

Review of Effective Faith Engagement Strategies for Addressing Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation

October 2025

Acknowledgement

This desk review was prepared by Samuel Hall, in consultation with Religions for Peace (RfP), the African Council of Religious Leaders - Religions for Peace (ACRL-RfP), the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities (JLI) and UNICEF, as part of the Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families, and Communities (FPCC) initiative. The Samuel Hall team included Nassim Majidi, Lisa Pfister, Cynthia Ngeinei, Mwara Namelok, Devyani Nighoskar, and Titus Gitau.

We extend our sincere gratitude to Alessia Radice and Massimiliano Sani from UNICEF's Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) and Child Protection sections, whose guidance and feedback shaped every stage of the process. From Religions for Peace, we thank Dr. Rozilla Adhiambo, Kristine Leonardo, Sarah Mokaya, and Deepika Singh for their critical contributions and theological insight. From the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), we thank Alvin Andaje for his great contributions and insights.

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List of Acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRS	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CEFM	Child, early and forced marriage
FBOs	Faith-based organizations
FGM	Female genital mutilation
FPCC	Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families, and Communities
GPECM	UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage
JLI	Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities
SBC	Social and behaviour change
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNICEF	United National Children's Fund
UNJP-FGM	UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation
WHO	World Health Organization

Glossary

Term	Definition
Child marriage	Any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.
Discourse	The process of social signification that involves the use of various semiotic modes, such as language, image, and sound, within a specific sociocultural context. Discourse is considered as one element of social life that is dialectically related to other non-discursive elements, such as time, space, place, and social power. In critical discourse analysis, discourse is operationalized as the patterned use of language that emerges from engagement in social practices. It both reflects and contributes to shaping social practice. ¹
Faith actors	The term 'faith actors' covers a wide variety of actors whose definitions and typology vary in literature and contexts. For the sake of this research, faith actors will refer to faith-based organizations, religious bodies or networks, faith communities, and religious leaders.
Faith-based actors	Actors whose identity is not directly or officially affiliated with a religion but who have close ties with a specific faith category and/or are strongly inspired by religious values.
Faith-based organizations (FBOs)	Registered or unregistered organizations emerging from civil society, whose missions or objectives are inspired by religious values, beliefs, or identity, either explicit or not. FBOs' statuses/level of formalization, geographic scales, and relationship to the religion are understood as part of a continuum rather than a binary definition.
Faith community	People who share common religious beliefs and values and draw upon these to carry out activities in their respective communities.
Faith leaders	Believers who play influential roles within their faith communities and the broader local community. They benefit from the trust and they exercise moral authority over their local faith community members, and shape public opinion in the broader community, even at the national or international level.

Female genital mutilation (FGM)	All procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. FGM has serious, short-term and long-term complications such as haemorrhage, infection, complications during birth and psychological issues.² Different types of FGM exist³: • Type I: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the clitoral hood. • Type II: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without the labia majora. • Type III (Infibulation): Narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal by cutting and repositioning the labia. • Type IV: All other harmful procedures to female genitalia for non-medical reasons, such as pricking, piercing, or incising.
Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities (FPCC)	The Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities (FPCC), launched in 2018, is an initiative based on faith engagement to broaden the scope and influence of faith in development and humanitarian work. It is based on three components: • Faith-centred research and mapping • Promotion of community feedback • Establishment of long-term faith coordination and partnerships⁴
Faith-based engagement	A way to work with faith-based communities and religious leaders to promote positive behaviour and social change.
Harmful practices	Harmful practices are persistent practices and behaviours that are grounded in discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, age and other grounds, as well as multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering. ⁵ In this research, harmful practices refer to child marriage and FGM.
Medicalization of FGM	'Medicalization' of FGM refers to situations in which FGM is practised by any category of health-care provider, whether in a public or a private clinic, at home or elsewhere. It also includes the procedure of reinfibulation at any point in a woman's life. ⁶
Mind-Heart dialogue	"A reflective and experiential learning process, exploring faith convictions, lived experiences and knowledge to influence positive social and behaviour change. It supports faith groups and development partners to work together to protect and empower children, families and communities." ⁷
Narrative	Narratives are defined at two different levels. The first level is that of the individual, who builds up representation to make sense of the empirical world. Individuals build narratives based on their daily experience. The other level, defined as the 'master narrative', is a collective representation that serves some political interest with regard to social categorization. A master narrative represents a collective storyline which is so central to the group's existence and 'essence' that it commands identification and integration into the personal narrative. ⁸
Positive social norms	Social norms are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a given group or community, thus guiding human behaviour. They consist of what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Social norms are, therefore, situated in the interplay between behaviour, beliefs, and expectations. ⁹ Positive social norms would, thus, strive to promote positive behaviours and shift harmful norms.
Social and behaviour change (SBC)	Social and behaviour change aims to lower the cognitive, social and structural barriers that hinder people from adopting positive practices and that hinder societies from becoming more equitable, cohesive and peaceful. ¹⁰
Localization	There is no single definition of localization. In humanitarian and development action, the term refers to the strengthening of local responders to lead and deliver response in a "spirit of partnership [that aims to] reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities". ¹¹ Localization targets both aid and practice.

Introduction

Harmful practices against children, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage, persist as deeply entrenched challenges, undermining gender equality and violating basic human rights. These practices are often viewed as cultural rites of passage, symbolizing maturity and social acceptance, but they take a heavy toll on children's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. FGM, defined as the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons, is frequently framed as a cultural imperative tied to gendered notions of purity and womanhood.¹² Similarly, child marriage, characterized by formal or informal unions before the age of 18, is particularly prevalent in regions like the Sahel, with Niger and Chad reporting the highest global rates.¹³

This desk review builds on a scoping exercise by Samuel Hall, which explored the drivers and trends behind these harmful practices. The current phase shifts focus towards leveraging faith-based engagement to advocate for the abandonment of FGM and child marriage in Africa and Yemen. Faith actors, representing 84 per cent of the world's religiously affiliated population, hold unparalleled influence in shaping cultural and social norms.¹⁴ As custodians of moral and spiritual authority, religious leaders are uniquely positioned to champion children's rights and promote the alignment of faith values with the abandonment of harmful practices. Faith-based interventions can foster significant social change by reframing traditions through a lens of protection and empowerment.¹⁵

Global initiatives such as the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (UNJP-FGM), the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage (GPECM) and the Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities (FPCC) exemplify successful approaches to integrating faith actors into prevention strategies.¹⁶ The UNJP-FGM initiative, launched in 2008, is implemented in 16 countries across Africa, and in Yemen, aiming to eliminate FGM by 2030 through multi-pronged strategies. Similarly, the GPECM, was launched in 2016 to tackle child marriage in 12 of the most high-burden or high-prevalence countries. The FPCC initiative was launched in 2018 as a faith engagement approach to address the role of faith and religion in influencing society and using that influence to promote positive change.¹⁷ This report examines these three initiatives, and more, to extract actionable insights, best practices, and recommendations for effective faith engagement in addressing FGM and child marriage.

The methodology for this review combines an extensive desk analysis of academic literature, UN reports, and programme evaluations. These findings guided subsequent field research across Ethiopia, The Gambia, Somalia, and Uganda, with additional remote data collection, such as e-surveys and virtual interviews, spanning Africa and Yemen. This research included country mappings, desk reviews, key informant interviews, and validation workshops. It identified patterns of theological resistance, shifting narratives (such as medicalization or cross-border FGM), and opportunities for early detection and faith-rooted response.

