

Preventing violence against women and girls in the faith-based context





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This resource is part of Communicating Equality, a project focused on gender-transformative approaches to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls. When we analyzed the evidence on this topic, religion emerged as an important context for advancing violence prevention and gender equality in Canada. This resource provides a summary of promising gender-transformative initiatives for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in faith-based contexts in Canada and around the world, with a focus on communication and messaging.

[Communicating Equality](#) for Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a Canadian initiative to address the root causes of VAWG by focusing on primary prevention. Worldwide, one in three women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life [1]. In Canada, more than 50% of women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 [2]. This project links expertise in media and communication, gender-transformative thinking and violence prevention to highlight and address the drivers of VAWG and translate them into effective Canada-specific messages and actions for public consumption.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Violence against women and girls	is defined as any act of gender-based violence that causes, or could cause, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or in private life. This definition encompasses all forms of violence that women and girls experience (including physical, sexual, emotional, cultural, spiritual, financial, and others) that are gender-based [3].
Primary prevention	means stopping violence against women and girls from occurring in the first place by addressing its underlying drivers. This includes changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence; and shifting the power imbalances and social norms, structures and practices that drive and normalize it [3].
Gender-transformative approaches	move beyond simply being aware of gender inequality, or sensitive to gender differences, and instead deliberately challenge harmful gender roles, stereotypes, practices and norms, with the explicit aim of shifting the unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men [3]. Concerning violence, gender-transformative approaches focus on eliminating violence against women and girls and ending gender inequalities at the same time. In order to do this, a whole-of-society approach that engages all segments of society in the promotion of gender equality- including at the individual, household, community, institutional and policy/legal level- is necessary. Overall, employing gender-transformative approaches requires creativity, critical analysis, and novel ways of thinking [3-6].

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

A significant portion of the global population either actively practices or holds some degree of affiliation to one of the many world religions [7]. Religion, spirituality, and/or faith is a core element of the human experience. For many, religion is the source of one's moral and ethical code, informing how they live their lives, conduct themselves, and interact with others and the world around them. Religion and religious belief can also inform the social and political principles and viewpoints they hold. Given this, faith-based contexts represent important settings for engaging in critical thinking, discussion, and action on primary prevention of violence against women and girls.

Unfortunately, religious institutions have also played a significant role in legitimizing violence against women and girls with beliefs that assert the divine superiority of men, which legitimizes domination and power over women who are scripted as inferior and subordinate to men. This may also translate to gender inequality in leadership and roles within the church and home. Often, interpretations of religious texts have been used to affirm men's control over women and promote gender violence [8, 9]. As such, approaches within faith-based contexts that are gender-transformative are especially necessary.

Recognizing that religion and spirituality are important elements in the lives of many Canadians, some organizations have hosted events and developed resources on the issue of violence against women and girls in faith-based contexts, but more is needed. Increasing engagement with digital religion, including chat groups with religious leaders, online sermons and religious content on social media, provides unique opportunities for integrating gender-transformative approaches [10].

Conversations on the intersection of religion and violence against women and girls are taking place within some organizations in Canada. Watch the video below to learn more:

In 2022, the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health hosted an event titled "[Gender Transformative Programming in Health: Experiences in Engaging Men and Faith Leaders](#)" with speakers from World Renew Canada, World Vision Canada, and Plan International Canada. This event focused on highlighting examples and learnings from gender transformative programming in health that engaged men and faith leaders.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE INITIATIVES FOR THE PRIMARY PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN FAITH-BASED SETTINGS

The following interrelated themes are prominent in gender-transformative primary prevention of violence against women and girls programming in faith-based settings: 1) engaging faith-based leaders, 2) reinterpretation of scriptures, and 3) mobilizing members within faith communities.

