



Faith sensitive protection from violence against women and girls in humanitarian and forced migration contexts

Guidance notes

Key messages

The risks of VAWG increase in the context of conflict and forced displacement with a continuum of violence from pre-migration, conflict and flight to refuge with patterns of violence that intensify as time in displacement increases. The exact scale of VAWG in displacement is unknown due to various barriers, but up to 69% of forced migrant women are estimated to be affected. Innovative and holistic approaches are urgently needed to prevent VAWG in displacement contexts and support the survivors.

Religion – religious beliefs, practices, organisations and experiences – is both a protective and a risk factor in experiences of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in displacement. Religious beliefs and practices can positively and adversely impact experiences of VAWG, help-seeking behaviours, attitudes towards and behaviours regarding VAWG, and (mental) health outcomes.

Faith actors play an important role in forced migrant communities by leveraging significant spiritual, physical and social assets to benefit affected populations. They can mobilise human and material resources in under-resourced settings to support protection. Also, displaced populations, some belonging to faith-communities, have important inherent resources and learning capacities to support VAWG prevention and response.

Protection practitioners (VAWG, GBV, MHPSS) can strengthen their work by demonstrating cultural competency which includes religious literacy. Religious literacy involves being open to the role that religious beliefs, practices, organisation and experiences may play in survivors' and perpetrators' understanding of VAWG and does not require specific knowledge of religious traditions.

Faith sensitivity in VAWG interventions will help interventions be more people-centred and adopt the 'do no harm' principle by tackling and leveraging complex intersecting influences of religion, while upholding the principles of neutrality and impartiality.

Key recommendations for humanitarian, protection, VAWG and GBV specialists include:

- ✓ Be aware of how spiritual and religious beliefs impact on perpetrators' attitudes and behaviours and on survivors' vulnerability to VAWG, resilience and well-being
- ✓ Be aware of how their own beliefs and biases influence how they interpret the influences of religion on survivors' experiences and needs
- ✓ Reflect on how they provide support to survivors who hold diverse cultural, spiritual and religious beliefs
- ✓ Demonstrate religious literacy by sensitively exploring the religious, cultural and spiritual factors that are unique to each survivor's circumstances
- ✓ Seek opportunities to tailor services to survivors' holistic needs
- ✓ Develop safe referral pathways to verified providers of pastoral/spiritual care and inform survivors that they can request support from female faith leaders
- ✓ Train faith actors and those responsible for places of worship to provide survivor-centred support with referral to specialist services when needed, promoting confidentiality, safety, non-discrimination and respect for survivors.

Summary of guidance notes

Part A: Preparing for faith-sensitive VAWG prevention and response

Key actions include:

- Take stock of what resources are available to address VAWG with faith sensitivity
- Identify any significant gaps in organisational capacity to address VAWG with faith sensitivity and develop a plan to fill these gaps
- Include faith actors in your mapping, contextual and influence analysis
- Conduct holistic needs assessments
- Train staff in cultural competency which includes religious literacy
- Improve how protection personnel and GBV and MHPSS specialists respond to the holistic needs of displaced populations of diverse religious backgrounds and no faith
- Consider developing an organisational policy on religious engagement and protection of religious minorities

Part B: Delivering faith-sensitive VAWG prevention and response

The following recommendations emphasize the importance of engaging with faith actors and institutions at various levels to effectively address VAWG in displaced communities, while considering cultural, religious, and gender dynamics.

General Suggestions:

1. Engage local faith actors throughout the VAWG project cycle.
2. Provide training on psychological first aid (PFA) for faith actors.
3. Sensitize faith actors on increased risks of VAWG in forced migration contexts.

Supporting Survivors:

1. Listen to women's voices and acknowledge the role of faith in their experiences.
2. Adapt interventions to resonate with displaced people's worldviews.

3. Enable survivors to identify their own sources of power, including faith.
4. Assist survivors in accessing ritual accessories and sites to uphold religious customs.
5. Understand survivors' religious coping mechanisms and support networks.

Supporting Families:

1. Understand culture-specific family structures where VAWG occurs.
2. Recognize that VAWG can be perpetrated by women of faith and address root causes of family violence.
3. Offer training for effective communication and conflict management within families, drawing on faith values.

Faith-Informed Community-Based Protection:

1. Leverage the capacities of faith communities in responding to VAWG.
2. Incorporate faith-community sensitivity into VAWG protection efforts.
3. Prioritize collaboration with local faith actors and organizations.

Engaging with Women's Faith Organizations/ Groups:

1. Identify existing women's faith groups and involve them in VAWG programming.
2. Tailor engagement activities for different age and ability groups.
3. Strengthen existing structures of women's faith groups, ensuring confidentiality and non-discrimination.

Engaging with Informal Women Leaders:

1. Identify and engage informal female leaders from local communities.
2. Support informal women leaders in taking on leadership roles in VAWG protection.
3. Understand the religious beliefs and practices of women leaders in relation to VAWG.

Engaging with Men and Boys from Faith Communities:

1. Understand how religious beliefs and practices shape men's attitudes towards VAWG.
2. Adapt gender-transformative approaches to involve men and boys in VAWG prevention.
3. Address toxic masculinity and challenge harmful behaviours and beliefs.

Engaging with Formal Faith Leaders:

1. Involve faith leaders in all stages of interventions and sustain their involvement.
2. Provide training on humanitarian standards and survivor-centered approaches.
3. Encourage faith leaders to provide safe spaces and support for survivors.

Engaging with Faith Institutions:

1. Build institutional capacity of faith institutions to offer survivor-centered support.
2. Strengthen partnerships with faith-based organizations around protection from VAWG.
3. Develop innovative faith-sensitive MHPSS services for survivors.

Full guidance note available at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/departments/social-policy-sociology-criminology/research/projects/2023/integrated-intersectional-and-socioecological-approach>

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