By synthesizing insights from global frameworks and localized practices, this report provides an understanding of the challenges, lessons learned, and best practices in leveraging faith-based actors as catalysts for change and outlines key dimensions for ensuring it is effective. It is grounded in conceptual frameworks of social and behaviour change (SBC) and the mind-heart dialogue.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research is anchored in two key frameworks, social and behaviour change (SBC) and the mind-heart dialogue, which provide a foundation for engaging faith-based and traditional actors in addressing harmful practices.

- **Social and behaviour change (SBC):** SBC is a cornerstone of child protection programming, particularly within UNICEF. It focuses on reducing structural, social, and cognitive barriers that prevent individuals and communities from adopting positive behaviours. SBC interventions work on multiple levels, addressing individual attitudes, community norms, and systemic factors to foster equitable and safe environments that protect children. By combining evidence-based approaches with community-led initiatives, SBC has proven effective in influencing deeply ingrained social norms.
- **The mind-heart dialogue framework:** Rooted in SBC and an integral part of the FPCC initiative, the mind-heart dialogue emphasizes the need to engage both the intellectual (mind) and emotional/spiritual (heart) dimensions of individuals and communities. This framework is particularly relevant for addressing practices like FGM and child marriage, which are inter-

twined with cultural, spiritual, and emotional values. The mind-heart dialogue facilitates critical reflection, empathy, and the alignment of values with the principles of child protection. This approach encourages sustainable behaviour change by addressing both the cognitive and affective dimensions.

Faith Actors and Their Role as Agents of Change

Faith actors are key in addressing harmful practices as their influence spans societal norms, cultural traditions, and spiritual beliefs.¹⁸ However, they occupy a complex position as they often do not fit neatly into categories of either perpetuating or opposing violence; instead, their

roles are multifaceted and vary widely depending on local dynamics.¹⁹ For example, child marriage is frequently legitimized through cultural narratives intertwined with religious beliefs, complicating efforts to disentangle these drivers. In some Islamic communities, girls are viewed as ready for marriage upon reaching menstruation, a belief that can perpetuate child marriage and related abuses.²⁰ At the same time, faith actors often possess greater social capital than governmental or non-governmental entities, allowing them to reach and influence communities consistently.²¹ Faith-based and traditional actors can also significantly influence communities by fostering collective action, advocating for beliefs and norms, safeguarding women and girls, and leveraging customary legal systems to enhance their protection.²²

Box 1. Typology of Faith Actors

Faith actors can be categorized by their level of formalization, geographic reach, and roles in addressing harmful practices. This typology helps to clarify the varied categories, approaches and opportunities for engagement:²³

Local and National Faith Actors

- 1. Formally registered faith-based organizations (FBOs) and networks:** Located in national capitals or regional hubs, these organizations partner with governments and international bodies, such as the United Nations, to address harmful practices and promote protective behaviours. Their structured operations and global connections effectively bridge local and international efforts.
- 2. Smaller formally registered faith actors:** Operating in rural or under-served areas, these entities have limited international ties but are deeply rooted in local communities. They address cultural practices through tailored, community-driven interventions.
- 3. Informal faith actors:** Linked to local places of worship, such as parish or zakat committees, these actors operate on a small scale, addressing immediate community needs. While unregistered, they wield significant grass-roots influence.
- 4. Places of worship and faith communities:** Churches, mosques, and temples are natural hubs for community mobilization. Although lacking formal programmes, they often spontaneously organize social and humanitarian initiatives during crises.
- 5. Religious leaders:** Spanning local to international levels, religious leaders shape norms, challenge harmful practices, and advocate for child protection and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 6. Traditional/tribal networks:** Clan elders and tribal councils influence cultural practices and community behaviours. Their deep integration into cultural and spiritual traditions makes them essential partners in shifting harmful norms.

International Humanitarian and Development Actors

- 7. Faith-based international NGOs:** Large organizations with faith-driven missions operate globally while partnering with local actors to implement culturally sensitive programmes.
- 8. Secular international NGOs:** Non-religious organizations collaborate with faith-based entities to align development goals with community needs.
- 9. Multilateral and bilateral agencies:** Agencies such as UNICEF and USAID integrate faith actors into global strategies, providing resources and coordination to amplify local efforts.

Faith actors' dual capacity to reinforce or dismantle harmful norms highlights the importance of strategic engagement. Their social capital, derived from trust-based networks within their communities, allows them to influence behaviours and attitudes that governmental or secular organizations may struggle to reach. Similarly, their spiritual capital enables them to reframe harmful practices through the lens of shared values, such as dignity, compassion, and justice.²⁴

Faith actors also serve as gatekeepers, providing critical access to communities where external interventions might otherwise face resistance. For example, their endorsement of alternative rites of passage or their advocacy for child protection measures can lend legitimacy to initiatives while fostering community ownership.

Palm and Eyber, 2019, provide an understanding of the potential contributions of faith actors in SBC through the framework of spiritual capital, social capital, and access capital:

- **Spiritual capital:** Faith actors' unique ability to draw on sacred texts, rituals, and religious teachings provides powerful tools to address harmful practices and align traditions with protective values.
- **Social capital:** Their networks foster community cohesion, trust, and collective action, enabling faith actors to support or resist normative shifts effectively.
- **Access capital:** Acting as gatekeepers, faith actors facilitate entry into communities for external actors, ensuring that interventions resonate culturally and socially.

This typology was not directly applied during the data analysis; rather, it serves as a useful conceptual framework to understand the multifaceted roles of faith actors better as they emerged from practitioner insights. This framework highlights the importance of leveraging faith actors' unique influence in addressing harmful practices by situating these roles within the broader social and behaviour change context.



Box 2. Modalities of faith engagement for addressing harmful practices

Community-centered dialogues: One of the most impactful approaches involves facilitating community-centred dialogues. Religious leaders are crucial in leading these conversations, challenging harmful norms, and fostering collective reflection. These dialogues can significantly shift attitudes when integrated with community-level interventions, particularly health education programmes. The involvement of religious leaders in community health initiatives enhances the acceptance of new ideas, catalysing broader normative and behavioural changes.

Faith-based advocacy networks: Networks of faith leaders amplify advocacy efforts by unifying their voices and pooling their influence. Sermons and religious gatherings provide platforms for delivering messages rooted in religious teachings, effectively connecting spiritual values with child protection goals. These networks ensure consistency in messaging, reinforcing community-wide support for abandoning harmful practices.

Capacity building for faith leaders: Equipping faith leaders with the tools, resources, and knowledge to integrate evidence into their advocacy is a critical modality of faith engagement. Tailored capacity-building programmes empower leaders to address sensitive issues like FGM and child marriage with confidence and cultural competence. This approach enhances their credibility and deepens their ability to advocate for sustainable change.

Interfaith collaboration: Collaborative efforts between faith communities demonstrate the potential for collective action across religious divides. Interfaith initiatives, such as those led by the African Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace (ACRL-RfP), strengthen advocacy by forming interfaith networks, including National Interreligious Councils and Women of Faith Networks. These efforts present a unified front, fostering trust and amplifying impact. However, such initiatives often overlook Indigenous and traditional religions, limiting inclusivity and leaving key actors underrepresented.