Engaging faith-based leaders

Gender-transformative initiatives dedicated to violence prevention in faith contexts have focused on engaging religious leaders to harness the tremendous influence they have as role models and gatekeepers, and the critical role they play in combatting harmful notions around gender roles, norms and relations [11-24]. Initiatives have focused on engaging religious leaders through workshops and roundtables to challenge unequal gender relations and shift ideas, attitudes, and behaviours. Issues include how women and girls are valued and treated at the individual, family, and community levels, positive fatherhood, equitable reproductive health, peacebuilding in conflict-settings, healthy intimate relationships, transforming harmful gender norms and ultimately, prevention and response to violence against women and girls. Some initiatives integrate relevant religious and cultural concepts emphasizing the importance of gender equality. For example:

[Prevention+](#) in Indonesia ran workshops with religious actors that highlighted the Islamic principle of mubadalah, a concept of reciprocity between man and woman that when upheld, promotes mutual support, cooperation and help amongst men and women. Workshops were organized and facilitated to disseminate the concept widely [19].

[Engender Health](#) focuses on challenging harmful traditional practices such as: initiation ceremonies which sometimes involve “sexual initiation” of girls, female genital mutilation, and forced circumcision of boys; norms requiring “widow cleansing” following the death of a husband; and beliefs that paying dowry provides automatic power to the husband and his family over the woman [18].

[‘We Believe’](#), a media-based campaign implemented by ABAAD (Resource Centre for Gender Equality) in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt, featured prominent faith leaders from diverse religions and religious traditions publicly and unequivocally condemning violence against women and girls. Their messages were drawn from the Bible and Quran and were disseminated through TV advertisements, billboards, radio commercials, online ads, news and press releases, and social media [19, 20].

Programming from [Reproductive Health Uganda](#) has supported faith leaders within the Hoima district to incorporate messages on positive parenting and gender equality into their religious teachings. Here is a quote from one of the sermons: “The prophet also said, men and women have duties and rights over each other, and if they fulfill these duties and rights, there shall be no violence but rather equality” [16, 23].

[SASA! Faith](#) engages Muslim and Christian religious leaders and members in preventing violence against women and HIV. Religious leaders attend a seminar to learn about violence against women, its connection to HIV, and how to prevent these harms (see the slide deck on pg. 68 of the [SASA! Faith guide](#)). The seminar draws upon religious texts when discussing the proper treatment of wives, including messages from the Bible (Colossians 3:19) and Book 46, hadith 3895. Religious leaders are encouraged to share ideas and stories about violence prevention on the radio and in prayer groups. Additionally, sermon notes for religious leaders are provided to support them in leading positive change on violence against women and girls and its connection to HIV. See some examples of messages below [24].

“Why? Because silence has suggested it's permissible and should be tolerated”

“violence against women hurts the faith community”

“If we put our faith into action we can break the silence, bringing an end to the consequences of violence against women”

Reinterpretation of Holy Scriptures

Several gender-transformative initiatives have involved sessions and practices where leaders and members of religious communities spend time critically engaging with holy texts (specifically, The Bible and The Quran) to address misinterpretations that have allowed for the justification and perpetuation of violence against women and girls [17, 19, 21, 24, 25].

Christian and Muslim religious leaders are encouraged to challenge gender-based violence (GBV) in their communities and more effectively support survivors as part of a program implemented in Liberia. A “Faith Leader GBV Toolkit” was developed which explores the ways religious texts have been used to condone the mistreatment of women and girls and guides readers to create more equitable messaging, emphasizing respect, responsibility and dignity [19].

[Channels of Hope for Gender](#), implemented by World Vision across Africa and in the Solomon Islands, leads faith leaders through a series of workshops to critically examine holy texts. For example, the creation story in Genesis is explored, underscoring that men and women were created equal. Luke 7:36-50 and John 8:1-11 are also highlighted to demonstrate the values by which Jesus lived and his leadership in honouring men and women as equal [17].

Muslim Men Against Domestic Violence, an initiative focused on Islamic ways of educating and advocating around domestic violence and supporting victims/survivors, included activities where members of the organization hosted talks and sermons at universities, mosques, and Muslim institutions. These often centered on domestic violence in Muslim communities and men’s critical role in violence prevention through re-interpreting the Quran and Sunnah messages in a way that did not condone domestic violence [25].

