

Religious leaders speak up for gender equality

Religious leaders are more gender aware, and are taking action in the space they influence.

What was the situation before V4C intervention?

From the outset of the programme, V4C has been working with a group of 'key influencers' – including religious leaders (RLs) and institutions – that it regards as critical to achieving a change in attitudes towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Up to this point, there were few opportunities for RLs to discuss the misconceptions, biases and socio-cultural practices which disempower women and girls or explore practical ways to address these issues in their work and personal lives. RLs who wanted to speak up about gender equality found it difficult to do so in a way that they thought was consistent with the teachings of their religion.

What did V4C do?

Since February 2015, V4C has facilitated gender and masculinity training for 276 Christian and Muslim religious leaders, and provided follow-up support in the shape of review meetings where RLs can continue to share and learn, and brokering meetings to help secure high-level endorsement.

The gender and masculinity training for religious leaders encourages participants to examine and discuss their own values with regards to gender, the nature of gender roles and stereotypes, definitions and types of violence, and what constitutes healthy and unhealthy relationships.

What happened as a result of V4C's involvement?

Since attending the training, participants have reported a wide range of positive changes, to their own awareness and behaviour, and in their ability to influence others on the issue. RLs speak of being profoundly moved, of understanding gender concepts for the first time, seeing gender relations in a new way, and seeing the relationship between culture and religion in a different light. Many of the RLs report that that they not only acquired new knowledge, but they also felt moved to act – in their personal lives and through their religious teachings.

Religious leaders are more aware of gender equality and their power to influence it.

“As a result of my engagement... I now understand the issues of patriarchy and relegation of the girl child, and so I encourage men to speak out on gender issues.”
(Religious leader, Enugu)

Religious leaders described the impacts of the training on their awareness in varying ways. Some said that it had enhanced their existing understanding and provided them with the tools to present gender issues to their congregations. They now felt armed with plausible arguments that they could convey, and with methods of presenting them in an acceptable way.

Religious leaders are convinced that they can and should play a part in securing gender equality and women’s empowerment.

“The subjugation of women is a loss to all and the agitation for women’s rights will only help all and bring about development and growth.”
(Religious leader, Enugu)

The training team gave particular attention to: who the participants needed to be in order to bring optimum influence on wider society, understanding the participants’ needs and perspectives as different types of religious leaders, and how a sense of ownership could be nurtured and thus the greatest likelihood of sustainability and scale. These things were incorporated after carefully considered research, strategy development and planning prior to the training, and contributed significantly to the shifts in the RL’s attitudes.

Religious leaders are using their new knowledge to take action in their spheres of influence.

Approximately 38 per cent of all the RLs who have taken part in V4C’s training programmes have taken action on gender equality. The examples documented suggest that these actions are diverse in nature and implemented in both personal and professional spheres. They include both little things like asking women to say opening prayers at meetings, and big things like changing policy or defending women’s rights in court; showing that action can be taken in a wide spectrum of spaces, and that RLs can initiate bigger changes with small beginnings.

The RLs reported using celebrations and events like Ramadan, Father’s Day and annual National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) camps to bring up girls’ and women’s’ empowerment (GEWE) issues. They also spoke of being involved in a mixture of proactive and reactive activities, from infusing routine activities like preaching and relating with their family and various community groups with GEWE messages, to responding to the gender-related needs and troubles of their congregation such as family conflicts and marital disputes.

Some religious leaders feel confident about taking action with their new gender awareness, and some don't.

"The training gave me the courage to become an advocate for women in the church and community." (Religious leader)

The changes in RLs, and the changes that RLs have brought about, vary widely. Some have visibly organised to take action; others find themselves uncertain, or facing resistance. Some leaders return to their organisations relatively alone and unsupported, while others are surrounded by allies. Some are secure within their congregations, others not.

Some gender equality 'champions' have emerged by being challenged to respond to a particular circumstance they faced. In one such example, a pastor came to the aid of three Catholic widows by teaming up with a lawyer in his congregation to challenge the behaviour of the women's' families towards their inheritance.

Connecting up religious leaders can help to leverage institutional change and contribute to a 'rising tide' of change.

"The training ...brought together people from diverse religious backgrounds and potentials, who have since become close friends and allies towards the same goal. The way the training was organised motivated everyone who attended to speak up for change on gender justice and women's rights."
(Religious leader)

Evidence from some of the RLs suggests that facilitating connections among them has made them feel that a bigger change is going on, and this has propelled them to act. A few have also gone further to build working relationships such as those between the Islamic Centre and NYSC, and between RLs and tertiary institutions. In contrast, a few RLs explained how they found obstacles or lack of support from their organisation's hierarchy and that this hindered them from organising further.

Analysis of the actions taken by RLs also suggests that although the mixing of religions as part of the training may have led to a change in mind-set, or perceptions of being part of a wider change, RLs are largely working autonomously. There were no examples cited of them initiating new interfaith collaboration.

What are the reasons for these changes?

While most of the causal factors for the changes mentioned by religious leaders were attributed to the training programme and other activities of V4C, other external influences were also mentioned. Initiatives from government, civil society organisations and international development partners have prepared some of the foundations for the changes that have taken place.

The most-mentioned significant contributions by V4C were the participatory methodologies used in the training programmes, the mix of participants from both major religions and the use of religious texts and religious scholars/facilitators to help demonstrate that gender equality and women's empowerment is consistent with their doctrine.

What lessons have been learnt?

1. Involving known, trusted and respected religious leaders as facilitators or resource people played a key part in convincing participants that gender awareness is important, and positive. By helping to translate and apply the gender-related messages into forms and messages that could be expressed in religious terms, participants in some way either gained new knowledge or new angles on familiar religious texts, as well as possible answers to frequently asked questions or challenges.
2. Using language that is considered less controversial helps reduce the level of resistance from the participants. For example, 'gender justice' was found to be a more acceptable term initially than 'gender equality.'
3. Involving a balanced representation of the two main religions and to have a range in terms of age and the types of roles they play, can result in diverse discussion groups, which can provide a rich resource both during the training programme and afterwards.
4. While it can be assumed that religious leaders are used to public speaking and large audiences, RLs may need special skills to communicate GEWE messages that go beyond the everyday religious teachings that they are used to delivering.