Media and technology integration: Integrating media and technology into faith-based advocacy has expanded its reach, particularly among younger audiences. Social media, film, and digital campaigns break the silence around taboo issues, creating safe spaces for dialogue and raising awareness about the harms of FGM and child marriage. These platforms enable faith actors to engage with broader audiences, challenging misconceptions and inspiring action.

Religious text reinterpretation: Religious texts, often cited to justify harmful practices, provide an avenue for transformative advocacy when reinterpreted through a protective lens. While no major religious scripture explicitly mandates FGM or child marriage, misinterpretations of these texts have fuelled harmful practices. Faith leaders are uniquely positioned to address these misconceptions, reframe teachings, and promote narratives prioritizing dignity, justice, and child rights.

Collaborative partnerships: Finally, collaborative partnerships between faith-based organizations, governments, and international agencies enhance the credibility, reach, and sustainability of interventions. By aligning faith-driven advocacy with broader development goals, these partnerships foster trust, integrate diverse expertise, and ensure a coordinated approach to eliminating harmful practices.

Challenges, Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Faith Engagement

Faith-based engagement offers immense potential to address harmful practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage. However, these efforts must navigate challenges deeply rooted in cultural, social, and religious systems. While many programmes may not explicitly employ frameworks like the mind-heart dialogue, reflecting on their strategies through this lens highlights the importance of addressing cognitive (mind) and emotional/spiritual (heart) change dimensions. This approach allows us to draw lessons and identify best practices that resonate holistically with communities.

This section presents ten recurring challenges that arise when engaging faith actors on harmful practises, alongside practical strategies that have shown promise in addressing them. The ten challenges are summarized in Box 3 below; each challenge is then explored in more detail in the sections that follow.

Box 3: Ten recurring challenges in engaging faith actors

1. Pushback Against Perceived External influence

What works?

Locally drive messaging and faith-led advocacy to shift narratives.

2. Resistance and Divergent Faith Interpretation

What works?

Peer-based theological dialogue and interfaith alliances

3. Limited Capacity & Resources for Faith Actors

What works?

Practical faith-sensitive training and direct funding for local actors.

4. Exclusion of Marginalised Voices

What works?

Formal leadership roles for women/youth and survivor-led advocacy.

5. Balancing Advocacy & Community trust

What works?

Emphasising protection and dignity rather than condemnig traditions.

6. Adapting to Evolving Social Norms & Laws

What works?

Engaging health professionals & real-time trend monitoring.

7. Misinformation & Social Media Influence

What works?

Digital literacy training & faith-aligned counter-messaging

8. Cross Border FGM & Diaspora Influence

What works?

Regional faith alliances and engaging diaspora faith leaders.

9. Lack of Data for accountability & Scalability

What works?

Training faith leaders in data collection & faith sensitive monitoring.

10. Politicisation of Advocacy Efforts

What works?

Positioning faith leaders as neutral moral voices on child protection.

Challenge 1: Pushback of Perceived External Influence

Pushback against advocacy efforts often arises from the perception that these initiatives are externally imposed, undermining cultural sovereignty and identity.²⁵ The idea of cultural integrity as a form of resistance to the elimination of harmful practices ties in with conservative faith leaders using cultural reaffirmation in response to Western imperialism. Pro-FGM activists also use resisting cultural imperialism as a validation for keeping the practice. They argue that efforts to eliminate FGM are part of a widespread cultural imperialism agenda and advocate for keeping the practice, and other traditions, as a method of resistance, therefore maintaining local sovereignty.²⁶ This resistance is both intellectual, rooted in narratives of foreign interference, and emotional, tied to cultural pride and historical grievances. Programmes that implicitly engage both the mind and heart, whether by reframing nar-

ratives or fostering community-led approaches, demonstrate effective pathways for overcoming this challenge.

In March 2024, a private Member's Bill was introduced in The Gambia to repeal the anti-FGM law, framed as a 'Global North' imposition to undermine cultural identity, which illustrates this dynamic. Pro-FGM advocates framed the law as a Western-imposed infringement on cultural identity, leveraging anti-imperialist sentiments to gain support.²⁷

📌 Lessons Learned

- **Advocacy** efforts resonate more when they affirm cultural pride (heart) alongside presenting factual, rights-based arguments (mind).
- **Locally led initiatives** effectively counter external imposition narratives fostering trust and ownership.

Box 4. Promising practices to counter pushback of perceived external influence

In **The Gambia**, in response to the 2024 efforts to repeal the anti-FGM law, women-led civil society organizations (CSOs) launched a locally driven campaign to shift the narrative. These CSOs worked with UNICEF and the UNJP-FGM to amplify survivors' testimonies, fostering emotional connections (heart) with policymakers and community leaders. Simultaneously, they used data and stories to engage intellectual resistance (mind), showcasing the physical and societal harms of FGM. A UNICEF-supported evaluation showed the impact of the campaign, particularly on male MPs, who were often unaware of the consequences of FGM due to cultural silence.²⁸ The advocacy also gained international attention, with support from the UNJP-FGM, highlighting The Gambia as a model for locally led movements challenging pushback against the elimination of harmful practices.

In **Uganda's Amudat district**, the Peace and Development Network (POZIDE) collaborated with the UNJP-FGM to organize Community Cultural Days in 2022. These events celebrated traditional art forms like poetry, storytelling, and dance while incorporating public declarations against FGM by faith and community leaders.²⁹ By preserving cultural identity (heart) while introducing rights-based messaging (mind), these events reinforced collective commitment to eliminating harmful practices.

The **Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK)** held the Anti-FGM Drama Festival for Muslim Girls Schools in September 2023 in a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints building. The festival theme was 'Interfaith Collaboration for Action on Gender-Based Violence'. It involved plays, poems, and dances focused on raising awareness and advocating against FGM.³⁰ By combining creative arts with interfaith dialogue, the festival showcased unity across religious divides while addressing harmful practices in a culturally resonant way.

Challenge 2: Resistance and Divergent Interpretations Among Faith Leaders

Faith leaders strongly influence societal norms, yet divergent interpretations of religious texts often hinder progress. Some leaders defend harmful practices as religious obligations, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural traditions rather than theological mandates.³¹ For example, in Kaduna State, Nigeria, a study categorized faith leaders into proactive advocates, passive observers, and resisters.³² While advocates promote child protection, resisters defend harmful practices using religious arguments, and passive leaders remain silent, creating confusion within communities. Addressing this challenge requires engaging leaders both intellectually through theological reinterpretation and emotionally/spiritually, by aligning advocacy with shared values of dignity and child protection.³³

Resistance among faith leaders often arises from divergent interpretations of religious texts and cultural traditions. In many cases, conservative leaders defend harmful practices as religious obligations, even when no major religious texts explicitly endorse them.³⁴ For example, isolated verses are often misinterpreted to justify child marriage or FGM, perpetuating these practices under the guise of faith.³⁵ This is manifested in different examples, as in Mali, where the High Islamic Council, the Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam and the Malian Association of Qur'anic Schools were identified as asso-

ciations that opposed legislation that would, among other things, outlaw FGM.³⁶ This type of framing as a method of resistance was also used by conservative faith leaders who used their platform to oppose child rights reforms by framing FGM and child marriage as religious obligations, as well as stating that they are vital for cultural integrity.³⁷ Furthermore, in Yemen, to resist the implementation of a minimum age for marriage, conservative faith figures cited Islamic teachings framed in a way that would normalize early marriage.³⁸

Sometimes faith leaders who advocate for positive practices can also be met with resistance. For example, the Emir of Kano in Nigeria has been advocating for stricter regulations on child marriage, suggesting a minimum age of 17, citing that child marriage is more of a societal issue than a religious requirement. However, he has been met with aggressive vocal dissent from the community, who believe it is religiously valid.³⁹

📌 Lessons Learned

- Misinterpretations of religious texts require careful **theological engagement** (mind) coupled with emotionally resonant appeals to shared values like dignity and protection (heart).
- **Inclusive engagement** of marginalized and Indigenous leaders fosters trust and strengthens collective action, addressing both intellectual and emotional divides.

