



Engaging Religious Leaders In Gender Transformative Work: Faith & Masculinities



Image courtesy of DentylRecords, (2014). CARE- 'Men Engaged' Initiative in Mali.

“The MenEngaged themes promote listening and social cohesion between a man and his wife, between a man and his children. Without harmony in the family, how can we practice our religion?”
Imam Madou Traore, Mali

In February 2017, CARE Norway held a seminar entitled, “Engaging Religious Leaders: A discussion about theory, practice and experiences in the field”. The following document has been compiled as a resource from the event, summarizing key findings and raising themes for future research. Primarily, the goal was to better understand how to involve Religious Leaders in work on masculinities within their respective communities.

Masculinities and Gender Equality Work

Many of the initiatives designed to combat gender injustice have been geared towards women’s empowerment without a critical examination or response to the influence of harmful masculinities. In recent years, CARE has directed its efforts towards understanding the role men and masculinities play in violence, conflict, economic and social issues.

Working with men involves both individual and collective engagement. In order to ensure the most positive outcome and sustainability, it requires institutional and political involvement and support. Thus, CARE’s work with men and boys reaches beyond individual engagement and actively works to involve local leaders and influential community

members. Many of the countries in which we work are largely shaped by religious teachings, which makes it critical to place a special emphasis on working with faith-based institutions. Through this practice, we have recognized a growing need to both understand and work with Religious leaders so as to understand how masculinities are shaped by one’s faith, and how men’s roles effect their own interpretations of religious text and practice. We have created this document to add to the literature of resources in working with men and faith, and we have identified areas still in need of exploration.

The Faith Sector

Globally, religious virtues and texts have been used as both sources of inspiration and support for social justice issues, as well as justification for gendered power imbalances. This discrepancy highlights how religion is a powerful tool to include in gender equality work and that its exclusion can have harmful effects on the greater community. Due to their trusted and wide-reaching influence, religious leaders have a strong platform for communicating strategies that encourage young men and boys to reflect on attitudes, behaviors and teachings which

promote harmful definitions of masculinity. Because CARE’s work is in communities in which religion and faith play large roles in the make-up the social fabric, we believe religious institutions have a great potential to support social change.



Masculinities and Religion

Many individuals use spiritual teachings to define their moral ethics. This influences the way men and women learn to relate to one another, and can thus be used to define gendered roles and responsibilities. Often times, this learned relation highlights and normalizes men’s authority and decision making role both in the household and greater community. This imbalance leads to greater violence, less relationship satisfaction and higher rates of suicide amongst men and boys¹, making it important to look critically at power relations in religious communities.

Religion, religious leaders and religious institutions play a foundational role in creating and upholding gendered norms. However, CARE’s work with engaging young men and boys has shown that religion alone does not define one’s masculinity, and must be viewed alongside cultural and political norms that can have a large influence on one’s interpretation of sacred text as well as faith-based practice. Therefore, we must critically examine schisms between religious values and the prevalence of gender inequality in faith-based communities.

“The narratives about masculinity often derive from misinterpretations of the scriptures. The Bible says that the body is not hers, but belongs to her husband. During a workshop a man realised that for the last 20 years he had forced his wife to sleep with him. He never asked for her permission,”
 - Prabu Deepan, TearFund

Working with Religious Leaders

Our engagement with religious leaders is influenced by the idea that there exists a disagreement between religious teachings which support social justice and the reality of gender inequality in communities where faith is interwoven into the social fabric. Religious leaders who have taken part in CARE’s Men and Masculinities programming have been able to identify positive examples of masculinity as modeled by key

actors in religious texts, and have used their own strategies to promote transformative notions of masculine norms and behaviors which are aligned with their faith-based teachings.

Religious Leaders as Role Models

Identifying religious leaders willing to take up the work of transforming harmful masculinities is just the first step towards a faith-based approach to engaging men in gender equality work. To ensure a strong delivery, it is important to train both existing progressive voices in the community as well as encourage those with more traditional views on men’s roles in society as protector and decision-maker. Existing programs encourage a symbiotic approach, so that as religious leaders acquire the tools and framework for a strong evaluation of power imbalances, they are simultaneously given the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences around masculinity. Personal reflection, dialogue and community support is critical for success.

Tools for Engagement

Sacred texts have been used as justification for many gender injustices including violence, education, exclusion of women from decision making and leadership positions¹. Alternatively, sacred texts are also used as sources of inspiration and empowerment towards social justice goals. How they are interpreted has a great deal of influence on gender relations. Identifying dominant scriptures used to fuel gender inequality and analyzing them with religious leaders allows for counter-arguments and leads to possibilities for new readings, as well as highlighting existing scripture which promotes gender equality. This is done with the knowledge that sacred texts are not read in a vacuum. The cultural and gendered norms present in a specific society shape the way sacred texts are interpreted, and interpretation simultaneously shapes existing cultural and gendered norms.