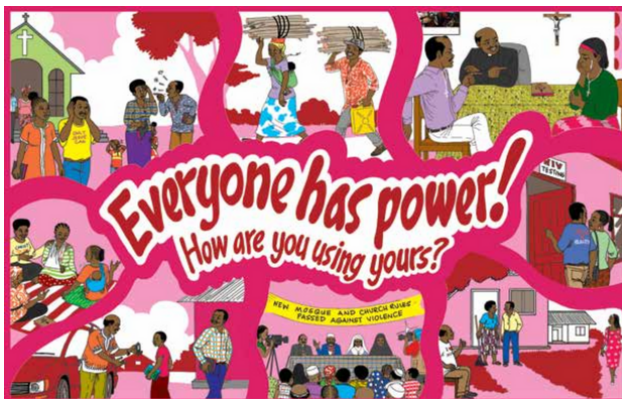
Mobilizing faith communities

Beyond engaging religious leaders, gender-transformative initiatives also mobilize entire faith communities to play a role in violence prevention [24-26].

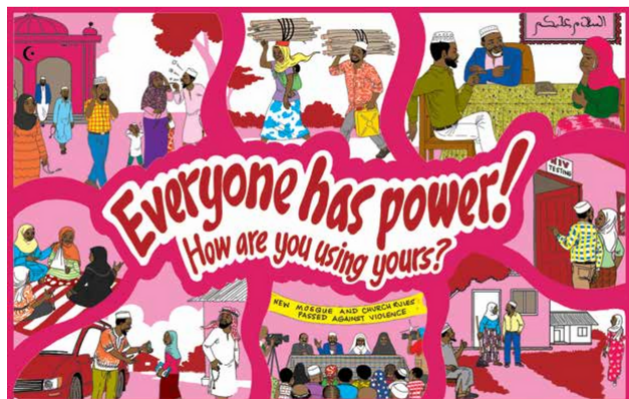
InnerCHANGE, an initiative based in South Africa that uses the Bible verse 1 King 5:17 as its foundation, nurtures local church congregations in Soshanguve to become “people of peace”. In doing so, they seek to build a strong foundation for fighting against the normalization of violence against women in South Africa. Local congregations and other faith-based organizations are encouraged to create teachings on violence so that Christian communities can begin to demonstrate and disseminate a new paradigm of building communities of peace [26].

The SASA! Faith project engages religious leaders, program leaders at local churches/mosques, members of local churches/mosques and their families, faith-based media and services, and local faith-based organizations who run programs or provide services. See some examples of campaign posters below [24].