Box 5. Promising practices to counter resistance and divergent interpretations among faith leaders

In Kaduna State⁴⁰, Nigeria, the Interfaith Committee aligned theological perspectives to advocate against child marriage. Leaders emphasized shared moral values, like child protection and the importance of education, reducing mixed signals and strengthening community trust.

The Archbishop of the Orthodox Church in the Amhara region in Ethiopia played a vital role in challenging other religious leaders' resistance to banning child marriages. The Archbishop's role underscored how appeals to shared spiritual values can complement intellectual advocacy to foster alignment.⁴¹

Global movements such as Musawah, which advocate for equality through holistic examinations of Islamic teachings and universal human rights, also play a key role in efforts towards eliminating child marriage. Their 'Policy Brief 2: Ending Child Marriage in Muslim Family Laws' advocates for reform to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 for girls and boys, stating that child marriage is "harmful to children's health, safety, education, employment, and overall well-being. It perpetuates poverty, violence, and discrimination. It impedes economic and social development."⁴² Similarly, in 2018, Girls Not Brides and Islamic Relief published a guide providing a list of principles in Islamic law that make a case against child marriage.⁴³ The guide presents an Islamic human rights perspective on child and forced marriage calling upon imams, community leaders, families and other stakeholders to collaborate on understanding the reasons behind why child marriages happen, as well as raising awareness of its harm and finding ways to combat it that are grounded in Islamic teachings.⁴⁴

Challenge 3: Limited Capacity and Resources for Faith Actors

Faith leaders and organizations are uniquely positioned to address harmful practices due to their deep-rooted influence in communities. However, many face significant challenges in capacity and resources, including limited training on social and behaviour change approaches, inadequate access to evidence-based tools, and financial constraints that hinder their ability to scale interventions. Furthermore, faith actors need to be engaged in ways that are contextually sensitive, encouraging them to reflect on and address their own biases without alienating them.⁴⁵

For example, the FPCC initiative has highlighted the need for tailored capacity-building programmes for faith leaders, equipping them with the knowledge and resources to integrate evidence-based advocacy into their work.⁴⁶

While some faith leaders are well versed in their theological domains, they often need more training on engaging communities in sensitive and nuanced discussions around FGM and child marriage.

🔗 Lessons Learned

- Capacity-building for faith actors must address both intellectual gaps (mind) and emotional readiness (heart) to tackle deeply sensitive topics.
- Resource investments should prioritize tools and training that enable faith leaders to balance their spiritual authority with evidence-based advocacy. Practical public speaking, media engagement, and community dialogue training ensure faith leaders can effectively deliver consistent, evidence-based messages.

Box 6. Promising practices to address limited capacity and resources for faith actors

The ongoing 'Peace, Love & Tolerance' project in Egypt, begun in 2013 and, developed in partnership with UNICEF, showcases how educational initiatives can bridge divides between religious communities. By creating educational materials that reflect both Islamic and Christian perspectives on child protection, this project effectively reached thousands through workshops and interfaith dialogues, fostering a shared understanding of the need to combat child marriage and violence against children.⁴⁷

World Vision's Channels of Hope (CoH) is a programme targeting faith leaders to discuss child well-being issues. These include abuse, exploitation and neglect, but the programme also touches on harmful practices such as FGM and child marriage.⁴⁸ The approach relies on workshops that are grounded in the participants' faith traditions to create a safe space where different faith leaders can learn from each other and debate among themselves challenging issues surrounding child safety, ideally addressing the root causes that hold up these harmful practices as norms.⁴⁹ A 2018 Senegal midline CoH report showed significant improvements in faith leaders' and their spouses' knowledge, attitudes, and actions regarding child marriage and harmful practices.⁵⁰

In 2022, The Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK), Global Freedom Network (GFN), and Walk Free human rights group collaborated to create a guide for faith leaders on advocacy on child and forced marriage.⁵¹ The guide outlines what the situation is in Kenya, the laws and regulations and advocacy strategies that faith leaders can use, backing the strategies with quotes from religious texts to legitimize them, providing faith-aligned messaging grounded in religious texts, practical tools for community dialogue, and information on local laws.⁵²

Challenge 4: Exclusion of Marginalized Voices (Indigenous Leaders, Women, and Survivors)

Efforts to address harmful practices often prioritize engagement with prominent religious leaders or large faith-based organizations, leaving marginalized voices, such as Indigenous spiritual leaders, women, and survivors, out of decision-making processes. Survivors, in particular, face cultural stigma and exclusion when speaking out against practices like FGM and child marriage. At the same time, entrenched gender hierarchies within faith communities limit women's participation in advocacy and leadership roles. This exclusion undermines the inclusivity of interventions and perpetuates the norms that advocacy efforts seek to dismantle.

Indigenous spiritual leaders, often dismissed as merely cultural actors, are similarly excluded, despite their influence as key cultural gatekeepers in communities. This marginalization stems from a tendency to prioritize mainstream religious actors, likely due to their global reach in development work.⁵³ For instance, in contexts like Kenya's Maasai communities, Indigenous spiritual leaders are key

cultural gatekeepers but are often excluded from national-level advocacy platforms.⁵⁴

Survivors of FGM, who bring unique perspectives and emotional resonance to these discussions, also report being sidelined. These omissions weaken community ownership, limit emotional and cultural relevance, and reduce the overall effectiveness of interventions.

🔗 Lessons Learned

- Advocacy initiatives must ensure the inclusion of diverse voices to foster trust (heart) and create a more holistic understanding of harmful practices (mind).
- Providing safe, supportive platforms for survivors and women to share their stories fosters empathy and creates emotional connections within communities. These testimonies can transform abstract debates into personal, relatable experiences.
- Empowering women and survivors to take on leadership roles in advocacy builds local ownership and challenges patriarchal structures that sustain harmful practices.

