.
- Funding and partnerships support short and long-term projects, awareness campaigns, intergenerational preventive awareness-raising and appropriate responses to violence.
- Engagement with religious actors should be guided by several **key principles**:
 - Efforts must prioritize human rights, including the FoRB of all involved, as well as gender equality, ensuring that the rights of women and girls are central, with guaranteed access to justice and support.
 - The principle of do no harm must be respected; meaning initiatives should empower women and not worsen their vulnerabilities.
 - Even-handedness and diversity should be embraced by incorporating a wide range of religious actors, perspectives and beliefs around a clear commitment to combat VAWG.
 - Engagement must focus on participation and inclusion, ensuring the involvement of marginalized voices, particularly women and girls who have experienced VAWG.
 - Non-discrimination and equal access ensure that services are available to all, regardless of religious or belief background.
 - Engagement should be based on respect and openness, fostering mutual respect between state and religious actors and all stakeholders engaged, including victims/survivors, whose needs should be at the core of these efforts while encouraging open and frank discussions.

ANNEXE 1:

Different forms of gender-based violence against women and girls

Physical violence: An act that aims to cause pain or physical injury, including murder, assassination, beating, biting, burning, kicking, killing, maiming, punching, arbitrary arrest, kidnapping, torture or other forms of attack, such as using objects or weapons to cause physical harm. Human trafficking and modern slavery are often categorized as physical violence, because those involved can suffer physical (alongside other types of) violence due to their enslavement.¹⁹⁴

Sexual violence: There is no single definition or understanding of what constitutes ‘sexual’ violence under international law. However, it can be understood as: “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, human trafficking or acts otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality, using coercion by anyone, regardless of their relationship to the victim in any setting”.¹⁹⁵ Whether violence can be characterized as ‘sexual’ is based on factors such as the intent of the perpetrator, the experience of the victim or survivor and the context in which it occurred.¹⁹⁶ Examples of sexual violence include sexual harassment, advances, remarks or jokes, sexual assault, rape, sexualised threats, sexist insults or image-based sexual abuse or extortion.¹⁹⁷

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is used to acknowledge both the sexual nature of the violence and the fact that the violence is based on gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This is because such violence often stems from gender inequality, power imbalances and stereotypes, e.g., that a woman should be sexually submissive or that sexual aggression and domination are core components of manhood and masculinity.

Psychological violence can take the form of e.g., verbal abuse, derogatory comments, domineering behaviour/intimidation, personal threats, stalking, bullying, rumour campaigns, character assassinations, illegal interrogation or surveillance, online harassment, abuse and trolling or threats against family and friends to silence women.¹⁹⁸ Over time, this can cause a coercive environment that may undermine women's ability to recognize acts of violence perpetrated against them and their ability to leave the situation. Psychological violence often accompanies or precedes other forms of violence, such as physical, sexual or economic violence. Systematic psychological violence often underpins some of the most extreme forms of gender-based violence including enslavement, gender persecution or even genocide.¹⁹⁹

Economic violence: Economic violence includes acts which undermine the target's ability to "acquire, use, and maintain economic resources, [thereby] threatening their economic security and potential for self-sufficiency".²⁰⁰ Examples include theft of earnings, restricting access to money, office, child care, health care or other assets, exclusion from inheritance, damage of property or a refusal to let a woman work or attend education. An extreme form of VAWG that also has an economic component is trafficking of women and girls.²⁰¹

More specific forms of violence, including harmful practices, include:

- **Child sexual abuse:** Involves any form of sexual activity with a child, causing harm and long-lasting psychological trauma. It can include molestation, exploitation and assault.
- **Child marriage** is any marriage where at least one of the parties is below 18. Marriage no earlier than 16 may be allowed in exceptional circumstances defined by law, based on the decision of a judge, taking into account the level of maturity of the child, and without deference to culture or tradition. Child marriage is a harmful practice and considered a form of forced marriage violating the child's human rights.²⁰²
- **Dowry violence:** Refers to the abuse of women, often in the form of physical or emotional violence, linked to demands for dowries during marriage.
- **Domestic violence and abuse (DVA):** Any form of physical, sexual, emotional or psychological abuse between intimate partners — during or after relationships — or within family settings, often leading to severe harm and long-term effects on victims. Notably, children who witness violence at home are also affected by it and may learn to view it as normal; boys may learn to imitate a violent father to get what they want, while girls may learn to accept physical violence as part of their later lives, equating love with violence and becoming involved with abusive men.²⁰³

