

# Violence against women and girls **DOES FAITH MATTER?**

## Policy brief

📍 Faith groups are present in remote and conflict-affected communities that governments and other agencies struggle to reach.  
Photo: Maggie Sandilands/Tearfund

Globally, one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is particularly prevalent and hard to address in conflict-affected areas. Do local faith groups have a role to play in response?

This brief highlights key policy implications from Tearfund's research in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

### Background

Violence against women and girls is a global human rights abuse, harming social and economic development. Sexual violence is a key and too often taboo aspect of VAWG, with severe life-limiting physical, emotional, social and economic impacts for survivors. It is particularly prevalent in many conflict-affected environments, including DRC,

### KEY MESSAGES

- Very high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) need to be recognised and addressed in conflict-affected communities in DRC.
- Harmful gender norms that drive violence are often supported or condoned by religious beliefs, but this research shows that faith engagement<sup>2</sup> is also linked to reduced IPV.
- Faith leaders have unique reach and influence within conflict-affected communities, and a mandate to speak into these issues. If mobilised and equipped, they could play a key role in more effective prevention of and response to VAWG.





📍 A Tearfund training in Libi, DRC, to equip faith leaders to understand and transform harmful gender norms.  
Photo: Uwezu Baghuma/HEAL Africa

where it is reported that approximately 1.8 million women have been raped in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> According to the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, conflict-related sexual violence is one of the most critical challenges faced by the people and government of DRC.

Tearfund's research confirms the extent and severity of violence against women and girls within remote and conflict-affected communities in DRC, particularly intimate partner violence (IPV). It also highlights the potential impact that could be made if donors, policymakers and humanitarian agencies effectively engaged with and equipped local faith groups to be part of prevention and response.

## Baseline research in DRC

Tearfund's project 'Engaging with Faith Groups to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls in Conflict-

📍 Mariam Gabus (right) leads the women's group at the mosque in Bale village and received training from Tearfund. 'As a faith leader I can speak about violence, in the village, in the mosque, or even in other villages. Because I am a faith leader, people come to me to ask for help.' Photo: Helen Hollands/Tearfund



affected Communities' is funded by UK aid from the UK government, under the *What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls? Global Programme*.<sup>4</sup>

The project aims to address the underlying root causes of violence against women and girls, particularly sexual violence, by engaging and equipping faith leaders and local faith groups (both Christian and Muslim), to transform the attitudes, behaviours and social norms within their communities that support gender inequality and enable VAWG.

In July 2015, Tearfund conducted a baseline quantitative household survey across 15 communities in Ituri Province in the DRC, to better understand current social and gender norms and factors contributing to violence. It also explored the role and relevance of engaging with faith within communities, and in relation to VAWG.

A total of 769 interviews were conducted, with 400 women and 369 men.

## Key findings

- High levels of violence were reported within these communities, underlining the urgent need for action. IPV was most prevalent, with 68.8% of women reporting some form of IPV in the past year.
- Sexual violence was noticeably high in comparison with other contexts, with 38.4% of women reporting sexual IPV in the past year. Experience of non-partner sexual violence (NPSV) within the past 12 months was reported by 20.8% of women who responded, compared to a national figure of 16%<sup>5</sup> and a global figure of 7% for lifetime experience of NPSV.<sup>6</sup> The majority of perpetrators were known, not armed groups.

- Stigma against survivors was high, with 37.1% of men believing that a man is justified in rejecting his wife if she has been raped. The majority of survivors had not sought any help, and only 17.2% of survivors felt that their community was supportive.
- Childhood experience of sexual abuse had a significant correlation to future perpetration for men (nine times more likely to perpetrate NPSV). Witnessing abuse of their mother as a child correlated to increased experience of IPV for women.
- The data highlighted the significant reach and influence of faith groups within communities, where 95% of respondents identified with a religion, of whom 83.4% described their faith as important or very important in their lives, particularly women. People were more likely to agree with harmful attitudes if framed as 'scriptural' and faith leaders were highlighted as the most influential social referent.
- One of the most striking findings was that faith engagement (for both Christians and Muslims) showed a protective correlation in terms of reduced experience of IPV for women. It was also consistently shown to be associated with more empowering attitudes for both men and women. For example, those who were actively engaged with a faith group were more likely to believe that physical violence is not justified in any circumstances, and that a woman has the right to refuse sex.