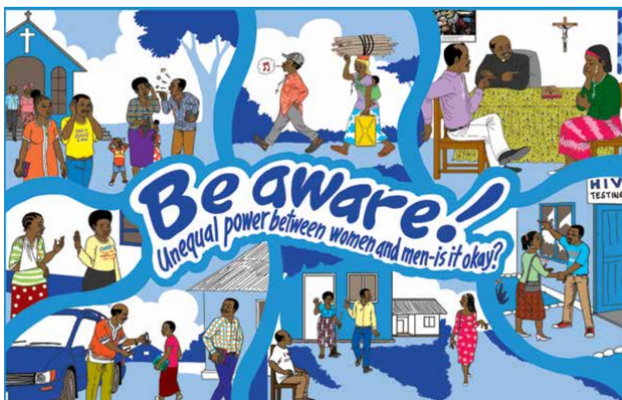
Start Christian Power Poster



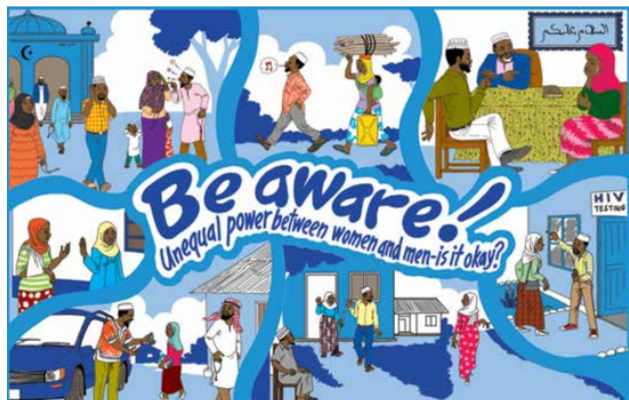
Start Muslim Power Poster



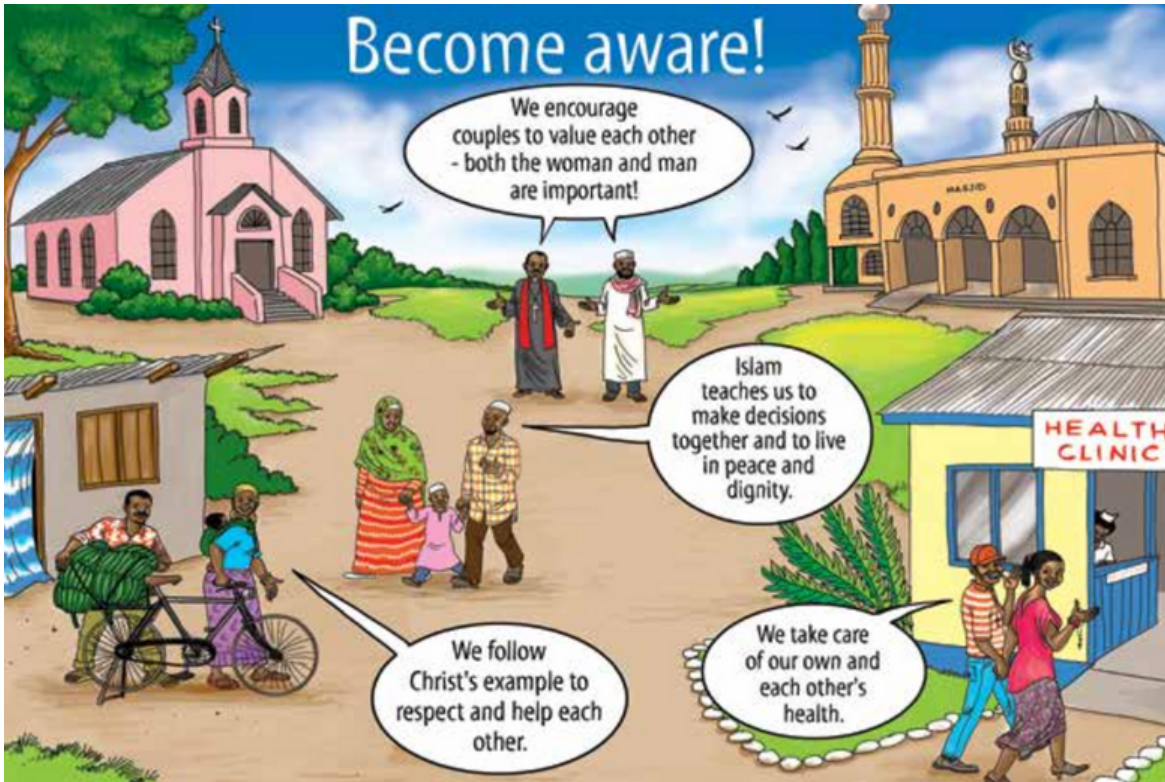
Awareness Christian Power Poster



Awareness Muslim Power Poster



Awareness Community Poster



CONCLUSION

This resource showcases examples of gender-transformative approaches for the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in faith contexts. These examples demonstrate that faith-based institutions are a key context where preventing violence against women and girls can be enacted, and that ultimately, faith leaders and institutions can serve as powerful catalysts for ensuring broader systemic and long-lasting societal change.

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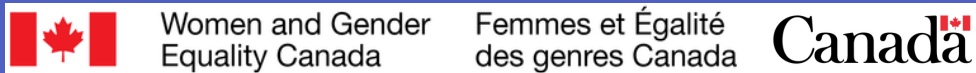


Communicating Equality

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