- **Female genital mutilation (FGM):** FGM is the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons. In some places, it is a requirement prior to marriage and practiced to control the sexuality of women and girls. It has short- and long-term health consequences, including on girls' and women's mental health. It is a harmful practice that violates girls' and women's human rights.²⁰⁴ Over 230 million women had been cut worldwide as of 2024.²⁰⁵
- **Femicide:** The killing of women and girls because they are women/girls, or that disproportionately affects women/girls. It can take the form of murder resulting from intimate partner violence, torture slaying, honour killings, targeting of women in conflict, dowry-deaths, infanticide (see below), deaths following genital mutilation (see above) or trafficking (see below), killing following accusations of witchcraft or other related deaths.²⁰⁶
- **Forced marriage:** Disproportionately affecting women and girls,²⁰⁷ this occurs when one or both individuals are coerced into marriage without their consent, often involving threats, violence or manipulation.
- **Grooming:** A form of coercive control involving the use of predatory behaviour, usually, though not always, perpetrated by men against women, for the purpose of sexual exploitation and abuse.²⁰⁸ In some cases, men groom women with the view of marrying them and coercing or forcing them to convert to their religion, which happens to be the religion of the majority. States and non-state actors have a responsibility to counter all forms of grooming including those motivated by ideological grounds (promoting religious supremacy and homogenization).²⁰⁹
- **'Honour' crimes:** Acts of violence primarily committed against women and girls, because family members consider that the family will be dishonoured by the suspected, perceived or actual behaviour of the victim (e.g., committing adultery, entering into sexual relations before marriage, seeking divorce, refusing to enter an arranged marriage, etc.) Such acts of violence can go as far as murder. These crimes are considered a means to preserve and/or restore the integrity of the community cultural, traditional, customary or certain interpretations of religious norms the victim allegedly transgressed.²¹⁰
- **Human trafficking:** The illegal recruitment of people by means of coercion, threat, violence, deception or abuse of a position of vulnerability, often for the purposes of sexual exploitation, labour exploitation or the commission of other criminal activities. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to trafficking due to factors like gender inequality and gender-based violence, poverty, cultural norms, lack of education and awareness, weak legal protections and demand for sexual services, which traffickers exploit for profit and control.

- **Infanticide/female foeticide:** The act of intentionally killing an infant or foetus, often due to gender preference and in association with poverty or social stigma, most commonly seen in cases of female infanticide.
- **Obstetric violence:** Mistreatment, disrespect and abuse experienced by individuals during pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period. This can include physical abuse, verbal humiliation, non-consensual medical procedures, neglect, denial of pain relief and a lack of privacy or informed consent.²¹¹
- **Online violence:** Affecting millions of women and girls each year, any form of violence that takes place in digital spaces, including sexist speech, harassment, video and image-based abuse, trolling, stalking, surveillance, doxing, swatting, revenge porn, online pile-ons, takedown or cancel culture and exploitation.²¹² Young women, girls, women in public life and women from marginalized groups are most at risk.²¹³
- **Sexual harassment and stalking:** Unwanted and inappropriate sexual advances, comments or actions that create an intimidating, hostile or unsafe environment, often leading to emotional and physical harm. Whilst both men and women are affected by stalking, most stalkers are male, and most stalking is cross-gender, affecting women.²¹⁴
- **Sextortion:** Use of information and communications technology (ICT) to blackmail a victim. A form of extortion that involves the threat to distribute private, sensitive or explicit material unless the victim complies with specific demands. These demands may include the provision of sexually explicit images, sexual acts or monetary payment. Perpetrators may also threaten to harm the victim's reputation and relationships, as well as the safety of family members or friends by leveraging personal information obtained through electronic devices, online platforms or social engineering tactics.²¹⁵
- **Violence against elderly women:** Physical, psychological or financial abuse of older women, often within familial settings, which can lead to their isolation, further increasing their vulnerability to violence.