Box 7. Promising practices to include marginalized voices (Indigenous leaders, women, and survivors)

To give space for youth and women at the continental stage, in 2023 the African Union Commission held a Child Participation Platform to elevate youth voices in ending child marriage and FGM. The goal of the event was to create a space for dialogue and a platform for children to lead initiatives to end child marriages and FGM, sharing their lived experiences and engaging with each other about a usually taboo topic.⁵⁵

The 'Shamekhat', or 'Girls Stand Tall' Network launched in 2019 in Yemen works to tie faith-based, youth and community groups with Hadramout University students and staff to combat FGM among the community.⁵⁶ Since the launch, faith leaders have used their pulpits to share messages about FGM and hosted workshops with religious authorities to discuss strategies to raise awareness of the risks in their communities.⁵⁷ It has proven effective: "In the governorate of Aden and Al Mukalla City, religious leaders have issued statements calling for the abandonment of FGM, with two communities declaring their rejection of the harmful practice."⁵⁸

In Eritrea, faith leaders participating in marches for the elimination of FGM lends credence to the cause. The combined efforts of faith leaders, survivors, NGOs, and civil society groups help spread further awareness and galvanize against the practice. An anti-FGM march in Eritrea pulled crowds of more than 1,000 people marching on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation; the presence of faith leaders contributed to such large turnouts.⁵⁹

Challenge 5: Balancing Advocacy and Community Trust

Faith leaders must often balance advocating for change and maintaining their standing within communities. When faith-based advocacy is perceived as externally driven or overly critical of cultural norms, leaders risk losing the trust that underpins their influence. This is particularly challenging when advocating against practices like FGM and child marriage, which are deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual beliefs. Addressing deeply ingrained practices like FGM and child marriage is often an emotional and sensitive process. Because these practices are closely tied to cultural identity and tradition, discussions about abandoning them feel personal and confrontational for many community members. Conversations can provoke defensiveness or even hostility, particularly when advocacy efforts are perceived as judgmental or dismissive of cultural values. It requires building trust and fostering dialogue within communities.

🔗 Lessons Learned

- Effective advocacy aligns with community priorities, addressing emotional attachments (heart) while grounding arguments in evidence and shared values (mind).
- Framing advocacy around shared values such as compassion, dignity, and child protection reduces defensiveness

ness and creates a constructive environment for discussion. Focusing on positive outcomes, like improved health, education, and opportunities for children, helps shift the conversation from critique to collaboration.

- Faith leaders can act as facilitators rather than enforcers of change, empowering communities to take ownership of solutions while maintaining trust, especially when creating new methods, such as alternative rites of passage.
- While alternative rites of passage (ARPs) have gained visibility, rigorous evaluations have shown mixed or limited effectiveness. According to the UNICEF Innocenti What Works review (2025), ARPs often raise awareness but do not address the underlying social drivers (e.g. marriageability, peer pressure, stigma); are frequently implemented in isolation from broader community mobilization or systems change; and risk being used as a compliance mechanism (e.g. for funding or reporting) rather than as a meaningful social norm intervention. In Kenya, for example, ARPs have been adopted in some areas, but FGM continues in secret, particularly for younger girls who have not yet gone through the 'real' rite. Therefore, ARPs should be explored only in contexts where a ceremonial structure already exists and communities themselves express readiness for an alternative, not as a default or donor-driven solution.

Box 8. Promising practices for balancing advocacy and community trust

TOSTAN's three-year Community Empowerment Program in Senegal, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania and The Gambia was a participant-centred human rights education programme targeting adults and adolescents. It educated participants on human rights, democracy and life skills drawing on "existing positive cultural practices and local knowledge – such as songs, dance, plays and poetry – to engage participants, and to reinforce and contextualise new information".⁶⁰ TOSTAN included faith leaders by having them participate in social mobilization activities, in which they hold seminars on Islam, well-being and human rights. This inclusion was vital in bridging the gap between traditional religious norms and human rights, both in convincing the faith leaders, but also their congregants and community.

In Puntland and Somaliland, UNFPA organized a training series, coaching religious leaders to act as agents of change. These leaders formed a network of 240 committed Sheikhs, delivering sermons during Friday prayers and conducting community dialogues to educate about the harms of FGM. Their efforts reached over 500,000 community members, sparking shifts in awareness and behaviour. The initiative empowered families to abandon FGM without feeling they were betraying their faith.⁶¹

The Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services' (CEOSS) anti-FGM work in Deir-el-Besha, Egypt, led to the formation of the FGM Free Village by engaging with the social and relational structures in the community. It ensured success by building community trust and engaging with stakeholders such as local religious leaders, government members and women in leadership roles. They targeted young girls' awareness education and women-led schools. With this improved awareness and education, the village publicly declared themselves as anti-FGM. However, attempts by CEOSS to recreate this success in other villages were unsuccessful.⁶²

Challenge 6: Adapting to Evolving Social Norms and Legislative Contexts

Harmful practices like FGM and child marriage often evolve in response to legal and social pressures. Legislative changes may push these practices underground or lead to their adaptation in ways that complicate detection and enforcement. This includes shifts to covert forms, such as secret ceremonies or informal unions, and increasing instances of FGM on infants, potentially due to attempts at avoiding legal ramifications,⁶³ and instances of medicalization, where health-care providers perform FGM to give it a veneer of legitimacy and safety. These adaptations highlight the need for advocacy strategies that address both the evolving practices and their underlying motivations.

The increasing medicalization of FGM presents a complex challenge. While this shift may reduce immediate physical harm, it legitimizes and undermines efforts to eliminate FGM entirely. Furthermore, health-care providers who engage in the practice often lack ethical training or fear community backlash if they refuse.⁶⁴

In The Gambia, despite the enactment of laws prohibiting FGM, the practice continues in secret. Communities have adapted by performing FGM on girls at younger ages, where it is less visible, or moving the ceremonies to private locations. These shifts complicate detection and enforcement, particularly when tied to resistance against perceived external influence.⁶⁵

🔗 Lessons Learned

- Advocacy must be adaptable, addressing both intellectual resistance (mind) and emotional attachments (heart) that drive the persistence of harmful practices.
- Protection efforts must be locally led to identify and address cases and evolving contexts.
- Addressing the medicalization of FGM requires targeted engagement with health-care providers, alongside efforts to educate communities about the ethical implications of it. Advocacy campaigns that frame FGM as a violation of medical ethics and human rights, rather than a safer alternative, can help shift perceptions. Empowering faith leaders to partner with health professionals in advocacy efforts strengthens the moral and practical arguments against medicalized FGM.

Box 9. Promising practices for adapting to evolving social norms and legislative contexts

In 2018, Egypt's Dar Al-Iftaa (Centre for Islamic Legal Research) condemned FGM, declaring it forbidden under Islamic law and supporting the Minister of Health and the Administrative Court's decision to ban it in hospitals and clinics.⁶⁶ This faith-led advocacy also recommended criminalizing FGM in the penal code, investigating perpetrators, training on penalties, and including FGM consequences in educational curricula. With much FGM in Egypt medicalized, the Ministry of Health launched a campaign targeting health-care providers, emphasizing its violation of medical ethics and the Hippocratic Oath. Workshops highlighted the harm caused by FGM, and religious leaders from Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Orthodox Church joined health professionals to issue unified statements condemning it. Community outreach efforts educated families on the risks of FGM and legal protections, leading to increased reporting and greater accountability for health-care providers.⁶⁷

Local protection networks in the Abu Jabra and Bahr al Arab localities of Sudan by World Vision are led by community and faith leaders to address child protection issues, including FGM and child marriage, via counselling, awareness-raising campaigns, and gender-based violence (GBV) response and prevention. World Vision trained the network members on child protection, inclusive of the consequences of FGM and child marriage.⁶⁸ Since the launch of the Protection Network in August 2022, no cases of FGM have been recorded.⁶⁹

The establishment of Community Hope Action Teams (CHATs) further exemplifies how local leaders and faith leaders can sustain advocacy efforts over the long term by designing, managing and implementing the community's child protection plan.⁷⁰ CHAT workshop participants in Uganda "reported experiencing positive changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and practices about child protection, which had spurred them on to engage in sensitization activities in their communities",⁷¹ effectively showcasing the long-term effect as community members began sending referrals to the CHAT groups.⁷²

Challenge 7: Misinformation and the Role of Social Media

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for advocacy, but it is a challenge due to the rapid spread of misinformation. FGM and child marriage are sometimes justified using distorted religious arguments or pseudoscientific claims. The decentralized nature of social media means that disinformation can reach large audiences quickly, undermining advocacy efforts and reinforcing harmful norms. Faith leaders, who may lack familiarity with social media platforms, often find it difficult to counter these narratives effectively.

