



Session 4c: Bringing religious leaders on board

Promoting alternative religious interpretations

Members explained that religious texts are often used to condone child marriage, but they can also serve as a basis for alternative religious readings in favour of girls' rights.

A participant from Guatemala spoke about their work with extreme-right Catholics: "Religious leaders use the Bible to justify patriarchal practices. How do we overcome that? We have found one text in the New Testament, the Parable of the Talents, useful to argue in favour of letting girls develop their talents. But if the selected quotes don't work, we are stuck."

A participant from Mozambique said, "We have developed "Channels of hope", a guide to engage with faith organisations and which contains language on where child rights fit in the Bible. Faith leaders don't care about UN Conventions, and relate to the Bible more. What does the Bible say about getting married, about taking care of your child? The model has only been developed in a Christian context, but we are working on a model for Muslim leaders and communities in Mozambique."

A participant from the USA said, "In Ethiopia, leaders who are working at higher levels within the Orthodox Church can sometimes be more progressive. We reached out to the patriarch who was concerned about child marriage, and we invited him to contribute to the Development Bible, which helps local religious leaders carry out their daily functions in the community. Progressive ideas were integrated into the guide by the patriarch and then taken to the communities."

A participant from Morocco said that their organisation trains female PhD students to look at Ayat and Surah in the Qur'an that are problematic and often used to condone patriarchal practices, and apply them to the contemporary Moroccan contexts. They stressed the importance of female religious leaders to engage male religious leaders for future legal and policy reforms.

Framing the issue

Beyond promoting alternative readings of religious texts, *Girls Not Brides* members use a wide range of arguments to convince religious leaders of the benefits of ending child marriage.

A participant from Cameroon explained that religious leaders in Cameroon say that Marie was married when she was young and use this as an argument to condone child marriage. Their organisation used the health argument – fistula in particular – to counter religious leaders' interpretation of religious texts. They found that, if you talk to leaders about 'women', they are reluctant to listen. But if you talk to them about their daughters, they are more receptive. As a result they have seen positive change. Religious leaders now refuse to marry girls as young as 10-12 and insist on following the law, e.g. they only allow marriages if they are first registered. The downside is that the law in Cameroon still allows for girls as young as 15 to be married.

A participant from India explained that health was a helpful entry point for collaborating with religious leaders and that they had partnered with Islamic universities to develop a training manual on the health of women and girls in Islam, including child marriage.

Similarly, **a participant from Egypt** explained: “We don’t talk about religion. We are only health or human rights experts.” In helping to develop the national strategy to end child marriage, their organisation led seminars to give religious leaders knowledge on health or human rights in relation to early and child marriage. Based on this knowledge, faith leaders went back to the Qur’an and the Bible to agree on the messages they wanted to be included in the strategy.

A participant from Pakistan found that it was more appropriate for their organisation to use legal arguments: “We are not religious leaders or scholars. We must follow the laws in Pakistan.” However, their arguments were more likely to be heard if they involved religious leaders in their work. They have organised discussions between religious leaders of different sects within Islam, asked their views about child marriage and discussed in groups. Now thirteen nikah registrars in their area refuse to perform child marriages.

A participant from Ghana said, “We should avoid talking about 18 as the minimum age of marriage but, instead, focus on girls as role models,” and added “We must be careful not to ignore traditional leaders who promote child marriage on the basis of customs.”

“It’s never us against them”: finding allies in religious leaders

“It’s never us against them” explained **a participant from India** who spoke of his experience working in a community with some of the lowest socio-economic indicators in the country and whose population is 90% Muslim. Muslims there already feel under siege and it was difficult to start a conversation on child marriage. They invited Muslim leaders to training courses that took place in three phases: a space to voice concerns and views on the issue; a space to enhance mutual understanding between practitioners and faith leaders; and finally, a space to consider ways to collaborate. Although it was a long, strenuous process, they were able to co-opt high level leaders that commend authority to bring credibility to their work.

Another participant from India spoke about working with leaders of Hindu temples to help get marriages registered.

A participant from Zimbabwe spoke of their experience with the Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe. They explained that they trained religious leaders, as well as peer educators within the church. They formed girls’ clubs within the church, and encourage religious leaders to develop a handbook.

Girls Not Brides members are sometimes faith leaders themselves. **A participant from Uganda** is a youth pastor. His organisation has the largest number of volunteers in the country because they approach churches and faith leaders. They ask for their support and endorsement, which boosts their reach and credibility.

A participant from Zambia who is also a faith leader added: “It’s important to work with religious leaders to give them the expertise they need to realise the fight to end child marriage.”

“We should approach religious leaders as humans first”, said **a participant from the USA**. “If you invite them to a meeting, invite them to a neutral space and ask them to share their own

experiences. Find areas of common agreement. Faith leaders feel ownership over the wellbeing of young people in their communities, and we do too! How can we find agreements?”

They added: “Work with the hierarchy – how can we explore tactics with the higher authorities that can trickle down?” This was a recurring tactic mentioned by members, including: working with the Orthodox Church on the Development Bible in Ethiopia, and partnering with Islamic university to develop a manual on women’s health in Islam in Pakistan

Working with faith leaders to affect policy change

A participant from Egypt talked about their experiences and lessons learned working with religious leaders to develop a national strategy to end child marriage. They work with religious leaders in two ways. First at the community level, they organise seminars to provide faith leaders with information on child marriage via a health and human rights angle. Faith leaders would then feedback their religious interpretations into the development of the strategy. Secondly, at the policy level, they work with Al-Azhar University, one of the most renowned Islamic universities whose scholars render fatwas clarifying Islamic stances on certain issues.

A participant from Morocco said, “It took more than 20 years to reform the Family Code. We went back to the Qur’an and the Surah, sought the help of theologians and Islamic scholars to support the reform. We focused on the positive elements within the religious texts. We were blamed of appeasing the Islamists. Religion has political perspectives in Morocco. It’s not just about religious leaders, it’s political Islam – it’s another layer of complexity.”