ANNEXE 2:

Responding to reports of VAWG/SGBV within religious or belief communities

Key principles for religious or belief actors²¹⁶

✓ Respond promptly

- Take all concerns seriously, listening with empathy and without judgement.
- Make it clear to the victim/survivor that enduring VAWG/SGBV is not part of being a good believer.
- Prioritize the victim/survivor's safety and well-being.
- Never pressure anyone to share details or take actions they are not ready for, unless immediate protection is required.

✓ Respect consent and agency

- Always seek informed consent before sharing a victim/survivor's information or making referrals, unless there is an immediate risk of harm to this person or others in their care (e.g., children, vulnerable adults).
- Explain clearly which actions may need to be taken and why (e.g., that some disclosures must be reported to authorities for safety reasons).
- Offer the victim/survivor information on their choices as regards who they speak to, what support to access, and how to proceed.

✓ **Report concerns appropriately**

- Notify the designated safeguarding coordinator or state authorities as required.
- Record the disclosure as accurately as possible, including the victim/survivor's consent (or reasons for acting without it).
- If consent is withheld, continue offering support and information about available resources.

✓ **Seek specialist advice and referral**

- With consent, connect the survivor to specialist health, psychosocial and legal services.
- If consent cannot be obtained and you believe someone is at risk, follow mandatory reporting laws, while explaining your duty of care compassionately.
- Ensure referrals are to providers who are trauma-informed and, as far as possible, sensitive to the survivor's beliefs and culture.

✓ **Respond to immediate danger**

- If there is reason to believe someone is in immediate danger, contact police, social services or the designated local authority immediately.
- Explain your actions to the victim/survivor where possible to preserve trust.

✓ **Confidentiality and trust**

- Do not guarantee absolute confidentiality in cases of abuse; instead, be transparent about your safeguarding obligations.
- Encourage disclosures made in clergy-penitent privilege to be repeated in non-privileged settings when necessary to enable reporting.
- Maintain privacy and discretion, sharing information only on a need-to-know basis.

✓ **Follow up and ongoing support**

- Continue offering pastoral or emotional support, respecting the victim/survivor's preferences.

- For religious actors who are also service providers, revisit consent regularly, including when not initially given, or if services change, as victims/survivors may change their minds as they feel safer or more informed.
- Encourage community accountability and education to prevent future harm.

Informed consent

Informed consent supports the victim/survivor's autonomy and safety. It is a process of communication and not just a signature. When dealing with consent, religious actors should:

- Ensure a victim/survivor voluntarily agrees to actions, including the sharing of their information with third parties;
- Explain clearly what will happen, why, and who will be involved, including the role of service providers or authorities;
- Clarify and ensure understanding of the purpose, potential risks and benefits of any action before it is taken;
- Avoid coercion or pressure, ensuring victims/survivors are able to explain their reasoning behind any consent given;
- Understand that consent may be verbal or written, with written consent preferable for sensitive information;
- Reassure survivors that they may refuse to consent and can withdraw their consent at any time; and
- Revisit consent regularly, especially as circumstances or services change.²¹⁷

Note: These principles are based on existing procedures within religious or belief communities and those applied by regular service providers. Some elements require the adoption of formalized procedures within religious or belief communities, as well as cooperation protocols with service providers. They will not be successful without a determination within religious or belief communities to act against VAWG/SGBV, which includes receiving appropriate training to be able to assess risk and needs, and point people to appropriate support. They also assume that state agencies are governed by the rule of law and implement their legally-binding international human rights obligations.

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- IV-2 Les associations professionnelles et bénévoles signataires s'engagent à évaluer la situation de la personne et à répondre à ses besoins dans la mesure des moyens dont elles disposent. Elles s'engagent en outre à communiquer une information complète et fiable sur les droits et les aides dont la personne peut bénéficier.
- IV-3 Les associations professionnelles et bénévoles s'engagent à proposer un accompagnement tout au long du parcours social, psychologique et juridique défini en accord et selon le rythme de la personne victime de violence. »
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