

Religions for Peace

African Council of Religious Leaders
Religions for Peace



Seeds of Change: Uniting Faith Communities to Protect Girls' Rights Everywhere

A Faith Leaders Guide to Ending Harmful Practices.

Seeds of Change: Uniting Faith Communities to Protect Girls' Rights

 Religions *for* Peace

African Council of Religious Leaders

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PREFACE

Across the globe, and unfortunately in many of our communities, the potential of young girls is tragically curtailed by the practices of female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage (CM). These practices not only inflict physical harm but also stifle aspirations, contradicting the abundant life our Scriptures promise. Faith leaders, with their immense power to shape societal norms, are the key to inspiring transformative change in their communities. Practices such as FGM and CM have persisted, deeply rooted in cultural and social norms yet often mistakenly justified by religion.

However, the very faith traditions that so many families hold dear provide the most compelling reasons to safeguard rather than harm. This manual, *Seeds of Change: Uniting Faith Communities to Protect Girls' Rights*, is a collaborative resource that gathers these reasons and translates them into actionable steps, encouraging faith leaders to work together to make a difference. It underscores a unified moral stance: that every girl is a cherished creation, deserving protection, dignity, and freedom from harm, and calls for a united effort from all faith leaders.

Written for pastors, priests, imams, sheikhs, catechists, madrasa teachers and lay leaders, the guide provides:

- A shared theological foundation: Side by side, the diverse faith communities' insights affirm that every person is created in God's image and entrusted with dignity, justice, and mercy. This manual explains why neither faith requires FGM or CM, uniting leaders in their mission to use scripture as a tool for change, not to justify harm.
- Conversation and teaching tools: From icebreakers and sermon prompts to anatomy flipcharts, case studies, and myth-busting posters, the resources help start an honest dialogue in congregations, homes, and youth groups while honouring cultural sensitivity.
- Tailored modules for women, men and youth: Interactive sessions foster healing for survivors, enlist fathers as allies and inspire young people to champion new norms grounded in faith and human rights.



PREFACE

- Real-world examples and resource links: Case studies from Ethiopia, The Gambia, Mali, Somalia, and Uganda demonstrate the transformative power of united clergy in shifting attitudes, influencing policy, and reducing the prevalence of HIV. A curated directory connects readers to medical, legal and psychosocial support, plus further study materials. It's a testament to the strength of collective action in bringing about lasting change.

By the end of the programme, faith leaders will be able to address FGM and child marriage with informed compassion, correct religious misconceptions and mobilise collective action for lasting change, showcasing the strength of unity and collaboration.

We invite you to use this manual as a living toolkit: adapt the activities to your context, translate key messages into local languages and bring together churches, mosques, elders' councils and youth clubs in a shared pledge to "choose life, so that you and your children may live." As you teach, preach, counsel and advocate, may your voice echo the deepest call of our faiths—to protect the vulnerable, uphold dignity and let every girl grow into the whole purpose God intends.



ABBREVIATIONS

ACRL-RfP – African Council of Religious Leaders–*Religions for Peace*

ARP – Alternative Rites of Passage

ATR – African Traditional Religions

CM – Child Marriage

EOTC – Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

FGM – Female Genital Mutilation

GBV – Gender-based violence

IRCE – Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia

PBUH – Peace be Upon Him

RfP – *Religions for Peace*

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

WHO – World Health Organisation



CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Faith Leaders' Toolkit

1. Introduction

Across diverse faiths, there is a growing recognition of the sacred duty to protect girls from harmful practices like FGM and child marriage. In communities throughout Africa, faith leaders are uniting to affirm that every girl's life and well-being are precious in the eyes of God, the Creator. Harmful practices such as FGM and CM have far-reaching consequences for the health and well-being of girls. FGM can result in severe health complications, including chronic pain, recurrent infections, and life-long childbirth challenges that often persist into adulthood. Beyond the physical toll, both FGM and CM inflict deep psychological trauma; affected girls frequently suffer from anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem, with emotional scars that can last a lifetime.

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Moreover, child marriage disrupts educational opportunities by forcing girls to leave school, thereby curtailing future career prospects and perpetuating cycles of poverty. This practice also undermines a girl's autonomy, leaving her more vulnerable to domestic violence and social isolation from peers and support networks, which further hinders healthy emotional and social development.

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This handbook guides faith leaders to engage their congregations in respectful and informed discussions about ending these practices. By fostering interfaith dialogue, it bridges Christian and Muslim perspectives, uniting both traditions in a shared commitment to protect human dignity and eradicate FGM and CM. Our faith traditions teach that God creates every person with inherent worth. As stated in Genesis 1:27, "So God created mankind in His image... male and female He created them." Similarly, the Qur'an affirms human dignity: "We have certainly created man in the best of stature" (Qur'an 95:4). We are called to embrace abundant life and wholeness ("I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" — John 10:10). By upholding these values, believers can testify that practices harming the body, denying personal agency, or perpetuating injustice are contrary to God's will.

How to Use This Manual

Each section offers theological foundations from multiple faith perspectives, interactive modules with scripture prompts and conversation starters, myth-busting facts to counter harmful social norms and a new harmonised interfaith framework. All added or updated content is highlighted for easy identification. Leaders can adapt these materials for use in sermons, youth forums, women's groups, and interfaith workshops. By speaking with a united moral voice, faith communities can sow the seeds of change to end FGM and child marriage, ensuring girls can grow up healthy, educated, and empowered. Let us journey together towards a future where all daughters can flourish, upheld by the love and protection of their families and communities.

1.1. Objectives of the Manual

By the end of this programme, faith leaders and participants will be equipped to:

- Address FGM and child marriage from an informed, compassionate, and faith-based perspective.
- Correct misconceptions by presenting authentic Christian and Muslim teachings affirming women's and girls' well-being.
- Inspire community-based collective actions to eliminate these practices through advocacy, education, and interfaith collaboration.

We present a shared theological position:

- Human dignity: Genesis 1:27 and Qur'an 95:4 highlight the intrinsic worth of every human person.
- Sanctity of the body: 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 and Qur'an 2:195 underscore the body as a sacred trust. Compassion, justice, and mercy (Micah 6:8) and "Do not contribute to your destruction with your own hands" (Qur'an 2:195), explicitly condemning practices harmful to health.
- Compassion, justice, and mercy: Christian: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8), underscoring justice and compassion. Muslim: "Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and oppression" (Qur'an 16:90), promoting justice and mercy.
- Consent and maturity in marriage: Ephesians 5:25 and Qur'an 4:6 establish principles for healthy, consensual marital relationships.

1.2. Common Themes and Theological Arguments on FGM and Child Marriage

Faith leaders across Africa are actively engaged in initiatives aimed at ending FGM and child marriage. Faith traditions share profound teachings about the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of the body, and the duty to care for the vulnerable. Here, the toolkit explores these foundations in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, the Bahá'í Faith, and African Traditional Religions (ATR), demonstrating a united spiritual mandate to end harmful practices against girls. Below are some of the common themes and theological arguments on FGM and child marriage across faith traditions.