- 📌 Tearfund is training volunteers from churches and mosques in Ituri province to address the root causes of violence against women and girls, and to support survivors within their communities. Photo: Helen Hollands/Tearfund

## Conclusions

These findings underline the importance of finding urgent and scalable interventions to prevent violence against women and girls within remote and conflict-affected communities in DRC. They highlight the need to strengthen the focus on addressing IPV within conflicted-affected communities, instead of merely focusing on the narrative of rape by armed actors.

The findings also consistently highlight the potential role for faith-based interventions, in these contexts where there are few other state or social structures functioning. They showed the need to tackle gender norms from a faith basis, and also linked faith engagement to women's empowerment and reduced IPV.

The findings underline the opportunity and importance of developing and testing interventions with faith groups, and building a better understanding of how they can be effectively mobilised to help prevent VAWG.

## Implications

The physical, emotional and economic costs of violence are well documented, for the individual and also the community and wider society. The very high levels of violence reported in these communities speak of a terrible human cost and continued barrier to development if there is no effective response.



Since childhood experience of violence or witnessing domestic abuse was highlighted as a predictive factor for future perpetration, if the underlying social norms and problems of IPV in these communities are not addressed the cycle of violence will continue.

Current responses are clearly inadequate to the scale of need and so effective new approaches need to be found, particularly for remote or conflict-affected communities, which are hard for governments, NGOs and other actors to reach. Engaging existing community resources, such as faith groups, could help to address this.

## Recommendations for donors and policymakers

- Recognise, resource and prioritise addressing IPV and other forms of VAWG in conflict settings, not simply focusing on 'rape as a weapon of war'.
- Ensure that interventions address the root causes of violence at community level, including harmful gender norms.
- Recognise, engage with and support the inclusion of faith actors in VAWG response.
- Work with faith-based agencies to better equip local faith leaders to respond, particularly in tackling root causes from a faith perspective – including challenging where faith leaders are currently upholding harmful gender norms.
- Encourage and resource partnerships between secular agencies, governments, research institutes and faith groups to increase faith literacy, and to better understand and develop the potential contribution of faith groups in preventing VAWG.

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## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: DOES FAITH MATTER?

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Engaging with faith groups is vital in this context where 95% of people identify with a religion and 83% describe their faith as (very) important in their lives. Photo: Helen Hollands/Tearfund

## Research report

Sandilands M, Jewkes R, Baghuma Lele U and Scott N (2017) *Does faith matter? Faith engagement, gender norms and violence against women and girls in conflict-affected communities: baseline research in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo*. Tearfund, UK.

The full research report is available at:  
[www.tearfund.org/sexualviolence](http://www.tearfund.org/sexualviolence)

- 1 UN (2006) *The Secretary General's In Depth Study on all forms of VAWG*; UN Women (2012) *Fast Facts: Statistics on Violence Against Women and Girls*; WHO (2013) *Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence*
- 2 The 'faith engagement' variable combined those who actively take part in religious services (ie not just attend) along with the small number who are in decision-making or leadership positions within their faith group.
- 3 'Estimates and Determinants of Sexual Violence Against Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo', *American Journal of Public Health*: (June 2011) Vol 101, No 6, pp 1060–1067
- 4 [www.whatworks.co.za](http://www.whatworks.co.za)
- 5 Ministère du Plan et Suivi de la Mise en oeuvre de la Révolution de la Modernité, Ministère de la Santé Publique, and ICF International, 'Democratic Republic of Congo Demographic and Health Survey 2013–2014' (2014)
- 6 World Health Organization, 'Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence' (2013). Available at: [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625\\_eng.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf)