Engaging the Mechanisms of Faith? How Faith Communities Can Contribute to Ending Violence Against Children

By Selina Palm and Carola Eyber

Abstract

Violence against children is shaped by social norms which are frequently underpinned by faith-related beliefs and values. There is renewed global recognition of the role of religions in legitimating or challenging harmful attitudes and practices, and this highlights the relevance and influence of faith communities in child protection. Faith communities may also have a unique role to play by engaging *spiritual capital and faith mechanisms* for positive change. These approaches go beyond an instrumentalised yet important role in service provision alone, to also transform harmful beliefs and offer positive alternatives grounded in faith mandates. This article draws on insights from a 2019 scoping study that explored positive and negative beliefs across multiple faith traditions that shape the perpetration, justification, or engagement to end violence against children. The study included three research components: a literature review, a case study submission process, and key informant interviews with experts on child violence working with diverse faith communities. Its findings show many ways in which religion's spiritual capital can either help place children at society's centre or can support harmful hierarchies of power that enable violence against children and seek to resist positive change.

Keywords: Violence against children, faith actors, faith-based abuse, spiritual capital, harmful beliefs

Introduction

Violence against children is a global crisis. Statistics show that seven out of ten children aged 2-4 are subjected to violent discipline in the home and every 7 minutes an adolescent is killed by an act of violence (UNICEF, 2017). Child labour also affects an estimated 165 million children and around 15 million

girls experience forced sex, with an additional 150 million marrying before they turn 18 (UNICEF, 2017). However, violence against children is also preventable. In the last decade, a range of effective strategies have emerged, such as the INSPIRE (https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/violence-prevention/inspire-technical-package) approaches, that focus on how to end violence against children (UNICEF, 2014). These strategies include engaging parents and primary caregivers, changing harmful social norms and beliefs, as well as creating safer environments and stronger response and support systems. These strategies also highlight the important role of faith institutions in the shared task of ending violence against children, especially in relation to transforming social norms and beliefs.

In a world where 84 percent of people identify as religious (Pew Research Centre, 2017), faith communities and religious institutions have a unique, indispensable role to play in ending violence against children (Hackett & Grimm, 2012; McLeigh & Taylor, 2020). In many parts of the world, faith leaders hold moral authority and profound, trusted relationships with their communities. They can play a key role in changing harmful practices, establishing child protection systems, providing direct services, and serving as advocates at multiple levels (Hanmer & Robinson, 2014; UNICEF, 2017). Over the past decade, a body of literature has begun to capture evidence of this work of faith-affiliated groups in the lives of many communities (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019). At the same time, disturbing evidence is also emerging of faith leaders and faith communities either violating children directly or allowing the perpetuation of violence against children through religious justifications or the silencing of survivor voices within religious spaces such as churches (Everhart, 2020; Australian Government, 2019). This includes the sexual abuse of children by faith leaders, but also the justification of, or carrying out of child marriage by faith actors, (Le Roux & Palm 2018) or the acceptance of corporal punishment or child labour in some faith schools and institutions (Rutledge & Eyber, 2018). While child protection experts highlight the urgent need to counter these abuses, faith communities may be slower to confront and eradicate these practices or beliefs that can result in violence against children, especially if they believe that they are allowed or mandated by their faith, or believe that faith leaders cannot be reported or held to account by secular courts (Fontes & Plummer, 2010).

Key milestones do exist in the public journey of global faith communities around their historical silence and complicity in certain forms of violence against children, and their increasing commitment to engage in ending all forms of violence against children. These include the Kyoto Declaration in 2006 and the Panama Declaration in 2017. Prominent faith leaders around the world, for example, South African Christian Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, American Jewish Rabbi Diane Gerson, Japanese Buddhist leader Reverend Takeyasu Miyamoto and Deputy Grand Iman of the Centre for Islamic Learning in Al-Azhar in Egypt, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, became global faith ambassadors around ending a range of child violence issues which were still highly contested in many faith spaces, including child marriage, female genital mutilation and corporal punishment. This points to a global movement for change within faith spaces that more leaders are invited to join. However, implementing these positive religious changes consistently also requires engaging with the many ambivalent roles that faith still plays in this area and the urgent need for new theological education (Eyber & Palm, 2019).

This article draws on a scoping study focused on this engagement as part of renewed recognition of faith communities' complex relevance and range of influences in child protection, especially through initiatives that aim to influence local communities through their faith affiliations (Palm, 2019; Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm & Colombo, 2019).

Methodology

In 2018, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFC)[1] commissioned a scoping study to explore how faith communities are involved in ending, as well as in contributing to violence against children (VAC). The unique aspects of faith actors' approaches and practices to ending violence from within their religious belief systems were analysed (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019;

1 The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFC) is an international collaboration on evidence for faith groups' role and contributions to local community health and wellbeing and ending poverty.

Palm, 2019; Palm & Colombo, 2019). This scoping study, conducted by two academic institutions, one located in the Global North and one in the Global South, took place between January and December 2018 and included three published research components: a literature review (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019), a case study submission process for practice-based models that focused on ending violence against children; (Palm & Colombo, 2019) and a consultation stage with experts identified through JLIFCs membership (Palm, 2019). This article draws specifically on the literature review and the interviews with experts from varied faith traditions and country contexts with academic and practical experience working at the intersection of faith and VAC (Palm, 2019; Rutledge & Eyber, 2019).

The literature reviewed included journal articles, book chapters, media articles and NGO reports. Efforts were made to locate literature from all major faiths and a range of geographic regions with 172 pieces reviewed in-depth. The second component of the study involved semi-structured interviews with 14 expert practitioners across the field of religion and initiatives to end violence against children. Efforts were made to fill gaps identified at a literature level through interviews across 13 countries with experts from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim contexts, with practical experience of working with local faith communities to end violence against children. University ethical approval was secured.

Limited academic literature was seen to focus on faith-based initiatives, especially in the global South. In terms of the major religions, a large part of the literature was related to Sub-Saharan Africa and focused mainly on Christianity, Islam and Traditional Beliefs. Most literature reviewed was in English.

Findings

One of the key overall insights that emerged from the 2019 scoping study was the value of engaging the direct mechanisms of faith (Palm & Eyber, 2019). Harmful beliefs were identified across various faiths in relation to children. While these can be challenged using secular arguments only, because they are beliefs, experts in this field note that they are best tackled by using faith mechanisms. How this is to be done varies between different faiths and regions, but promising approaches draw on patterns of spiritual power within their traditions, including the critique of abusive beliefs and practices and development of positive values and norms. These mechanisms of faith may include religious rituals, sacred texts, faith doctrines, faith leaders, faith spaces and religious experiences. Spiritual power is manifested in various ways e.g., prayers, religious stories, divine commands, exorcisms, anointed leaders etc. These can be an asset or a liability in the shared task of ending violence against children.

Both the literature review and the interviews highlighted the unique roles played by many faith actors as a form of 'spiritual capital' (Palm, 2019; Rutledge & Eyber, 2019). This included positive and negative beliefs, behaviours and a range of spiritual mechanisms (such as prayers, sermons, religious rituals and sacred texts). This article focuses on the findings regarding the unique value of spiritual capital in relation to ending violence against children. This emerged in the study through promoting positive beliefs, transforming harmful beliefs, and changing behaviours.

> "In a world where 84 percent of people identify as religious (Pew Research Centre, 2017), faith communities and religious institutions have a unique, indispensable role to play in ending violence against children (Hackett & Grimm, 2012; McLeigh & Taylor, 2020)"

The Role of Spiritual Capital

In many parts of the world, faith leaders have both significant moral authority and profound, trusted relationships with their communities. They can act as gatekeepers to communities with the power to allow or deny access by outsiders (access capital). They frequently have holistic, sustainable influence in promoting or challenging prevalent ideologies and behaviours (Palm, Le Roux & Bartelink, 2017; Le Roux & Palm, 2021). Faith leaders are increasingly being engaged by secular development programs for their social capital, such as with buildings, volunteers, and networks to carry out many roles across the prevention/response continuum. However, the study also identified an additional cross-cutting domain around *spiritual capital* as a unique role that faith communities can also play, which had received less attention to date than their wider social or access capital.

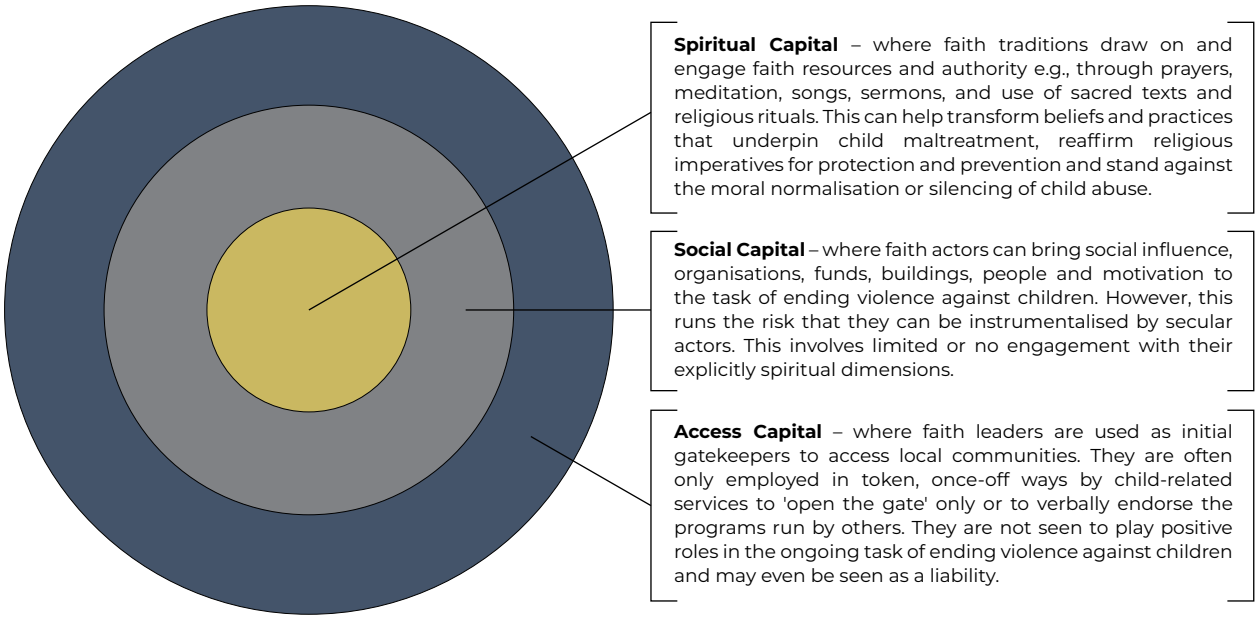

***Figure 1**: (adapted from Palm & Eyber, 2019)*

Dutch religious sociologist Gerrie Ter Haar (2011) describes spiritual capital as involving four types of religious resources in the forms of organisations, practices, experiences and ideas/beliefs. She suggests that these spiritual ideas or beliefs have often been overlooked in development work but provide unique resources that go beyond faith actors' recognised roles in social and access capital. Spiritual capital can be either a resource or a roadblock in efforts to end violence against children. It draws influence from pre-existing notions of religious authority. While this can be misused, it can also motivate, reinforce or challenge existing beliefs and practices in effective ways (Palm, 2020b).

The scoping study (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm, 2019) showed that faith leaders can speak about faith and ethics in ways that hold unique authority and influence for their followers. They also have an impact on how people behave in the multiple domains of their lives, including families and workplaces. In places of worship, each week sit presidents, political leaders, teachers, caregivers, children, perpetrators, and lawmakers. Religious beliefs, sacred texts, and images of the divine can all be deployed in ways that relate to, and position children in certain ways. They can connect faith, child protection and child rights or disconnect them. For example, faith-based approaches that critically engage sacred texts have been used as an effective strategy by both faith actors and child rights activists to rethink harmful interpretations or translations and to offer alternative interpretations (Arigatou International, 2019; Veith, 2018). Common principles are shared by many faiths such as respect for human dignity. Faith leaders can be equipped to act and speak about relationships between

adults and children in ways that 'do no harm' as identified by the experts interviewed (henceforth 'the experts'):[2]

> *(T)here are a huge number of people for whom their faith is a critically important part of their lives. I think that it is the role of leaders within different faiths to set an example above all else but also to talk about things like respect for human dignity, appreciation of diversity, your obligations, we all have rights…We need churches and faith leaders to search their texts and their hearts for ways to make humankind nicer to each other. To forget about power and control and dominance (Interviewee, 2019, South Africa).*

Mainstreaming faith engagement alongside the disturbing contemporary global realities on violence against children, such as corporal punishment, sexual abuse, child marriage and child labour, into the interpretation of core faith values like justice, peace, human dignity, equality, compassion, with a commitment to life, was another approach identified as being valuable across different faiths:

> *They all profess respect for the human dignity of a child and compassion, equality, justice and non-violence and how do these square up with violence against children. If they are able to preach these particular beliefs and values and they have enormous potential to do that…. the religious themes that people have been happy with, like peace and justice, which have never included violence against children in the past, are now doing so… for the first time, children's rights are included (Interviewee, 2019, United Kingdom).*

These underlying beliefs can shape protective norms for children. Rethinking how faith communities are shaped makes a contribution to how children experience places of worship and participate in them. Finally, attitudes regarding whether the situation of children can be improved may exist in tension with fatalistic beliefs that suffering may be deserved or is to be accepted as 'God-ordained'. The study findings highlighted the powerful role of religious ideas and beliefs with both positive and negative consequences for the task of ending violence against children and urgently need deeper critical engagement. However, the mechanisms of faith by which beliefs are transmitted need to be explored.

Use of Faith-Based Mechanisms

Religious actors can be essential players in challenging misinterpreted religious beliefs and helping faith communities unlearn and relearn patterns and pass information on. This engages beliefs ,including deep-seated emotional responses, as essential for sustainable behaviour change. An evidence base is emerging around religious scholars and leaders using their spiritual capital to correct misinterpretations of sacred texts, to engage their spiritual messages and rituals with issues of child protection (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm & Le Roux, 2021). However, according to both the literature and interviews with the experts in this 2019 scoping study, religious ideas and beliefs were seen to form an underexplored area in relation to violence against children and it was noted they are best transmitted in ways that tap into existing spiritual structures, rituals and roles within faith communities. Understanding and use of, those existing faith mechanisms is recommended if messages are to be adopted. Four examples are given below that offer unique ways for faiths to engage, namely through sacred texts, religious rituals, spiritual counselling, and weekly religious messaging. These channels often play an important role in beliefs and norms around children and child violence.

Engaging Sacred Texts

Sacred texts and their interpretation are being taken more seriously as a core shaping mechanism for many faith communities, in relation to beliefs around ending violence against children. However, the study findings suggest that more work is needed, especially beyond the Christian tradition and with those who have oral traditions. Some faith leaders are engaged, but it has rarely becomes a compulsory part of formative training for all faith leaders. A focus on critical yet respectful engagement with sacred texts is used by some faith-based organisations for engaging with a faith-based approach. This has been an effective strategy for bringing change in faiths which have a central text but may marginalise faiths that do not

2 All quotations from interviewees are taken from the expert consultations of the scoping study (Palm, 2019).

have a single central sacred text at their core, such as Buddhism and Hinduism.

Promising approaches to, for example, contextual Bible study, such as the Tamar campaign in Kenya which focused on sexual violence, engage directly with the potentially harmful stories in their sacred texts rather than ignoring them (West & Zondi-Mabizele, 2004). This may need to be done for other sacred stories where children are positioned as voiceless or harmed, such as the sacrifice stories of Isaac or Jephthah's daughter in the Bible. Some theologians are re-interpreting their sacred texts in the light of patterns of child harm and developing alternative interpretations that do not endorse harmful practices. Religious structures can disseminate these to their adherents in ways that are internally authoritative. This was seen to work well with text-based religions as experts noted that there are places where mistranslation has been embedded into religious texts for centuries and many people assume this is the Word of God. However, careful reinterpretation of, for example, both Islamic and Christian texts by well-recognized scholars within those traditions enabled a fatwa to be announced against female genital mutilation in 2006, and child marriage to also be condemned along with a range of other violent practices against children (Al-Azhar University, UNICEF & Coptic Orthodox Church, 2016a).

Involving Religious Rituals

A range of diverse religious rituals were also shared, including traditional African religions and in neo-Pentecostal Christian religious movements of Latin America, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa in particular. These religions place less emphasis on sacred texts and formal teaching, and grant more spiritual authority to religious experiences with some grassroots faith leaders even seen as appointed by God as 'anointed Prophets' with unquestioned power, which can at times lead to further faith-based abusive practices against children by these leaders (Briggs & Whittaker, 2018). Critical interaction with these religious movements can develop positive techniques to engage these sources of religious authority which may contain a complex entanglement of culture and religion. They also offer new possibilities for engagement and can appeal to low literacy populations through their experiential spiritual rituals in which adults and children can participate together. Other faith leaders may also play an important role in engaging these perpetrators by using religious frames of reference. They employ a language around sin and evil that can enable them to engage perpetrators of violence through using their spiritual authority, access, and spiritual tools, such as prayer and sacred texts, to speak to perpetrators and victims and to advocate for change. Religious rituals often include components of change and forgiveness, such as the Islamic concepts of *Tawbah* and *Rahma*, and Christian notions of repentance. These rituals were identified as effective mechanisms for bringing change to patterns of violence against children in certain contexts (Le Roux & Palm, 2021).

Religious communities also use the spiritual rituals which form part of their faith to reinforce child protections such as baptism, name days, prayer and religious ceremonies (CNNV, 2015). Where these rituals are causing harm, they can help to develop alternative rituals as noted in the study (Palm, 2019). For example, an expert working with Maasai communities in Kenya found that religious and traditional leaders played a key role in stopping the tradition of female genital mutilation/cutting by replacing it with an alternative celebration that satisfied the girls' need to have a ritual that people in their community accept. This type of approach has also been successful with wider faith actors (Le Roux & Palm, 2021).

Undertaking Spiritual Counselling

Faith leaders also have the authority to visit homes, to counsel elders and to speak to parents and caregivers. These form opportunities for engagement with both adults and children and draw on shared mechanisms of faith such as prayer and confession to encourage behaviour change by perpetrators of abuse within family settings. One expert pointed to the unique authority of faith leaders to call for change amongst adherents that has led to testimonials of changed behaviours of or changed practices of violence against children by previous perpetrators. Evidence also emerged of adults changing their behaviour because of what children had said to them or by the use of mechanisms of faith such as prayer with and by children. This involves children directly in nonviolent spiritual practices for change, as this quote from an expert working in this area in East Africa shows:

> *Some of the parents, when we meet them, they will give testimonies, 'I used to abuse my children a lot, not giving them food or this, but as soon as they asked us to pray more often…', you will find the parents changed. The way they are abusing their children, or not giving them food. That is how prayer changed the household, even to stop violence in the home because children were insisting to pray. They are the ones leading prayers, simple prayers but a big change to the household (Interviewee, 2019, Tanzania).*

Employing Weekly Religious Messages

The experts across different faith traditions offered suggestions for ways that faith leaders could harness the unique spiritual tools at their disposal. These tools can help reshape the ethical perceptions of millions of citizens who sit in spaces of worship across countries and faiths if the religious leader is a credible witness to what is being preached. This includes what they say in their weekly sermons or religious messages to both children and adults:

> *They are looked up to in the society, for example, if a faith leader speaks about disciplining the child and uses a reference from the faith perspective like if you want to discipline a child you have to beat them. You have to thrash them according to a (sacred text) verse. So, if a faith leader says, whatever is written in the sacred text, it may be written that way but beating a child is physical abuse. If he explains that to his congregation or society in such a way so it is not misinterpreting what is in the religious text. If faith leaders come from the religious perspective that really counts, that is really good (Interviewee, 2019, Nepal).*

Local faith leaders often see themselves as having a special role in the spiritual development of children. Approaches like the Arigatou Prayer and Action for Children program connect this role to enabling children to recognise and challenge abusive patterns in their environment (Arigatou International, 2019). Child workers also develop child-centred approaches directly with children in places of worship that promote child-friendly spaces and beliefs and enable children to be active participants within religious spaces, an area of focus strongly recommended by the study as indirectly improving child protection.

Promoting Positive Beliefs

Faith leaders can offer moral authority and motivation to end violence against children, by helping to bridge the gap between global declarations and grassroots practices. Their spiritual or 'pulpit power' in their communities can be used in positive ways to protect children, to denounce violence as evil, and by using special days to build momentum for change such as the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children. The literature component of the research study (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019) shows that all religious traditions contain protective elements for marginalised and vulnerable people, which can be carefully strengthened and reclaimed for children.

Some examples of positive messages emerging from sacred texts include the Islamic view of children as a blessing and the mandate to care for orphans. While discipline is needed, harm to the body and soul is prohibited. Core tenets of Buddhism reject causing pain to others and point to a code of discipline based on mutual respect, loving kindness, and compassion. This connects to the idea that children must not be ill-treated. Sikh scriptures, for example, note that God cherishes all children and in the Bahai faith, relationships are seen to be structured through loving fellowship, consultation, and mutual respect, including family relationships where violence towards, vilification or humiliation of husband, wife or children is not seen to be an acceptable part of family life. The Christian Bible connects true religion in God's eyes to care for widows and orphans in distress. In a Hindu context, the principle of the sacredness of life and the foundational principle of non-injury means that a failure to protect children from abuse and exploitation is incompatible and at variance with basic Hindu teachings and their cardinal ethical principle of non-injury (*ahimsã*) (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019). While these different religions do have diverse understandings of God, other multi-religious studies and interfaith declarations also reinforce the findings from this research that there are important commonalities on which work to end violence against children can built (Arigatou International, 2019).

A second way in which faith leaders can build positive momentum for treating children differently is by expanding the religious categories

of justice, peace, and human dignity to include children. This offers ways for religious communities to build a movement for change and collaborate to end violence against children across faiths by drawing on shared religious values and on the roles that faith leaders play as teachers, theologians, leaders of worship, chairs and community activists. These key religious themes can reinforce the value of the child. Doctrines regarding a 'theology' of the child in each tradition were also highlighted as relevant by the experts. Children are depicted in different ways within religious teachings, and this can influence how they are treated both socially and religiously. For example, one Hindu expert in the study pointed to engaging childhoods of divine beings to remind people that a child has divine power to shake up evil, while themes of the child as 'made in the image of God' in Judeo-Christian tradition, or as placed in the centre of the mandala[3] in Buddhist thought, were also promising entry points identified. One practical example was given where Buddhist leaders partnered with the government to put the child in the centre of the mandala where the deity normally goes with the articles of the Convention of the Rights of the Child around them as an example of a positive collaboration between child rights and religious teachings. This approach was also reinforced by experts within both Asian and African contexts as being important to counter prevalent perceptions here that child rights are Western, secular, at odds with religious teaching and are to be automatically resisted (Palm, 2019).

A third strategy identified was through he use of religious stories about key faith persons or their childhoods in religious traditions. These can either reinforce or challenge practices of child violence. Examples include Mohammad, Tamar, Isaac, Aisha, Rama, Mary and Jesus, who all encountered violence or vulnerability as children themselves. Whether a child is seen as inherently bad or pure or as capable of being religiously enlightened, may shape the education a child is given and the mode of teaching. In Buddhism, there is a belief that a child can be enlightened because the first people that the Buddha taught his insights to after enlightenment were children. In Christianity, Jesus prioritises children's access to him and places a child at the centre of his vision of the kingdom of God (Palm, 2020a).

Finally, faith leaders often have regular and trusted access to children of all ages in their places of worship, schools and homes, as well as in programs run by faith actors. These spaces can build childrens' capacities to internalise protective norms as part of their spirituality. Religious rituals for children around, for example, birth, baptism, naming, blessings, coming of age, marriage and death offer opportunities for renewed engagement with child protection and child rights in ways that speak to the spiritual purpose of these rituals, whilst also requiring critical reflection from faith actors on the need for rituals to evolve and to do no harm. For example, both female genital mutilation and child marriage are often shrouded in auras of religious morality, but have been increasingly contested publicly by religious leaders such as Islamic religious scholars (Al-Alzar & UNICEF, 2016b). Religion plays a role in human lifecycles from before birth to after death and is expected to speak about morality, especially around families, child rearing and education. Divine images, religious founders, sacred stories and doctrines shape social structures around the child who may then internalise what is seen to be normal.

Transforming Negative Beliefs

Despite the many positive examples and protective beliefs identified, faith actors were seen by the experts and in the literature as often perpetuating problematic mindsets about children described as 'toxic theology' (Trofgruben, 2018; Palm, 2020a). Local faith engagement can be at odds with global religious discourses, creating a gap between high level policies and grassroots practice. Local faith actors are seen to have legitimacy to address entrenched beliefs and practices, and need to be equipped to bridge this gap. If this does not take place, faith actors may be seen as a liability by the wider child protection sector and their spiritual contributions will be mistrusted or marginalised. Study findings, however, suggest that faith communities' unique contributions to ending violence against children may be their potential to promote, challenge, and re-interpret religious beliefs and practices that contribute to violence

3 Mandala means "circle" in Sanskrit, a spiritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism that represents the universe.

against children, particularly those with a spiritual foundation or basis in sacred texts:

> *We need to involve faith leaders not only because they are influential but first and foremost because of underlying beliefs…in many cases, there are underlying beliefs and social norms and values that are somehow highlighted in or by the religious sector that need to be changed (Interviewee, 2019, Panama).*

Some faith leaders, faith actors or faith communities perpetuate violence against children through the misuse of their spiritual authority by justifing violence through religious teachings, or silencing and covering up in the face of child abuse. This is also why engaging faith and faith communities is critical if current complicity with perpetration is to be reshaped. As a result, local faith communities hold a unique position in relation to wider efforts to end child violence. Acknowledging that religion can be used to defend or hide child violence is an important first step towards building forms of allyship to address and end child violence globally. Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist and Christian experts all pointed to what they feel are ongoing "wrong beliefs and assumptions" regarding the provision of care to children that underpins patterns of continued violence within many faith communities. The 2019 scoping study highlighted a number of problematic religious beliefs, often entangled with cultural patterns, seen to indirectly shape violence against children (Rutledge & Eyber, 2019; Palm, 2019). These included, but were not limited to, beliefs about evil spirits or witchcraft, demon possession of children, disability or albinism in children as a curse, repressive gendered patterns such as son preference, damaging beliefs about sexual purity and physical punishment seen as essential for education or discipline in the home. These beliefs can underpin a reluctance by communities to change by offering an aura of morality, underpinned by spiritual beliefs interpreted in harmful ways, as one Hindu religious expert pointed out:

> *Children with disability are looked at as freaks of nature and because we believe in the theory of karma so the actions in this life, they influence our next life so they would say perhaps the person did not do good deeds in a past life, so the child has been punished. That is a very negative attitude (Interviewee, 2019, India).*

Religiously endorsed patterns of silencing children and expecting unquestioned obedience as a form of hierarchical respect for adults become particularly problematic in light of global sexual abuse scandals emerging across various faith groups (Everhart, 2020). These patterns have been found across multiple faith traditions and continue to affect many children. When the underlying drivers of harm against children are perceived to be spiritual or religious (e.g., by perceiving children as witches, child marriage as religiously ordained, or corporal punishment as mandated by sacred texts) spiritual engagement becomes an essential part of challenging these religiously infused root causes effectively.

One specific area that emerged strongly from the research study was around corporal punishment. Experts highlighted this area as forming a unique nexus between faith and violence against children, as an area of deep contention across all regions and faiths. This needs sensitive engagement to dispel the aura of religiously infused morality that still often surrounds it. For example, a legal expert from a Christian organization in Central America noted that "leaders in the church Biblically establish that they have to discipline children physically" (Interviewee, 2019, Honduras).

Faith actors play a powerful role in running schools in many regions and in some of these, physical modes of punishment remain standard practice. Corporal punishment, in both homes and schools, was also named as an ongoing concern across many faith traditions. The experts noted that this issue emerged consistently in training with faith leaders. For example, in some religious schools, selected phrases from diverse sacred texts are still used to justify beating children in order to inspire learning.

Some of the experts suggested that corporal punishment may sit at the root of all other forms of child violence where the corporal punishment of those viewed as 'less than' becomes religiously justified and is not even named as violence. Children are most vulnerable to violence within their homes and families. A religious view which sees corporal punishment as an accepted form

of discipline as part of a patriarchal household model was named as underpinning entrenched patterns of violence against children with close links to other forms of violence in the home. An expert from South Africa noted:

> *(W)e have focused on corporal punishment in particular as we believe it to be fundamental to all other forms of violence. It is so commonplace that it has become normalized as a parenting tool. So many children in so many societies are physically punished as children. This says something as it is normally state-sanctioned violence so it affects the status of the child and the whole problem of [child] violence in society is because of their very low status in society (Interviewee, 2019, South Africa).*

A second area of harmful beliefs identified in the study was that of strongly gendered religious messages about sexual purity, including issues such as virginity and menstruation, which shape social mindsets around adolescent girls in particular. These underpin specific harmful practices such as virginity testing or monthly exclusion from religious spaces as 'unclean,' as well as religious ceremonies that endorse child marriage. While reinterpretation of these messages may take place at a global level, at a local level these beliefs may persist and impact the lives of many girl children. Religion has often exacerbated social taboos about gender, sex and sexuality, which become a source of harmful beliefs and myths. Engaging faith leaders to disentangle these taboos personally and communally is an important part of change. Religious law loopholes are still used in many regions to justify harmful sexual practices with children, as seen for example around child marriage (Le Roux & Palm, 2018). Repressive social patterns were also identified under the cover of the sexual 'protection' of girl children by parents, justified by religious ideas. For example, one Hindu expert noted the religiously sanctioned practice of a young girl going to live with her future family when she is too young to be married as a harmful practice that is focused on enabling the "girl's chastity to be protected...it then becomes the responsibility of the in-laws, not the parents" (Interviewee, 2019, India).

The study also highlighted the fact that religious taboos around discussing sex, LGBTIQ+ issues, or comprehensive sexuality education, can also make children more vulnerable to hidden forms of sexual abuse. One expert noted that guilt and shame form a significant issue for children, which can be further exacerbated when faith leaders are the abusers, where "sometimes the children feel guilty, as if it is their fault, that is what we are trying to change, these beliefs" (Interviewee, 2019, Cambodia). Finally, they noted that a focus on the girl child alone can reinforce binary gendered assumptions that girls need special protection, which can lead to potentially repressive forms of protection by parents or faith communities. The study insists that faith responses in this area must ensure that child protection approaches can support protection and agency for all children, albeit in gender-informed ways.

A third area that emerged from the study findings was that religious themes of obedience and respect shape a social hierarchy where children are often expected to be 'seen but not heard' (Palm, 2020a). These beliefs about children can be embedded within various mechanisms of faith and require nuanced challenges from within faith traditions, by drawing on alternative resources of faith that can support the voices and agency of children, and challenge the underlying paradigm of patriarchal ownership of children by adults common in many religious spaces:

> *Patriarchal religion, and the three monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, are particularly hierarchical... We set up a pattern where men are dominant, a patriarchal construction of reality, a devalued worth of women and children, and where children are at the bottom of the pile. People think that they own their children... Men are the ones in charge who make decisions. Women need protection, someone to look after them and children must be seen and not heard, and they are ours to do whatever we like with them. We say things like, 'I brought you into this world I can take you out' (Interviewee, 2019, South Africa).*

Underlying beliefs play a role in shaping patterns of power between adult and child. These include themes that see suffering as divinely ordained or redemptive, requirements of filial piety, or a punitive male parent God with women and

children seen as male property. This belief can be tied to modelling God by punishing others. These religious assumptions need to be challenged if the roots that underpin violence against women and children, in family settings in particular, are to shift. Religious themes shaped by popular perceptions of *karma* (you get what you deserve), *fatalism* (things cannot be changed), or *retribution* (God as a violent punishing parent) are interpreted in ways that perpetuate the power of abusers. Children's religious duties to 'always honour your father and mother' can be interpreted in harmful ways with the family unit positioned as sacred in religious traditions, creating unregulated spaces for abuse. Stories of child violence as required by divine forces exist in many religious teachings, such as the sacrifice of Isaac by his father, as noted by a Jewish faith leader:

> *It is the most disturbing story in the Bible. It can be understood either as a paradigm for, or as a polemic against child sacrifice. It speaks directly to the issue of ending violence against children as you can take this text and say it is okay after all God told Abraham to sacrifice his son for a greater purpose. Viewed widely in Judaism as a polemic against child sacrifice, it lays the foundation of who are we? How do we deal with this? (Interviewee, 2019, USA).*

Finally, parents are often expected to fulfil religious moral duties regarding their children, often premised on a patriarchal family model. Religious family rituals can reinforce harmful social preferences – for example, a religious blessing of the womb so the child will be a boy. One expert noted beliefs in her tradition, dedicating a child to the monastery secures blessings for the parents. Beliefs that the religious leader is a reflection of the divine often made their words and actions authoritative. One Buddhist expert noted that "if the monk tells you something, you will believe them" (Interviewee, 2019, Thailand). This can silence reporting abuse by children themselves who are confronted by the spiritual authority of someone who may also be providing them with social care, food or education.

Conclusion

This 2019 scoping study shows that local faith leaders already play a range of roles in informal child protection systems as first responders and as moral influencers in families and communities where children remain most vulnerable. Faith actors are also being equipped to bridge the gaps between children and a raft of other child protection processes, and are able to play practical roles alongside other actors to strengthen child protection systems at various points across the prevention/response continuum.

However, interviews with experts working in diverse faiths and for child protection as part of the study call for deeper engagement with questions of spiritual capital that they see as influencing their work. They feel that faith leaders can do more to engage their unique spiritual roles to challenge complicities of legitimated patterns of child violence within religious spaces and beyond. Reinterpreting sacred texts that have been used to harm, as well as traditional and ritualised practices that affect children, by adopting more liberating hermeneutics for children, was deemed essential but was identified as less developed to date. Spiritual capital needs to be better understood and engaged by all working to end violence against children, if the root causes that legitimate and underpin prevalent norms and practices in the world today are to be transformed into a set of beliefs and actions that people of faith can hold with equal fervour and commitment. This could better extend the core values of all major religions to patterns of justice, peace and love to children. It also offers a unique way of tapping into people of faith's sense of ethical behaviour, and the mechanisms which shape their worldview regarding children. By transforming beliefs at this level, it opens spaces and motivates for new ways of engaging children as agents and spiritual beings.

Faith communities have an opportunity to make a unique contribution to the elimination of violence against children through their potential to challenge, re-interpret and refuse to promote specific religious beliefs and practices that contribute to violence against children. Their moral ability to mandate practical social action in relation to children can be a significant asset. However, this will only be the case if they also deal constructively with entrenched harmful faith beliefs used by some to underpin abusive adult/child hierarchies, break the silence and secrecy on hidden practices of child abuse or maltreatment within religious institutions and families, and take concrete steps toward preventative action.

References

Al-Azhar University, UNICEF & Coptic Orthodox Church. 2016a. *Peace. Love. Tolerance. Key Messages from Islam & Christianity on Protecting Children from Violence and Harmful Practices.*

Al-Azhar University & UNICEF. 2016b. *The Islamic Perspective on Protecting Children from Violence and Harmful Practices*. Cairo: Egyptian Publishing House.

Arigatou International. 2019. "Faith and Children's Rights: A Multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child", New York: Arigatou International.

Australian Government. 2019. "Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse", accessed December 30, 2019.

Briggs, S., & Whittaker, A. 2018. Protecting Children from Faith-Based Abuse through Accusations of Witchcraft and Spirit Possession: Understanding Contexts and Informing Practice. *The British Journal of Social Work*. Vol. 48, no. 8, pp. 2157-2175.

Churches' Network for Non-Violence (CNNV) and Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children. 2015. Ending Corporal Punishment of Children – a Handbook for Worship and Religious Gatherings. Nottingham.

Everhart, R. 2020. *The #MeToo Reckoning: Facing the Church's Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Eyber, C., & Palm, S. 2019. *A Mixed Blessing: Roles of Faith Communities in Ending Violence against Children*. Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities.

Fontes, L. A., & Plummer, C. 2010. Cultural Issues in Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 19, 491-518.

Hackett, C., & Grim, B.J. 2012. *The Global Religious Landscape. A Report on Size and Distribution of The World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010.* Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.

Le Roux, E., & Palm, S. 2018. *What Lies Beneath? Tackling the Roots of Religious Resistance to Ending Child Marriage*. London: Girls Not Brides.

Le Roux, E., & Palm, S. 2021. *Learning from Practice: Engaging Faith-based and Traditional Actors in Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls.* New York, United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women.

McLeigh, J D., and Taylor, D. 2020. The Role of Religious Institutions in Preventing, Eradicating, and Mitigating Violence Against Children. *Child Abuse and Neglect.* Dec:110 (Pt 1).

Momen, M. 2021. *The Family in Baha'i Faith.* Iran Chamber Society. Accessed on 1 January 2021.

Palm, S., Le Roux, E., & Bartelink, B.E. 2017. *Amplifying Development Partnering with Faith. Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities.*

Palm, S., & Eyber, C. 2019. *Why Faith? Engaging the Mechanisms of Faith to End Violence Against Children.* Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities.

Palm, S. 2019. *Scoping Study on Faith Actors' Involvement in the Prevention, Elimination and Perpetuation of Violence against Children. Experts Consultation Report'*. Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities EVAC Hub.

Palm, S., and Colombo, F. (eds.). 2019. *Scoping Study on Faith Actors' Involvement in the Prevention, Elimination and Perpetuation of Violence Against Children.* Case Studies. Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities EVAC Hub.

Palm, S. 2020a. "Seen but not heard? Engaging the mechanisms of faith to end violence against children" In *Vulnerable Childhoods in South Africa*. (eds) C Jones and J Grobbelar. South Africa: AOSIS.

Palm, S. 2020b. *Ending Violence Against Children. The Role of Spiritual Capital.* Joint Learning Initiative Webinar. 26 February 2020.

Pew Research Centre. 2017. The Changing Global Religious Landscape. Accessed on 1 Jan 2021.

Robinson, M. & Hanmer, S. 2014. 'Engaging Religious Communities to Protect Children from Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation'. *Child Abuse & Neglec*t 38(4), 600–611.

Rutledge, K., & Eyber, C. 2019. 'Scoping Study on Faith Actors' Involvement in The Prevention, Elimination and Perpetuation of Violence Against Children: Literature Review.' Washington DC: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Ending Violence Against Children Hub.

Ter Haar, G. 2011. *Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World.* Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Trofgruben, T. 2018. 'Toxic Theology: A Pastoral Response to Bible Passages often Used to Justify the Abuse of Children or Prevent Them from Seeking Care', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45(3), 56–60.

Veith, V. 2018. 'Introduction. Child Abuse and the Church: Prevention, Pastoral Care, and Healing'. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45(3):1-2.

West, G., & Zondi-Mabizela, P. 2004. The Bible Story that Became a Campaign in South Africa (and beyond). *Ministerial Formation* 103: 4-12.

UNICEF. 2014. *Ending Violence Against Children: Six Strategies*. New York: UNICEF.

UNICEF. 2017. *A Familiar Face: Violence in the Lives of Children & Adolescents*, New York, UNICEF.