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Image taken at “Engaging Religious Leaders” seminar on February 2nd, 2017

Key Findings

1. Focus on Progressive Religious Leaders within the Community

Transforming masculinities must involve religious leaders from all levels, yet an entry point is often in working with those who hold a flexible understanding of scripture and have used their faith towards promoting social justice issues.

Tips

- ★ Provide leaders with the tools to diffuse teachings on healthy masculinities and faith.
- ★ Support them in their work.

2. Leave Room

Scriptural interpretation is often used as justification for how gender norms and relations are acted out in the cultural context in which they preside. Therefore, encouraging alternative interpretations and leaving room for multiple readings based on historical, cultural and contextual differences is vital.

Tips

- ★ Encourage flexibility. Remember that masculinities are multiple and dynamic and shift with time and context, much like one's faith.
- ★ Use multiple readings as opportunities for discussion and identify overlapping themes.



Image courtesy of DentylRecords, (2014). CARE- 'Men Engaged' Initiative in Mali.

3. Encourage Interfaith Dialogue

Supporting engaged religious leaders means identifying ways to promote dialogue between those with a working knowledge of harmful masculinities and those practicing different forms of faith within their communities.

Tips

- ★ Identify common virtues that promote healthy masculinities within sacred text.
- ★ Encourage interfaith dialogue and learning initiatives.
- ★ Pull from research done by organizations

such as TearFund which identify positive masculine characteristics in key religious actors such as Jesus, Muhammed, etc.

4. Dialogue as a Critical Tool for Engagement

Engaging with Religious Leaders around masculinity means working with highly sensitized topics. Because leaders are predominantly men, personal reflection around one's own agency can have both negative and positive consequences, including pushback. It is important to utilize mindful communication strategies that promote non-violence. Dialogue can be used as a tool to encourage active listening and assist leaders in coming to their own authentic conclusions.

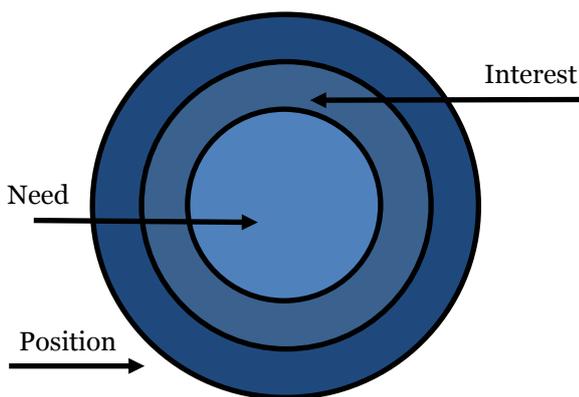
Tips

- ★ Utilize the onion² method to identify the position, interests, and needs of those you are in dialogue with. Focusing on and unpacking the need will help build bridges of understanding and identify solutions.
- ★ Listen for thoughts and opinions that may sound as if they do not belong to the religious leader, but an ideology.
- ★ Ask open-ended questions.
- ★ Train members of your staff in dialogue and help disseminate helpful tools to promote its use with religious leaders. For further resources, see references.

References:

1. *Masculinity and Religion in Nigeria: Findings from qualitative research*. Christian Aid Nigeria, 2015. Page 19.
2. Nansen Training, February 2017
3. Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue, Lillehammer, Norway.
4. DentylRecords, (2014). *CARE- 'Men Engaged' Initiative in Mali*. [image] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PK2PjWLy1qI&feature=youtu.be> [Accessed 1 Mar. 2017].

The Onion Model



Further Areas for Research:

When gathering data for this document, it became apparent that little work has been published on how faith has been used to transform harmful masculinities. While we found several examples on how faith has been used to engage men in health issues such as HIV and aids, less common was information on practices specific to programming around masculinities in faith-based communities. Therefore, this document has sought to identify lessons learned both in the field and through shared experiences with local organizations. It has also raised questions still unable to be answered through existing work. We hope this document can be used to further our knowledge and strengthen practices geared towards engaging men and religious leaders worldwide.

Some questions to consider:

- ★ What community actor is best suitable for a role as facilitator in interfaith dialogues?
- ★ What type of pushback is experienced by engaged religious leaders, and what are the best systems of support to prevent backlash?
- ★ How can the relationship between sexuality and masculinity be viewed from a faith-based perspective?

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A special thanks to our seminar attendees and guest contributors,

- Prabu Deepan, TearFund
- Beatrice Halsaa, UiO Centre for Gender Research
- Christiane Seehausen, Nansen Centre for Peace and Dialogue
- Knud Jørgensen, Areopagos



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