In Somalia, social media platforms have been used to spread narratives claiming that FGM is a requirement under Islamic law but there are also activists, notably from the diaspora, who are using social media to break the silence around FGM. For instance, Shamsa Sharawe, a Somali diaspora woman in the UK, used TikTok to discuss her FGM experience, including the physical and psychological

challenges she faced and it reached the Somali community globally. Her video, which used a rose to symbolize the mutilation process, garnered nearly 12 million views, sparking widespread conversation on a traditionally taboo subject.⁷³ This shows how social media platforms can amplify marginalized voices, foster community support, and drive social change by facilitating open discussions on sensitive issues.

🔗 Lessons Learned

- Proactively engaging on social media with accurate, faith-aligned content can counter misinformation and build credibility. Faith leaders can use these platforms to share relatable, evidence-based messages that resonate with both younger and older audiences.
- Training faith leaders and local influencers in social media use ensures that they can engage meaningfully with online communities, debunk myths, and promote positive narratives about child protection.

Box 10. Promising practices for countering misinformation and leveraging social media

The 360 Degree Surround and Engage Platform Campaign in Egypt, launched in 2023, combined storytelling, peer education, and digital outreach to combat FGM. A 33-episode television drama highlighted the harm caused by FGM through relatable characters and narratives. Complemented by social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, the campaign reached nearly 30 million people online, sparking dialogue among youth and families.⁷⁴

Showings of a film that highlights the health complications and consequences of FGM in Mali served to convince parents to spare their daughters from the practice, get medical services for children suffering from complications, and, in some cases, even convince family patriarchs against marrying off their young daughters.⁷⁵ UNICEF produced the mini-series 'Vaillante' that tells the story of a soon-to-be bride and young woman campaigning against child marriage, highlights the lived experience of people in this situation and has been powerful in engaging with stakeholders in Burkina Faso, raising awareness and campaigning for the elimination of child marriages.⁷⁶ Faith leaders play an important role in validating these films to their audiences and encouraging their communities and congregations by supporting such forms of media.

The Men End FGM initiative started as a Twitter hashtag (#MenEndFGM) in Kenya, challenging activists, CSOs and government agencies to include men and boys in their campaigns to end FGM.⁷⁷ They have evolved into a global movement encouraging the engagement of men and boys in fighting against FGM, child marriage, and other forms of GBV, launching various projects that target men – including religious leaders – educating them about harmful practices, calling for them to challenge negative gender norms and encouraging them to use their influence and power to advocate and lobby for changes.⁷⁸

Challenge 8: Cross-Border FGM, Migration, and the Role of Diaspora Communities

Cross-border and transnational FGM and migration complicate efforts to eliminate the practice. Families often evade legal restrictions by travelling to countries where FGM is legal or less policed, while practitioners cross borders to operate in areas with weaker enforcement.⁷⁹ Uganda and Kenya are key examples of this cross-border movement to evade law enforcement. Friends and relatives across the border assist with organizing the practice. These movements are driven by the perception that it may be easier to evade Kenyan authorities, and that the procedure may be of a higher standard and more affordable in Kenya compared to Uganda.⁸⁰

Migratory trends further sustain FGM, with displaced or migrant communities maintaining practices influenced by home or host country norms. For example, Sudanese displaced communities adopted FGM to integrate into areas where it was normalized.⁸¹ Internally, families take girls to regions with weaker enforcement, undermining local efforts to end the practice.⁸²

Diaspora communities also play a dual role. While some advocate for abandonment, others perpetuate harmful practices due to the desire to maintain their cultural identity.⁸³ Diaspora-led advocacy can sometimes face resistance from local communities, viewed as disconnected from on-the-ground realities, creating tension between external and local efforts.

📌 Lessons Learned

- Addressing cross-border dynamics requires regional and cross-border collaboration to harmonize legal frameworks and enforcement strategies (mind) while engaging communities to address cultural motivations for cross-border practices (heart).
- Diaspora advocacy must balance emotional connections to cultural identity (heart) with evidence-based arguments against harmful practices (mind).
- Efforts to abandon harmful practices must include migrants and displaced communities, and the complexity of the practices in these situations must be understood.

Box 11. Promising practices for addressing cross-border dynamics

In 2019, the Djiboutian Network of Religious Leaders participated in a regional workshop of faith-based organizations at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, which focused on addressing gender-based violence and the harmful practices of child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) and female genital mutilation.⁸⁴ The workshop impact was evident as it succeeded in convincing the Djiboutian Network of Religious Leaders in 2021 to issue a declaration for the abandonment of FGM and that child marriage violates human rights and perpetuates violence against girls.⁸⁵ Egypt, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen also reiterated this declaration at the summit.⁸⁶

Ministers from Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Tanzania signed a joint declaration to strengthen cross-border coordination. Faith leaders engaged in dialogues to deliver unified messages on FGM's harmful effects tailored to shared cultural values across the region. Regional data-sharing systems and joint community outreach were established to enhance enforcement and education efforts.⁸⁷

Challenge 9: Limited Availability and Use of Data for Accountability and Scalability

The lack of robust data systems and effective monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) frameworks poses a challenge to the sustainability and scalability of efforts to address FGM and child marriage. With reliable data, it becomes easier to assess the effectiveness of programmes, identify gaps, and adapt interventions to changing contexts. This gap also affects accountability, as stakeholders, including governments, faith-based organizations, and CSOs, cannot demonstrate the impact of their initiatives. Furthermore, communities may be sceptical of advocacy efforts if they are not backed by clear evidence of success or relevance to local realities.

📌 Lessons Learned

- Data-driven approaches enhance advocacy by providing clear evidence (mind) while empowering communities to see tangible progress (heart).
- Building the capacity of local organizations and faith leaders to collect and use data ensures that the process is community-driven and culturally sensitive. This could include training faith leaders and communities in data collection. Faith leaders can serve as trusted conduits for community data, ensuring that reporting mechanisms are both culturally appropriate and accurate.

Box 12. Promising practices for addressing the limited availability and use of data for accountability and scalability

In Mozambique, faith leaders partnered with local health authorities to address child marriage using localized data. Training programmes enabled leaders to identify high-prevalence areas, tailor interventions, and track changes in community attitudes.⁸⁸

In Ethiopia, the UNJP-FGM focused on the development and launch of a road map that involved a national and subnational budget plan, a resource mobilization plan, and an in-depth monitoring and evaluation and accountability framework.⁸⁹

Challenge 10: Politicization of Advocacy Efforts

Advocacy against FGM and child marriage often intersects with political dynamics, creating risks of co-optation or backlash. In some contexts, harmful practices become tied to identity politics, with advocacy efforts framed as attacks on cultural sovereignty or used to gain political leverage. Religious and political leaders may be aware that FGM is not intrinsically part of their doctrine but are unwilling to take the risk and challenge the practice for fear of losing control by intervening.⁹⁰ This politicization can undermine the effectiveness of social and behaviour change efforts and erode trust between communities and advocates.

For example, in Mali, the opposition of a prominent Imam opposing proposals to modernize the Family Code, bolstered his standing, tapping into traditional values to strengthen his political base.⁹¹

Also, in The Gambia, efforts to repeal the national FGM ban in 2024 were driven by politicians seeking to align with conservative cultural factions.⁹²

🔗 Lessons Learned

- It is essential to engage with those in representative political positions to understand their true motivations and challenge them on that level. Politicization requires careful navigation to maintain trust (heart) while ensuring that advocacy remains focused on the health and rights of children (mind).
- Uniting political will with the authority of faith leaders can create coalitions in which faith actors and political leaders work together to influence legislation. Faith leaders can act as neutral mediators, helping to depoliticize discussions and refocus them on shared moral and spiritual values.

Box 13. Promising practices for countering increasing politicization

In Egypt, the Dar Al-Iftaa (Centre for Islamic Legal Research) condemned FGM in 2018, ruling that it is not required under Islamic laws and is forbidden.⁹³ This declaration aided the Minister of Health and the Administrative Court of Justice's decision that FGM should be banned in hospitals and clinics, illustrating the power of faith-led advocacy in shifting cultural norms.⁹⁴ The Dar Al-Iftaa statement also included recommendations to aid in the elimination of FGM, such as criminalizing FGM in the penal code, calls for investigations into perpetrators, calls for training covering the penalties and consequences of FGM, and the inclusion of FGM consequences and laws in the education curriculum. *While referenced earlier, this example is revisited here because it also demonstrates how faith leadership can counter politicization by positioning religious authorities as neutral moral voices, helping to insulate advocacy against political pushback and ensuring that child protection remains the central focus.*⁹⁵

TOSTAN projects engage local authorities as well as faith leaders, educating them on human rights to open a safe space dialogue on harmful practices, including FGM and child marriage, and encouraging collective declarations to end the practices in communities. In 2024, 27 communities in Dakatéli, Senegal, that did not directly participate in Tostan's Community Empowerment Program (CEP) but had learned from neighbouring communities that had participated in TOSTAN, declared abandonment of female genital mutilation and child marriage.⁹⁶ These declarations were made possible by the combined effort of health professionals, faith leaders, and local authorities participating in social mobilization activities, inter-village meetings and awareness programmes.⁹⁷

Localization: A Transformative Framework for Faith Engagement

Localization represents a transformative approach to faith engagement, ensuring that interventions are community-driven, culturally resonant, and sustainable. Defined as the deliberate strengthening of local responders to lead and deliver interventions, localization prioritizes partnerships that reinforce, rather than replace, local capacities. This approach, central to the commitments of the Grand Bargain, recognizes the importance of community self-determination and seeks to address power imbalances in global humanitarian and development systems.⁹⁸

At its heart, localization embodies a commitment to equity, inclusion, and context-specific solutions. By placing local actors, including faith leaders, at the centre of advocacy efforts, localization aligns with the mind-heart dialogue framework:

- **Heart:** Localization fosters emotional connections by rooting advocacy in communities' cultural and spiritual values.
- **Mind:** It equips faith leaders with intellectual tools to challenge harmful norms, address structural barriers, and advocate for systemic change.

The Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)⁹⁹ outlines three levels of localization that guide this transformative approach:

1. **Project-level localization:** Faith actors implement externally designed programmes, providing immediate but limited impact.
2. **Transformative partnerships:** Faith actors co-design and lead interventions, creating equitable partnerships that challenge hierarchical models.
3. **Networks and collectives:** Faith actors collaborate in inclusive systems that promote systemic change, aligning local efforts with global frameworks.

Localization not only ensures that faith engagement is rooted in community realities but also enables it to address the complexities of harmful practices like FGM and child marriage effectively. The following dimensions of effectiveness illustrate how localization principles translate into actionable strategies for faith-based engagement to abandon harmful practices.

Dimensions of Effectiveness for Faith Engagement

1. Cultural and religious resonance: Faith leaders' deep integration within cultural and religious systems positions them to foster trust and reduce resistance. By embedding advocacy in shared moral and spiritual values, faith actors engage communities' emotional (heart) and intellectual (mind) dimensions.

Key Strategies:

- **Theological reinterpretation:** Partnering with religious scholars and leaders to reinterpret sacred texts, challenging misconceptions that harmful practices are religiously mandated.
- **Storytelling and rituals:** Using culturally resonant formats such as sermons and traditional storytelling to connect emotionally with communities while providing intellectual clarity on the harms of FGM and child marriage.
- **Faith-based advocacy:** Framing harmful practices as violations of religious teachings and human rights. Faith leaders use their platforms to deliver advocacy messages that connect emotionally and intellectually with their audiences.

2. Community-led and locally anchored approaches:

Localized approaches empower communities to lead advocacy efforts, ensuring sustainable and culturally relevant interventions. Faith leaders, as trusted figures, are critical to fostering community ownership by engaging both the emotional connections (heart) and intellectual engagement (mind) of their communities.

Key Strategies:

- **Participatory programme design:** Engaging local faith actors and community members in co-creating interventions ensures that advocacy is both culturally appropriate and community-owned.
- **Strengthening local networks:** Building interfaith networks to scale interventions while maintaining local leadership. These networks enable faith actors to address specific community needs effectively.¹⁰⁰

3. Integration into multi-stakeholder frameworks:

Faith engagement gains strength when it is embedded within multi-stakeholder frameworks, fostering collaboration between governments, civil society, and international organizations. This dimension amplifies the impact of localized efforts by leveraging broader resources and expertise.

Key Strategies:

- **Regional collaboration:** Aligning advocacy efforts across borders to address shared challenges such as cross-border FGM or migration.
- **Institutional capacity-building:** Providing faith leaders with resources and training to navigate broader humanitarian and development systems effectively, equipping them with tools to influence policy and lead systemic change.¹⁰¹
- **Interfaith councils and networks:** Supporting interfaith platforms that foster collaboration across religious traditions, enabling unified advocacy efforts.

4. Inclusive engagement of marginalized voices: To be truly effective, faith engagement must actively include survivors, women leaders, and Indigenous spiritual leaders. These voices bring valuable lived experiences and perspectives, enriching advocacy strategies and fostering community trust.

Key Strategies:

- **Survivor-led advocacy:** Survivors of FGM and child marriage provide powerful, authentic narratives that connect emotionally with communities while offering tangible evidence of harm.
- **Representation of women leaders:** Actively involving women leaders from faith-based and community organizations in decision-making ensures gender-sensitive approaches and strengthens advocacy outcomes by fostering credibility and inclusivity.¹⁰²

- **Inclusion of Indigenous and minority faith leaders:**

Engaging Indigenous spiritual leaders and minority faith actors ensures advocacy is inclusive of diverse cultural and religious traditions.

- **Addressing power dynamics:** Creating equitable spaces for marginalized voices to participate in advocacy ensures that their contributions influence outcomes, rather than being tokenized.

5. Resilience and adaptability: Faith engagement must respond dynamically to evolving harmful practices, such as the medicalization of FGM or cross-border practices. Localization equips faith actors to address these shifts, maintaining emotional resonance (heart) and intellectual adaptability (mind).

Key Strategies:

- **Addressing medicalization of FGM:** Faith leaders work with health-care providers to challenge medicalized FGM, reframing the practice as unethical and unnecessary from both health and spiritual perspectives.
- **Real-time monitoring and reporting:** Establishing localized systems to track emerging trends and covert practices ensures timely and context-specific responses. Localized monitoring systems empower faith actors to adapt interventions dynamically.¹⁰³
- **Engaging in cross-border collaboration:** Coordinating advocacy across borders to address cross-border FGM and child marriage, which exploit legal and enforcement gaps.
- **Dynamic community dialogues:** Facilitating ongoing dialogues that address emerging justifications for harmful practices enables faith actors to remain flexible and responsive to shifting community norms.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion: Localization as the Guiding Framework for Future Faith Engagement

This desk review underscores the key role of faith engagement in addressing harmful practices such as FGM and child marriage. Faith leaders, as trusted figures within their communities, are uniquely positioned to drive change. Still, for their efforts to be effective, they must be supported through approaches that are localized, inclusive, and adaptable. Localization provides the guiding framework for ensuring faith engagement aligns with the realities of communities, fostering sustainable and culturally relevant interventions.

By embracing the principles of localization, future faith engagement can:

- Empower local actors to lead solutions tailored to their communities.
- Build equitable partnerships that promote inclusivity and sustainability.
- Foster emotional connections (heart) and intellectual clarity (mind) to shift harmful norms.
- Equip faith leaders with tools to respond dynamically to emerging challenges.

The current pushback to the elimination of child marriage and FGM illustrates a complex web of cultural, religious, and economic influences that must be understood in context. Cultural preservation advocates perceive FGM legislation as Western interference, while some religious communities view it as essential to spiritual identity. Medicalized FGM, intended as a harm-reduction compromise, paradoxically reinforces the practice.

To address these pushbacks effectively, robust laws and enforcement are necessary, but more is needed. A com-

prehensive, community-centred approach is required; one that engages civil society, community leaders, faith-based organizations and local influencers. These actors must share responsibility for change, creating opportunities for agency and empowerment at every level.

Ultimately, a localization approach remains central to countering pushback against the elimination of FGM and child marriage. By actively involving communities in designing and implementing interventions, we move beyond empathy to empowerment. Social and behaviour change programmes are most successful when community members hold the keys to transformation, ensuring the change is not only profound but also enduring.

This desk review is one part of a broader research and programmatic process under the Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities (FPCC) initiative. Alongside this report, a comprehensive Programme and MEAL Guide has been developed to translate these insights into practical tools for UNICEF and UNFPA country offices, faith-based organizations, and partners. It includes typologies of faith actors, adaptable engagement approaches, and programme design recommendations rooted in localization and social and behaviour change principles.

Furthermore, country-specific mappings identify risk profiles, typologies of pushback, and contextual entry points for faith engagement, providing the granularity needed to design locally anchored and sustainable interventions. Together, these outputs form a holistic resource package to support practitioners in navigating both the opportunities and the evolving resistance around FGM and child marriage.

Strategic Recommendations for Localized Faith Engagement to End FGM and Child Marriage

Theme	Recommendations
Centre advocacy on cultural and religious resonance	1. Equip faith leaders with tools to reinterpret theological teachings that challenge harmful practices, ensuring alignment with spiritual principles such as justice, dignity, and care for the vulnerable. 2. Use culturally resonant formats such as storytelling and rituals to foster emotional connections and reinforce messages. Use tools in the programme guide for training workshops for faith leaders on integrating these formats into sermons, community events, and advocacy campaigns. 3. Leverage positive framing by emphasizing shared values rather than confrontation. For instance, promoting child protection as preserving the community's future fosters collaboration without alienation.
Foster community ownership through co-creation	4. Transition to human-centred design approaches by co-creating with local actors such as faith leaders, women's groups, and youth, in every programme development and implementation stage. 5. Embed long-term strategies that transfer leadership to local actors, reducing dependency on external support and building trust. This can include establishing mentorship programmes where international organizations coach local actors to lead advocacy and implement culturally appropriate solutions. 6. Create platforms for community dialogue to reflect on and adapt practices, ensuring that solutions emerge organically from within the community.
Engage diverse faith and traditional actors	7. Actively include Indigenous spiritual leaders, women, youth, and minority faith groups, recognizing their influence as cultural gatekeepers and the need for diverse representation. For example, community leadership structures and Indigenous religious groups to identify underrepresented actors and integrate them into advocacy efforts. 8. Facilitate interfaith and cross-generational dialogues to build consensus and shared responsibility among diverse actors. 9. Recognize and address the power dynamics between traditional and mainstream faith actors, ensuring tailored engagement strategies that acknowledge their unique roles.
Focus on social norm change beyond condemnation	10. Engage faith leaders in reflective dialogues that address entrenched norms while offering constructive alternatives aligned with cultural identity. Use the Mind-Heart Dialogue framework to engage communities intellectually (mind) and emotionally (heart), promoting shifts in social norms without alienation. 11. Move beyond condemnation by fostering positive norms that celebrate protective practices and align with spiritual values. The programme guide includes toolkits for faith leaders that have case studies, theological reinterpretations, and actionable scripts for promoting protective norms.

Theme	Recommendations
Strengthen capacity and accountability mechanisms	12. Build the capacity of faith leaders in advocacy, programme management, and data collection to enhance their effectiveness. For example, offering training on digital data-collection tools can enable faith actors to track the impact of their advocacy and interventions in real time. 13. Develop locally defined accountability systems to ensure transparency and trust, such as community-led monitoring committees that evaluate the progress of interventions. Partner with local NGOs to design these mechanisms collaboratively with community stakeholders.
Promote adaptability in programme design	14. Equip programmes to address emerging challenges such as the medicalization of FGM, cross-border practices, and misinformation. Implement real-time monitoring systems that track shifts in harmful practices, enabling immediate programme adjustments. 15. Incorporate community feedback mechanisms to refine and adapt interventions continuously. Use participatory workshops where community members can voice concerns and suggest improvements to ongoing initiatives. This includes community accountability and ongoing learning and monitoring as further detailed in the FPCC MEAL framework.
Leverage technology for broader reach	16. Use digital platforms and social media to amplify the voices of youth and faith leaders, counter misinformation, and foster advocacy. Create short, faith-based video messages for platforms like TikTok and WhatsApp that challenge harmful practices and promote protective norms. 17. Integrate technology into training and monitoring, such as online learning modules for faith leaders and mobile apps for community reporting. This can include partnering with tech-focused NGOs to design simple, culturally appropriate digital tools for advocacy and data collection.

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Published by UNICEF

Prevention of Harmful Practices Unit, Child Protection Programme Group

3 United Nations Plaza

New York, NY 10017, USA

www.unicef.org

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October 2025