1. Christian Perspectives: The Bible upholds the sanctity of every person as created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and condemns harming the innocent. Jesus' ministry honoured women and children: "Let the little children come to me... for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14). The Christian call to love one's neighbour and to "rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:4) inspires churches to oppose practices like FGM and child marriage that endanger girls' lives. Church leaders emphasise that a girl's worth is not in adherence to harmful customs but in her inherent God-given dignity and potential.

2. Muslim Perspectives: Islam, likewise, teaches mercy and protection for children. The Qur'an does not endorse FGM or underage marriage; instead, it speaks of marriage as a solemn pact requiring maturity and consent. The Qur'an (4:6) urges caring for orphans until the age of marriage. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him-PBUH) showed profound care for girls—he ended the pre-Islamic Arab practice of female infanticide. He stated: "Whoever has two daughters and treats them kindly, they will be a protection for him from Hellfire", promising Paradise for those who raise daughters well. Such teachings dispel any claim that Islam requires or condones harming girls. Leading Islamic scholars in Africa affirm that FGM is cultural, not religious, and thus forbidden if it causes harm. For example, Somalia's top religious authorities issued a fatwa declaring "there is no religious or cultural basis for FGM", emphasising that Islam does not require it.⁶ Muslim communities are reminded that the Prophet described the body as a God-given "amanah" (trust) to be cared for, not mutilated.

3. Hindu perspectives: Hinduism's rich spiritual heritage venerates the divine in female form and extols non-violence (ahimsa) and respect for women. Vedic scriptures (Vedas) declare that: "Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards." This ancient verse from Manu-Smriti (III.55–59) frames the treatment of women and girls as a measure of societal righteousness. Verse III.55–56 states that "fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law should keep their female relatives happy and content through kind words, respectful behaviour, and gifts... where women are honoured, the gods are pleased, and where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards". Hindu teachings urge family members – fathers, brothers, and husbands – to honour and protect the women in their care. Harming a girl through FGM (which is not part of Hindu tradition) or forcing her into marriage violates the core Hindu duty of ahimsa, non-harm. Instead, girls are to be cherished as manifestations of the Divine Mother. Many Hindu communities refer to a daughter as "Lakshmi," the goddess of prosperity, indicating she brings blessing to the home. Historical Hindu reformers, inspired by the concept of dharma (moral duty), fought against child marriage and promoted women's education. Today, Hindu leaders build on scriptural values – such as "Let thy mother be to thee like unto a god" (Taittiriya Upanishad) – to assert that protecting girls and ensuring they grow into educated, healthy women is a sacred obligation.

4. Sikh Perspectives: The Sikh faith stands firmly for the equality of women and men. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism, proclaimed in the Guru Granth Sahib: "From woman, man is born... without woman, there would be no one at all. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born." This scriptural hymn rejects any notion of female inferiority and, by extension, condemns practices that degrade or harm women. Sikh Gurus in the 15th–17th centuries actively challenged social evils: they opposed Sati (the immolation of widows) and discouraged any ritual that treated women as property. In Sikh teaching, marriage is a partnership of equals (Anand Karaj), entered by choice and mutual consent. The Sikh Rehat Maryada (code of conduct) forbids child marriage as a "manmat" (contrary to Sikh principles), emphasizing that a person should marry only when physically, emotionally, and intellectually mature. Historically, Sikh reformers have led by example. In 1863, for instance, the Namdhari Sikh leader Guru Ram Singh banned child marriage among his followers, pioneering social change. In today's Gurdwaras, Sikh preachers draw on Guru Nanak's words and the lives of women Sikh heroines to stress that coercing an underage girl into marriage or tolerating abuse like FGM has no place in a faith that teaches "women and men are two sides of the same coin in God's eyes." Protecting daughters and ensuring they are educated and respected is seen not just as a social responsibility but as seva (sacred service) to humanity in Sikhism.

5. Bahá'í Perspectives: The Bahá'í Faith, a monotheistic religion founded in 19th century Persia, explicitly advocates for the equality of women and men, as well as the elimination of harmful traditions. Bahá'í teachings denounce FGM and child marriage in unambiguous terms. The supreme governing body of the Bahá'í Faith stated that FGM is "contrary to the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings." Likewise, forced or underage marriage is strictly prohibited. Bahá'í law requires that both bride and groom consent to the marriage and sets 15 as the minimum age of marriage, defining that age as the onset of spiritual and physical maturity. Any betrothal of a girl before maturity is forbidden. The Bahá'í writings emphasise that true religion supports the "advancement of women" and that humanity cannot progress while girls are oppressed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the faith's founder, used the metaphor of two wings: "The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly." Thus, stunting a girl's potential through FGM or child marriage is seen as gravely impeding the entire community's social and spiritual flight. Bahá'ís around the world, including in Africa, have been at the forefront of campaigns for girls' education and health, demonstrating the faith's proactive approach to social issues and inspiring others to do the same. They see this as a direct application of their belief in the oneness of humanity. Guided by principles of compassion and justice, Bahá'í communities work alongside others to replace harmful customs with those that safeguard girls' well-being by, for example, organising health workshops and insisting on schooling for both daughters and sons. In sum, Bahá'í theology provides a clear mandate: to cherish every girl as a noble soul and to remove any practice that violates her dignity or undermines her future.

5. African Traditional Religions Perspectives: Despite their diversity, ATR share a common thread of deep respect for life, community harmony, and ancestral teachings that protect the vulnerable. They view children as a blessing and a communal responsibility, as encapsulated in the proverb: “It takes a village to raise a child.” Harmful practices like FGM and child marriage, often mistakenly attributed to these religions, are in fact cultural rather than spiritual mandates. Many traditional leaders today emphasise that such practices conflict with the core value of protecting children. For instance, elders and healers in communities that once practised FGM are increasingly saying that their ancestors intended to prepare girls for womanhood – but never to cause lasting harm. With a new understanding of the health and emotional damage of FGM, these leaders are reviving the positive aspects of rites of passage while eliminating the cut. In Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and beyond, alternative rites of passage (ARPs) have been introduced: girls partake in cultural education, blessings from elders, and coming-of-age ceremonies without genital cutting. Such approaches demonstrate ATR’s flexibility and focus on community well-being; traditions evolve when they no longer serve the community’s best interests. Likewise, African traditional chiefs are taking a stand against child marriage. Many see early marriage as dishonouring the community’s future since it often leads to broken education and health complications. For example, Chief Mwenda of the Tonga people in Zambia has stopped over 600 child marriages in her chieftom since 2014, ensuring these girls return to school. She has declared that no one in her domain should allow a child to be married at school-going age as long as she is alive. Such decisive leadership reflects ATR values: the chief (or king or elder) is the custodian of the people’s well-being. By invoking ancestral authority to ban harmful practices, today’s traditional leaders affirm that nothing in authentic African spirituality requires girls to be cut or married off young. On the contrary, many ATR creation stories and proverbs celebrate the feminine as a life-giver and emphasise balance and timing in life’s transitions. For example, some West African sayings note that “a ripe fruit falls on its own”, teaching that marriages should only happen when a girl is “ripe” in age and readiness.

In African countries where FGM is practiced, over $\frac{2}{3}$ of the population want the practice to end.¹



In summary, FGM and child marriage are universally recognised as harmful practices that violate the dignity and well-being of girls and women. Religious leaders are identified as pivotal figures due to their moral authority and community trust, making them influential agents in challenging such harmful traditions. Furthermore, all toolkits clarify that FGM is not mandated by religion but is, instead, a cultural practice often wrongly justified by misinterpretations of religious teachings.

1.3. Practical Approaches for Faith Leaders

- **Dignity and Consent:** Teach that God creates every human with intrinsic worth. Marriage must be entered voluntarily, and girls must be given time to mature physically and emotionally.
- **Prepare Faith Leaders:** Leaders must be educated, emotionally prepared, and supported to handle sensitive discussions, equipped with theological insight and health knowledge.
- **Use Contextual and Interactive Tools:** Flipcharts, anatomy guides, case studies, and conversation starters are included to facilitate learning and engagement in small, safe group settings.
- **Scripture as a Tool for Change:** Religious texts must be used to promote love, protection, and wellness, not to justify harm.





CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

Getting Started

2. Introduction

This chapter will equip faith leaders with practical tools to initiate respectful, and open conversations about FGM and CM. The handbook offers faith-based discussion starters that draw from Christian and Muslim teachings because of the sensitivity of these issues.

2.1. Principles for Effective Engagement

- **Respect for diversity:** Acknowledge diverse beliefs while upholding universal human rights and child protection.
- **Community engagement:** Foster inclusive dialogue involving religious congregations, cultural elders, women's and youth groups, and local authorities.
- **Faith as a catalyst for change:** Leverage religious teachings to challenge harmful practices and promote well-being.

2.2. Conversation Starters and Dialogue Circles – Begin the Conversation

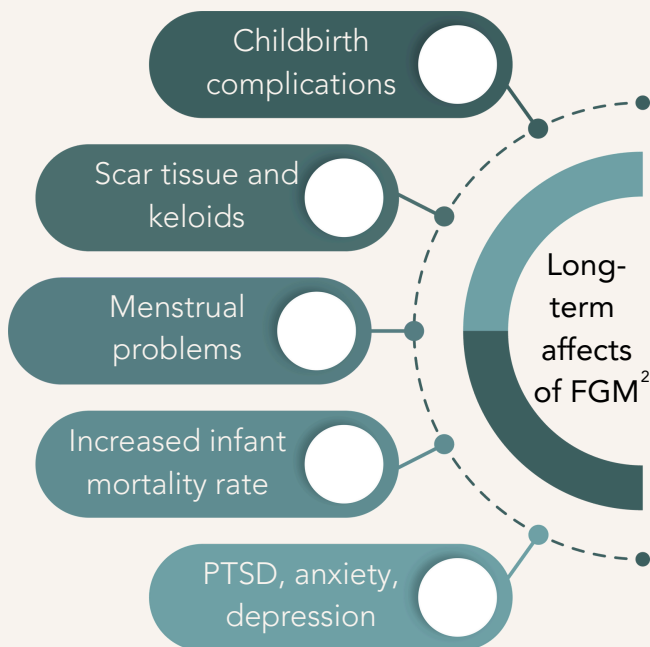
Starting the conversation about FGM and child marriage can be challenging, given the sensitivity of the matter. This chapter provides guided **conversation starters** to help faith leaders break the ice and engage participants in a respectful, open dialogue. The prompts draw on both Christian and Muslim teachings, allowing participants to immediately see that **both faiths have strong values that oppose harming women and girls**. These openers set a collaborative tone for the following modules, beginning with personal reflection and shared values. Sometimes formal preaching is not enough; people need safe spaces to voice fears and doubts. Organise small dialogue circles – within one faith or interfaith – using these conversation starters:

2.2.1. Opening Reflections

- **Personal Stories:** Here, the facilitator can invite participants to share personal experiences that highlight the effect of FGM or child marriage on their lives. For instance, a woman might share their story about how undergoing FGM affected her health or marriage, or a member might recount a story of a girl in their family who was married off at 14. These testimonies ground the discussion in real-life context and empathy. Facilitators should create a safe, non-judgmental space for people to express feelings and ask questions. Hearing experiences from community members (or from prepared case studies if no one volunteers a personal story) can powerfully illustrate why these practices are a concern. (**Example:** A youth leader might share: "My cousin was married at 15 and had to drop out of school. It was very hard for her," to prompt reflection on lost opportunities.) Such stories help participants acknowledge the emotional harm caused by FGM and CM before delving into theological analysis. Below are examples of stories that can help shape the conversations:

Vignette 1: A Quiet Question

One day, during a women's fellowship meeting at a rural church, a young woman named Amina approached the pastor, her voice barely above a whisper. "Pastor," she said, "is it true... that God wants us to suffer to be accepted? My aunt said it is our duty, but my sister almost died after the 'cut'." The pastor paused with a heavy heart. This story sounds familiar, he quipped, but no one speaks about them in this village. At that moment, he understood the weight of the matter and the need for someone to speak up. At a nearby mosque, a similar moment unfolded. After Friday prayers, Imam Yusuf was approached by a father of four daughters. "I have always followed what our elders say," the man confessed. "Now, I wonder! Does Islam expect fathers to marry off their daughters at 13?" Both leaders knew that tradition can feel inseparable from faith, but they also knew that their faiths speak clearly about mercy, justice, and protecting the vulnerable. So, they decided it was time to begin a new kind of conversation in their communities.



Vignette 2: Shared Tears

Muslim and Christian women gathered in a sunlit community hall, sipping tea (chai). Amina, 28, hesitated before speaking. "At age seven," she whispered, "my grandmother held me down. The pain... I thought I'd die." Tears glistened as she described chronic infections and childbirth agony—her daughter nearly lost her life. "My husband called me 'broken.'" The room was filled with a palpable tension. A Christian woman, Grace, reached for her hand. "He left when I couldn't 'fulfil duties'," Amina continued. "But my faith taught me resilience. I rebuilt, found a clinic, and met women... like me." Her voice steadied. "Now, I teach others. My new husband listens and learns." Grace embraced her. "Sister, your strength binds us." Nods rippled; a Muslim elder vowed, "We'll protect our girls together." Amina's story, raw and unflinching, became a bridge. In that hall, crosses and hijabs blurred into a tapestry of shared resolve—a promise that faith, intertwined, could heal wounds the world tried to silence.

Scripture and Tradition: After raising initial thoughts, gently introduce relevant faith teachings to frame the issue. Discuss themes of **compassion, protection,** and justice found in both the Bible and the Qur'an, and ask participants how these apply to the situation of girls undergoing FGM or being forced into child marriage. For instance, one might share a Bible verse about protecting the vulnerable – "Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy" (Psalm 82:3) – alongside a Qur'anic verse about not harm – "Make not your own hands contribute to your destruction" (Qur'an 2:195). Discussing these familiar teachings reminds everyone that our religions call us to **care for those at risk.** Participants can reflect on how practices like FGM measure up against our duty to protect the weak. Bringing Scripture into the opening conversation shows that our faith is not separate from this issue – instead, faith compels us to address it.

2.2.2. Guided Discussion Questions

Use open-ended questions to stimulate thinking and allow participants to explore the topic from a faith perspective. Pose one question at a time and give people a moment to discuss in pairs or small groups before sharing answers. These key questions will help participants articulate their understanding and doubts. They also allow the facilitator to correct misinformation gently. As recommended in the Christian review, it is important to "tap into the knowledge that participants have on the topic". By harvesting their perspectives first, the conversation becomes more relevant, and the group can build on what is raised, making the learning experience participatory and context-specific.

2.2.3. For parents (mothers and fathers separately or together)

- "What do you wish for your daughter's future?" List their hopes (education, good marriage, etc.), then discuss how FGM/child marriage might hinder or help those hopes.
- "How did you feel when you first became a parent? What promises did you make to your baby?" Reflect on whether harmful practices align with those promises (e.g., "I promised to keep you safe..." then why cut her?).
- **Present a Scenario:** "A family's 13-year-old girl is set to marry a 30-year-old man. She will leave school. How do you think her life will be in five years? 10 years? What if she waits till 18 and finishes school?" Let them imagine and weigh outcomes.
- If fathers are resistant, bring economic angle: "Did you know an educated girl can earn much more and support you in old age? Investing now yields benefits." Share any local data of girls who succeeded.

2.2.4. For Youth Groups

- *“If you could change one thing about how girls are treated in your community, what would it be?”* Often, they’ll mention early marriage or lack of voice. This opens discussion of these practices.
- *“How do you think your generation’s view on FGM/child marriage differs from your parents’ generation?”* This can highlight a trend that many young people don’t want these practices, empowering them to speak up respectfully to elders.
- **Boys’ involvement:** Ask young men, *“Would you want to marry someone who was forced to drop out of school? Why or why not?”* Most will say no, they prefer an educated partner. That insight is powerful for their own mothers to hear, so consider a joint session where sons tell mothers: *“We don’t need our wives to be cut or very young.”*
- **Engage through creative means:** have them do a role-play where one plays a girl resisting FGM and the other plays a parent or circumciser, then swap roles. Debrief on feelings.

2.2.5. Interfaith Community Dialogue

- Use a common value as a starting point: *“All our faiths preach compassion. What would a compassionate community do about FGM/child marriage?”* List practical steps as an interfaith team (e.g., reporting cases, supporting victims).
- *“Has anyone here witnessed a positive change in our community regarding these practices? What triggered it?”* Sharing success stories (like an imam’s sermon or a chief’s decree that made a difference) can inspire others.
- Discuss the **“harmonised values”** (which we will outline in the next chapter) – e.g., *“We all agree on the sanctity of life. How does cutting a girl or early childbirth fit with that?”* Let a religious rep from each faith respond, reinforcing how aligned they are. This unity builds a louder voice.
- **Plan collective action:** maybe an **Interfaith Walk or Prayer Day for Girls’ Health**. Dialogue should lead to concrete collaboration like forming a *“Faith Watch”* committee to monitor and intervene in potential child marriage cases.

Facilitation Tip

Ensure a non-judgmental atmosphere. People might express adherence to the old ways; respond with: *“Thank you for sharing – let’s explore that.”* Use active listening: *“I hear you’re worried your daughter won’t marry if not cut. Many parents feel that. Let’s examine if that’s still true today.”* Bring in experts occasionally (a nurse, a social worker) to provide accurate information – sometimes hearing from a neutral health expert can change minds (like explaining scarring from FGM leads to difficult labour, etc.). Always loop back to faith: end each conversation by asking participants how their understanding of their faith has grown in relation to protecting girls. Perhaps have everyone, as a closing, state one faith principle they commit to uphold (e.g., *“I commit to the principle of not harming – I will not allow my daughter to be cut”*). These verbal affirmations in a group can solidify resolve.

The key questions include:

1. **How do our religious teachings encourage us to protect the vulnerable, especially children and women?**
 - a. *Follow-up:* Can participants recall specific teachings from the Bible or the Qur'an about caring for one's family, justice for the oppressed, or treating one's body? (For example, Christians might mention Jesus welcoming children (Mark 10:14) or Paul's teaching that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, while Muslims might recall that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) forbade harming oneself or others and emphasised mercy.)
2. **In what ways have cultural practices been misinterpreted or wrongly linked to religion?**
 - a. *Follow-up:* Discuss common justifications given for FGM or child marriage in your community. Do people say: "It is our tradition", or claim: "Our religion requires it"? Examine these claims openly – what do our holy scriptures say? This question encourages participants to distinguish between culture and faith and realise when culture overshadows core religious values like compassion. (For instance, some may bring up that: "We thought FGM was required to maintain cleanliness or chastity," giving the facilitator a chance to clarify that **neither the Bible nor the Qur'an commands FGM** – it is a cultural practice, not a religious one.)
3. **What shared values do Christianity and Islam have that we can use to advocate ending these practices?**
 - a. *Follow-up:* Participants might point out values like human dignity, love for others, justice, non-violence, and the importance of consent in marriage. Emphasise responses that show unity, e.g., "*Both our faiths teach the Golden Rule – to treat others as we would want to be treated. No one would want pain or oppression for themselves, so we should not impose it on our daughters.*" List these shared values on a flipchart. These highlights that despite theological differences, Christians and Muslims in the community stand on common moral ground on this issue. This question sets a collaborative tone: We are together versus the problem, not one faith versus another.

Engaging Scripture Activity

Print Bible and Qur'an verses on cards and distribute them for mixed-faith pairs to discuss and share insights.

- Christian insight example: "Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).
- Muslim insight example: "Make not your own hands contribute to your destruction" (Qur'an 2:195).

2.2.6. Scriptural Prompts – Christian and Muslim Perspectives

After the initial discussions, the facilitator can introduce specific scriptural prompts to ground the conversation in faith further. Presenting verses and teachings side-by-side demonstrates that both traditions strongly support ending FGM and CM.

Presenting these scriptural prompts ground the conversation in actual religious teachings. It encourages participants to reflect on and look up the verses. The side-by-side approach helps build the understanding that both faiths, at their core, stand for the protection and honour of women and girls, giving participants a united moral foundation as they continue into the learning modules. The facilitator might print out such verses on cards – one Bible verse and one Qur'an verse per card – and distribute them. Have participants read them aloud and briefly discuss what the verse means to them in mixed-faith pairs. This can be a dynamic way to engage people directly with the texts.)

Prompt Examples:

Christian Perspective

The Bible, while not mentioning FGM or child marriage explicitly, provides clear principles that affirm human dignity and condemn harming others: for instance, Genesis 1:27 says that God created "male and female" in his image, meaning any practice that degrades or injures women is a violation of God's design. Likewise, Jesus' ministry upheld the value of every person: He welcomed children, healed women, and broke social norms to protect the vulnerable. Christians are taught to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves" (Proverbs 31:8) and to care for the "least of these" as if caring for Christ Himself (Matthew 25:40). Bodily integrity is respected as well: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit... Therefore, honour God with your bodies" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). These verses can prompt reflection on how cutting a girl's body or forcing her into marriage dishonours the sanctity God bestowed. Emphasise the Christian view of marriage – a holy covenant between consenting adults built on love and mutual respect, as exemplified in Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it". If love is sacrificial and seeks the other's good, how can love force a person into marriage? The Bible's teachings on love and justice provide a basis for rejecting FGM and child marriage.

Muslim Perspective

The Qur'an and Sunna likewise offer powerful arguments against these practices. Human dignity and non-harm are key. The Qur'an states, "We have certainly created man in the best of stature" (Qur'an 95:4), implying that God's creation is already beautiful and not meant to be altered by harmful cutting. In Islam, causing unnecessary harm to oneself or others is forbidden "Do not contribute to your destruction with your own hands" (Qur'an 2:195). FGM inflicts harm and can even be life-threatening, so it contravenes this principle.

Additionally, Islam emphasises justice and equality – "God loves the equitable" (Qur'an 60:8) – and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught that "women are the twin halves of men", meaning men and women are two halves of humanity. Thus, treating girls as inferior or mutilating their bodies has no place in actual Islamic practice, which holds that gender-based marriage injustice is not Islamic; Islamic teachings stress that marriage should be entered with maturity and consent. The Prophet said: "Whoever can marry, should marry" – and scholars interpret "able" to mean physically, mentally, and financially capable. Classical Islamic jurisprudence even rules it haram (prohibited) to marry if it would likely cause harm to oneself or one's spouse. Child marriage often causes significant damage, as medical science confirms that girls under 18 are not physically ready for childbirth and face higher risks in pregnancy. Such facts align with the Islamic directive to seek expert knowledge (cf. Qur'an 16:43) when making decisions.

The Qur'an also describes the spousal relationship as one of love and mercy – "He created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you love and compassion" (Qur'an 30:21). A marriage in which one partner is a child who had no choice cannot fulfil this Qur'anic ideal of tranquillity and compassion; instead, it often breeds fear and pain. Moreover, Islam requires that a woman consent to her marriage – the Prophet invalidated marriages where the woman's permission was not taken. Therefore, forced marriage goes against the Prophetic example. By sharing these teachings, the facilitator can help participants see that the Islamic principles of "no harm," justice, maturity in marriage, and the honour of women all argue against FGM and child marriage. Notably, if Islam indeed required either practice, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) would have commanded them – yet there is no verse in the Qur'an mandating FGM, and the Prophet never instructed his daughters or wives to be cut.



CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 3

Beginning the Conversation

3. Introduction

This chapter presents information sheets facilitators can use to provide transparent, accessible backgrounds from Christian and Muslim perspectives. These tools can equip facilitators and participants with accurate historical, cultural, and theological insights to help correct misinformation and guide respectful, faith-based dialogue.

The content is organised into three key areas:

- *Historical and cultural context* – Emphasise that FGM and child marriage are rooted in culture, not commanded by religion.
- *Scriptural interpretations* – Clarify how both the Bible and the Qur'an, when understood correctly, uphold the dignity of persons, and do not mandate harmful practices.
- *Contemporary faith perspectives* – Highlighting how religious leaders and institutions using interfaith networks are working together to eradicate these practices.

3.1. Understanding FGM and Child Marriage – The Facts and Faith Response

The objective of this section is to equip participants with up-to-date information on FGM and child marriage, and explore why ending these practices is a matter of faith and justice.

3.1.1. Defining the Practices

- **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** A procedure involving partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons. It has no health benefits, only serious harm. FGM is often performed on girls between infancy and age 15, usually as a cultural rite of passage or linked to notions of purity. Faith leaders note: No holy scripture prescribes FGM. It is a cultural practice that predates many modern religions.
- **Child Marriage (CM):** Explicitly refers to any marriage where one or both spouses are under the legal age of 18, as established by international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). Most often, it affects girls. It can be driven by poverty, gender norms, or the false belief that it will secure a girl's future. In reality, child marriage usually ends a girl's education and exposes her to early pregnancy, health risks, and abuse. All major religions stress the importance of consent in marriage – something an underage child cannot truly give. Thus, child marriage contradicts the spirit of faith teachings on marriage as a partnership. *(NB: For advocacy, policy, and legal purposes, "child marriage" and (not early marriage) is the appropriate and widely accepted term, given its clarity and precise alignment with national and international legal frameworks).*

3.1.2. Social Norms and Cultural Practices Behind FGM and Child Marriage in Africa

FGM and child marriage are deeply rooted harmful practices in many African communities. They persist due to entrenched social norms, cultural beliefs, and traditions that assign low status to girls. In Africa alone, an estimated 130 million girls and women alive today are married as children, and nearly 140 million have undergone FGM. These practices violate girls' rights and well-being, yet community expectations and centuries-old customs often uphold them.

- **Patriarchal Gender Norms and Beliefs:** FGM and child marriage are grounded in patriarchal traditions that subjugate women. In every society where they occur, they reflect values that hold girls in low esteem. A core driver is the desire to control female sexuality: Families and communities enforce these practices to ensure girls' sexual purity and obedience to gender roles. Girls are expected to be virgins before marriage and faithful afterwards, leading to practices like FGM as a way to curb sexual desire and "prepare" them to be modest wives. Fundamentally, gender inequality underpins both FGM and early marriage, as girls' futures are valued primarily in their roles as wives and mothers.
- **Rites of Passage and Cultural Traditions:** Many communities consider FGM and early marriage as essential rites of passage. FGM has been practised for centuries in sections of Africa as part of a coming-of-age ceremony marking a girl's transition to womanhood and eligibility for marriage. Despite its risks, it is often seen as integral to cultural or ethnic identity, and some even perceive it as a religious requirement (though no major religion mandates it). Likewise, marriage soon after puberty is traditionally viewed as the typical path for girls in some societies. These customs are reinforced by tradition and the belief that adhering to them preserves community identity and moral values. In some contexts, FGM is directly linked to marriageability – an uncut girl may be deemed "unclean" or unsuitable for marriage, so, families subject their daughters to FGM supposedly to secure their future.
- **Family Honour and Community Pressures:** Social pressure and notions of family honour strongly influence these practices. Where FGM or child marriage is the social norm, families fear ostracism if they do not comply. Parents often marry off daughters young to avoid the "shame" of premarital sex or pregnancy, thus protecting the family's honour. Harmful myths persist that marrying a girl early or cutting her will uphold her chastity and the reputation of her family. Community expectations are enforced by influential elders and peers. For example, over 90% of respondents of a study in Mali found that the opinions of immediate family members and community elders were the most potent factors sustaining FGM and child marriage. In many cases, older women (such as circumcised women, mothers and grandmothers) act as gatekeepers of the tradition, exerting peer pressure on younger women to conform. These collective expectations make it difficult for individual families to abandon the practices, even if they understand the harm they cause.

- **Regional Variations Across Africa:** While the underlying norms show common themes, the prevalence and cultural context of FGM and child marriage vary across Africa's regions:
 - **West & Central Africa:** This region has the world's highest child marriage rates – about four in 10 girls marry before 18. In Niger and Mali, the majority of girls become brides as minors (around 75% and 50% respectively). FGM is also widespread in parts of West Africa (e.g. an estimated 89% of women in Mali have been cut), often tied to secret initiation societies and long-held tribal rites. Traditions emphasising family alliances (through marriage) and initiation ceremonies for girls fuel these practices, alongside strong social norms around female chastity.
 - **Eastern & Southern Africa:** Eastern Africa see entrenched norms supporting FGM and early marriage. In the Horn of Africa, FGM is nearly universal (for instance, Somalia's prevalence is estimated at above 90%) and is commonly viewed as a necessary preparation for adulthood and marriage. Countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan have deeply rooted FGM rituals, though some communities are beginning to abandon them. Child marriage remains common in parts of the region; about one-third of young women in Eastern and Southern Africa were married before 18. Rates are exceptionally high in rural, impoverished or conflict-affected areas (for example, South Sudan, Mozambique and Malawi record very high child marriage prevalence). Drivers include bride price traditions, poverty, and the belief that marriage offers girls protection. At the same time, increased education and advocacy in countries like Kenya and Uganda have started to shift norms, offering "alternative rites of passage" to replace FGM and encouraging communities to keep girls in school.

Women who have undergone FGM III are twice as likely to die during childbirth.³



- **North Africa:** In North African countries, FGM and child marriage occur in more localised contexts. Egypt and Sudan stand out for high FGM prevalence (over 85% of women are affected in both Muslim and Christian communities due to an entrenched custom passed through generations). In these societies, cutting is associated with ideals of femininity, purity, and honour, and many families believe it to be a religious or cultural obligation. Child marriage in North Africa is generally lower than in sub-Saharan Africa. However, it persists in conservative or rural areas – often justified by similar honour-based norms and misconceptions about religious approval. Across the Maghreb, most communities do not practice FGM, illustrating how certain harmful norms are particular to specific ethnic or cultural groups and not universal to the continent.

3.2. Information Sheets (Christian & Muslim Perspectives)

Facilitators need to equip themselves with background facts and information. The toolkit includes information sheets that provide factual and theological context on FGM and child marriage from both Christian and Muslim viewpoints. Facilitators can use these as a quick reference and share them with participants as handouts for learning⁷. We recommend preparing two sets of information sheets—one highlighting Christian insight and the other highlighting Muslim insight—or a combined interfaith set organised by topic.

Each information sheet should be written in clear, accessible language (avoid overly academic terms) and be no more than 2-3 pages for easy reading. Use bullet points or short paragraphs with headings (as above) for clarity. Including a few quotations from prominent faith leaders can be impactful – for example, a quote from a well-known local bishop or sheikh stating why their faith compels them to fight FGM. Facts and theological points drawn from these sheets can later be woven into the module discussions, and they serve as a reference for tough questions that may arise. Remember, the facilitator can refer to these sheets to correct misinformation or clarify points during the sessions. They are a tool to ensure that the facilitator has accurate answers (both medical and theological) when community members challenge you with: "But isn't this our religious duty?" or "What harm does it do?" Equipped with knowledge, facilitators can confidently respond that we must protect life and dignity and can back that up with evidence and Scripture.

Key context to include:

- **Historical and Cultural Context:** Explain the origins and evolution of FGM and child marriage in various cultures, and clarify how they get linked to religion: Christianity and Islam. FGM, for instance, is believed to have originated in specific African communities as far back as the time of the Pharaohs and was later assimilated into local cultures across religious lines. Emphasise that neither the Bible nor the Qur'an ever commands FGM – it was a cultural custom that some communities attached to religion later. Child marriage has roots in economic and social traditions (such as strengthening family alliances or relieving poverty) and was common in many societies historically. However, as the understanding of human rights and child development has grown, virtually all countries (and major religions) now discourage marriage below 18. By outlining this history, the sheets should help dispel the notion that "we have always done this because of our faith." These are cultural practices, not religious requirements, and cultures have changed over time – meaning they can change again. Also note any local history: for example, if certain ethnic groups in the country practice FGM for coming-of-age initiation, mention how that practice began and that other groups do not practice it.

- **Scriptural Interpretations:** Provide a summary of how key religious texts have been (mis)interpreted regarding these practices. This section directly tackles common justifications.
 - **Christian Perspective:** Address interpretations like the misreading of Genesis 3 (the story of the Fall), which some have used to label women as sources of sin or "*in need of control*". The information sheet can explain that misinterpretations of the Genesis story led some to wrongly consider women's bodies as inherently sinful or in need of purification through suffering, but mainstream Christian theology refutes this. Mention, for example, that blaming Eve for the fall is a flawed theology – in fact, the New Testament emphasises that all have sinned and all can be redeemed. It never advocates punishing women's bodies for Eve's mistake. Also, debunk the peculiar local myth (if present) that the Virgin Mary remained "*pure*" because she supposedly had undergone FGM. Clarify that there is no biblical or historical evidence for that claim – Mary's virginity was a spiritual and moral status and had nothing to do with cutting. Then highlight authentic biblical principles: human beings (male and female) are made in God's image, our bodies are part of God's good creation, and Christ's redemption is for all equally, which means practices that demean or harm one group (girls) contradict the Bible's spirit.
 - **Muslim Perspective:** Summarise the findings of Muslim scholarship on FGM and child marriage. Note that no verse in the Qur'an endorses FGM, and the Sunna often cited in its support is either weak (unreliable) or misinterpreted. The sheet can list those Sunna briefly and their scholarly status: e.g., the Sunna of Umm Atiyya about "not exaggerating in cutting" – explains that the Arabic word is ambiguous and, regardless, the Sunna is classified as *da'if* (weak) and cannot be used to justify FGM. Another Sunna says: "*Circumcision is sunnah for men and an honour for women*" – many scholars interpret this not as requiring female circumcision, and in any case, it too is weak and not a sound basis for practice. Highlight that foremost Islamic authorities (Al-Azhar University, national fatwa councils) in the modern era have studied the evidence and concluded that FGM has no religious obligation. On the contrary, it should be ended due to the harm it causes. Similarly, address how Islamic texts have been used regarding child marriage: e.g., some cite the young age of Aisha (RA) at marriage, but context and scholarly opinions vary, and importantly, the Prophet's context 1,400 years ago cannot be taken as a blanket endorsement of child marriage today. Focus on Quranic principles of marriage requiring maturity and consent, as well as the example that the Prophet invalidated forced marriages when women complained. The key message: both the Bible and the Qur'an, when correctly understood, uphold the well-being and free will of the person; harmful traditional practices are nowhere mandated as part of faith. Continuing such practices violates foundational teachings (like "*love your neighbour as yourself*" or "*there is no harming nor reciprocating harm*" in Islam). References to Scripture or respected religious scholarship should support all these points.

- **Contemporary Faith Perspectives:** Illustrate how modern religious leaders and organisations are addressing FGM and child marriage. It encourages that the broader faith community is actively working on these issues, not just a few individuals. For the Christian side, facilitators might cite statements from church organisations or leaders: for example, the Pope has spoken out against practices that violate the dignity of girls; the Anglican Church in Africa has declared support for ending FGM; numerous local pastors and priests have integrated anti-FGM messaging into sacraments and sermons. For instance, the Anglican Church in Kenya has been involved in alternative rites of passage for girls. On the Muslim side, mention fatwas and declarations: e.g., Egypt's Al-Azhar University has issued fatwas declaring FGM forbidden (*haram*) under Islam due to the harm it causes, and countries like Somaliland have issued a religious fatwa banning FGM. Note any influential Muslim scholars (imams, muftis) in your region who have publicly denounced FGM or child marriage. Also, include how interfaith groups unite on this front – for example, national inter-religious councils or NGOs (like UNICEF and World Vision) working with churches and mosques to educate communities. If available, add brief statistics or findings: e.g., "In 2020, a gathering of 70 Muslim scholars from across Africa concluded that FGM is not following Islam and should be eliminated." Alternatively, "A 2022 pastoral letter from the Council of Bishops urged all churches to treat child marriage as a form of abuse and report cases to authorities." These contemporary perspectives reinforce that ending these practices is a growing movement within both faiths, not a betrayal of one's community. They show participants that by joining this cause, they align with respected faith leaders and global efforts.

Key Takeaway: While contexts differ, a typical pattern emerges: when laws, local culture, and faith teachings align to value girls, rapid progress can be made. In each country, religious leaders are leveraging their moral authority to reinforce laws or compensate for their absence. Participants in this training should ask: What is the situation in our community? Who are the gatekeepers, and how can we engage them through faith and facts? Use local data if available (e.g., "In our county, three out of 10 girls drop out of school due to marriage or pregnancy"). Frame the ending of FGM/child marriage as both a legal and a moral imperative.

Activity – Country Mapping: Break into small groups by country/region. Each group draws a map of their country and marks areas of higher FGM/child marriage, any known laws or recent court cases, and influential faith or traditional leaders who have spoken on the issue. Then, share in plenary. This visual exercise helps ground the discussion in reality and identify allies. For example, a Nigeria group might mark Kano with “Emir’s campaign,” and a Kenya group might circle Kuria and mark it as “FGM hotspot – need church outreach.” Encourage participants to fill in any gaps in each other’s knowledge and correct misconceptions.

Facilitation Tip

The information sheets can be distributed after the initial conversation so participants can read more during a break or between sessions. Facilitators might also use them in an interactive quiz – e.g., give small groups a set of “True or False” statements about religion and FGM and have them use the info sheets to find the answers





CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4

Modules for Faith Communities

4. Introduction

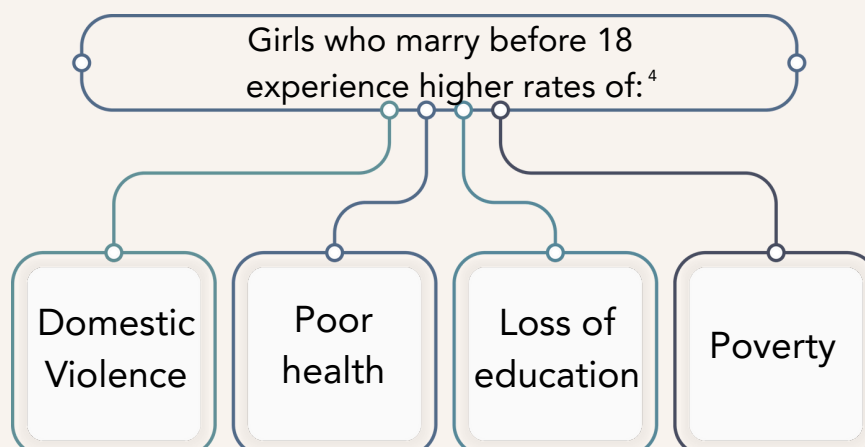
This section offers structured, faith-based lesson plans tailored to women, youth, and men, recognising that each group engages with FGM and child marriage differently. The modules provide interactive activities, scriptural reflections, and practical tools that promote healing, critical thinking, and community-driven change. Each Module addresses participants' unique experiences and roles, using faith teachings to affirm dignity and encourage advocacy. Activities such as role-plays, visual aids, and real-life testimonies foster open dialogue and personal connection to the issue.

The toolkit ensures that community members are informed and empowered to act. They draw strength from their religious values and cultural identity to challenge harmful traditions and protect the next generation. The modules help create a unified, compassionate movement for lasting change by involving all community segments. Facilitators are encouraged to be flexible and adapt the content to their local context and the group's needs.

4.1. Why Faiths Communities Must Respond

After establishing the facts, it's critical to discuss why FGM and child marriage are harms that faith communities must confront:

- **Health Impacts:** FGM has no medical benefit and often causes severe pain, haemorrhage, infections, and long-term complications like cysts, infertility, and childbirth complications. Many girls experience trauma and can even die from the procedure. Child marriage likewise poses health risks: teenage brides face a higher risk of obstructed labour, maternal mortality, and fistula, and their infants have higher mortality rates. In our faith context, these health outcomes are an affront to the concept that the body is a temple/ trust from God. For instance, Christian doctrine urges believers to care for the body (1 Corinthians 6:19), and Islamic teaching prohibits self-harm; thus, by extension, causing physical damage to girls through harmful rites is sinful. Participants should recognize that protecting girls' health is a form of *pikuach nefesh* (preservation of life, in religious terms). One Somali sheikh put it simply, "If circumcising a girl could kill her, how can we support it when Allah forbids killing?"



- **Psychological and Spiritual Impacts:** Girls subjected to FGM or forced into marriage often suffer deep emotional trauma: loss of trust, depression, anxiety, and a sense of rejection by those who should care for them. These practices can damage a girl's relationship with her family and community – and even with God, if she believes God allowed her suffering. Emphasise that our faith communities should be sources of healing and hope, not sources of hurt. When a girl is robbed of her childhood, it can impede her spiritual growth. For example, Bahá'í teachings emphasise the importance of joy and education in childhood as foundations for a spiritually vibrant life; similarly, African proverbs refer to childhood as the *"morning of life"* that determines the day. By ending these practices, we allow girls to flourish spiritually and emotionally, which in turn enriches the whole faith community.
- **Educational and Economic Impacts:** A girl who does not undergo FGM or avoids early marriage is far more likely to stay in school. Education is strongly valued across religions: almost all faith traditions operate schools and encourage learning (e.g., the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, *"seeking knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim,"* and Sikhs begin reading from a young age as part of their religious practice). When girls stay in school, they acquire knowledge and skills that support themselves and their families, thereby breaking the cycle of poverty. Studies show that each year of secondary education can significantly reduce the chance of child marriage and FGM approval. Conversely, a child bride often drops out of school and remains economically dependent and impoverished. For communities, this results in lost potential and stagnation. Participants can discuss: How does our religious community benefit when girls are educated? Perhaps mention local examples (a pastor whose daughter became a doctor, an educated mother who is now a Sunday school teacher or madrasa instructor). Framing education as a blessing that is stolen by FGM/child marriage can powerfully resonate.
- **Violation of Rights and Religious Values:** Ultimately, both FGM and child marriage violate fundamental human rights – the right to bodily integrity, health, and free consent to marriage. This is not just a matter of tradition or culture, but a violation of the most basic rights of individuals. For faith actors, we translate these into religious values: the sanctity of the body, the freedom of conscience, and the principle of justice. All faiths represented here advocate justice (e.g., Micah 6:8 in the Bible, Qur'an 16:90). It is unjust to cut a child who cannot consent or to bind a girl in marriage when she is not mature. By raising our voices against these injustices, we *"do justice and love kindness,"* fulfilling divine commands. Religious communities have often been champions of social justice (think of church leaders in the abolition of slavery or imams in campaigns for peace). Ending these practices is part of that legacy – a continuation of protecting the oppressed.

4.2. Interactive Toolkit Activities

- **Role-plays:** Realistic scenarios to practice addressing marriage pressures.
 - **Example:** Sarah, a bright 14-year-old girl, faces pressure from her family to marry an older man due to economic difficulties. Community elders and faith leaders discuss the situation, guided by scriptural teachings on consent, maturity, and human dignity. Participants assume various roles, including family members, faith leaders, and community advocates, to navigate this sensitive scenario and reach a compassionate resolution that aligns with religious and moral principles.
- **Visual Aids:** Posters and infographics depict myths versus facts. Visual aids refer to using visually engaging materials to simplify complex information, particularly myths surrounding FGM and child marriage. These aids effectively communicate accurate information, correct misconceptions, and reinforce key messages during interactive sessions. Visual aids enhance comprehension, especially in diverse literacy contexts, and stimulate interactive discussions among participants.
- **Resource List:** These lists include contact information for organisations and individuals who offer specialised support such as medical treatment, emotional counselling, legal aid, and emergency services for individuals affected by FGM and child marriage. These resources enable immediate action and support, empowering communities to respond effectively to situations requiring intervention or assistance.



4.3. Modules for Women

Women are often directly affected by these practices – as survivors of FGM, as young brides or mothers of child brides, or as those responsible for carrying out traditions. The women's modules create a supportive environment for women to share and heal, empowering them with knowledge and faith-based affirmations of their worth.

4.3.1. Session Themes

- **Personal Stories and Testimonies:** A session devoted to listening to women's experiences with FGM and child marriage. This could involve storytelling, where volunteers (or pre-identified community members) talk about what they have been through or witnessed. It is a time for empathy and solidarity. Hearing peers break the silence can validate emotions and reduce stigma.
- **Health and Well-being Sessions:** A session that discusses the physical, emotional, and social consequences of FGM and child marriage on women and girls. This includes factual medical information (perhaps with a health professional co-facilitating) about complications like childbirth injuries, trauma, or lost educational opportunities. Women are invited to ask questions and dispel myths using medical facts and religious teachings that cleanliness is a matter of hygiene, not cutting. Grounding this in faith, one might reference how Jesus healed a woman who had suffered a haemorrhage for years (Mark 5:25-34) or how the Qur'an allows Muslims to seek medical treatment because preserving life is paramount. The idea is to link holistic well-being with God's will for them – that God cares about their bodies and futures, and thus, we must also care.
- **Empowerment and Advocacy Sessions:** Focusing on how women can advocate for their and daughters' rights within their families and communities. It covers building assertiveness skills and protections (if laws against FGM or child marriage exist, inform them here) and how to engage respectfully in dialogue with family members who insist on the old ways. Crucially, it frames advocacy as an extension of faith. For example, women can find strength in the knowledge that "*God is within her, she will not fall*" (Psalm 46:5) or in the Qur'anic acknowledgement of the equality of all believers. The session might include role-playing common scenarios (e.g., a mother-in-law pressuring a mom to cut her daughter) and practising responses using faith and facts to politely refuse. By the end, women brainstorm actions they can take – from pledging not to cut their daughters to forming support circles to speaking in women's fellowship or madrasa gatherings about what they have learned. An "*action planning*" component at the end of this module helps translate conversation into commitment (this follows the reviewer's suggestion to include an action section for each module).

4.3.2. Tailored Content

The module is enriched with theological reflections relevant to women's experience.

Christian Perspective: Emphasise themes of **healing, renewal, and the transformative power of faith**. Many women carry deep physical or emotional scars from these practices. Biblical narratives that speak to restoration can be compelling. For example, a Bible study on Jesus healing the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10-17) could be included. He calls her a "*daughter of Abraham*", frees her from what bound her, symbolically affirming her dignity. Relate this to how the Church today should help "*daughters of Abraham*" stand tall by ending practices that oppress them. Another theme is the concept of "new creation" and renewal (2 Corinthians 5:17) – communities can leave behind harmful old practices and embrace new, healthy ones, much like the Gospel brings new life. The forgiveness and hope aspect of Christianity can also help women who perhaps feel guilty (sometimes women are told undergoing FGM makes them "clean" or "honourable"; discovering that they are loved and whole in God's eyes regardless can be freeing). Key messages for Christian women might include: "*Your body is God's temple, and His Spirit dwells in you*" – thus, no one should destroy or damage that temple; and "*There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ*" (Galatians 3:28) – affirming gender equality and that women should not be treated as lesser or subjected to suffering as a status quo. These scriptural affirmations can be turned into short devotions or prayers within the sessions, grounding the women's advocacy in their faith.

Muslim Perspective: Highlight themes of **mercy, protection, and community support** from Islamic teaching. In Islam, God (Allah) is often called *Ar-Rahman/Ar-Raheem* (The Most Merciful); believers are encouraged to emulate that mercy. One could include a reflection on how the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) showed mercy and respect toward women – for instance, he forbade the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide and instead said that raising daughters with kindness opens the gates of Paradise. A facilitator might share a Sunna: "*Whoever has two daughters and treats them well, they will be his protection from Hellfire*" (Sunna in Bukhari/Muslim), illustrating the honour of caring for girls. The role of community (ummah) can be stressed: women supporting each other is akin to believers being like one body – "if one part is hurt, the whole body feels pain". Therefore, harm to any girl is a concern for all. Also, invoke the principle of "*Amr bil ma'ruf*" – enjoining good and forbidding wrong – which applies to women as well; they, too, have a duty and right to challenge wrongdoing like FGM that is classified as *Munkar* (evil) by scholars. Mercy is a key theme: remind them of the saying, "*Allah will not show mercy to those who do not show mercy to others*" – thus, how can a community expect God's blessing if it does not show mercy to its young girls? The Muslim content also underscores that seeking medical knowledge is encouraged (per Qur'an 16:43), so women are right to trust doctors who say FGM is harmful and that Islam's emphasis on cleanliness does not require circumcising girls (that is a myth; actual cleanliness is achieved by proper washing, *tahara*). Encourage the sharing of local examples where Islamic leaders have come to women embedding Quranic verses, Sunna, and even perhaps a short *dua* (prayer) for the protection of children; the module helps Muslim women see that their faith supports them in questioning these traditions.

4.4 Modules for Youth

Young people, both girls and boys, are critical stakeholders in ending FGM and child marriage. They are the generation currently at risk and the leaders of tomorrow who can champion different norms. The youth module engages adolescents and young adults (approximately ages 13-24, adjusted as appropriate) with interactive and thought-provoking activities. It encourages them to think critically about tradition versus faith and to envision a future free from these harms. The module harnesses their energy and idealism while providing accurate knowledge and grounding in positive religious values.

This module engages hearts and minds. It equips young people with knowledge, gives them space to voice doubts and ideals, and aligns their natural desire for fairness with their faith. The interfaith aspect – having Christian and Muslim youth share perspectives – is compelling here, as they see peers from another faith echoing the same call for dignity and justice. This unity can eliminate stereotypes and build friendships. By the end, the youth are encouraged to create something (a pledge, a poem, a short play) to present to the broader community, symbolising that the youth are united and resolved to end FGM and child marriage in their time. Their voices can then feed into community forums or the concluding parts of the programme.

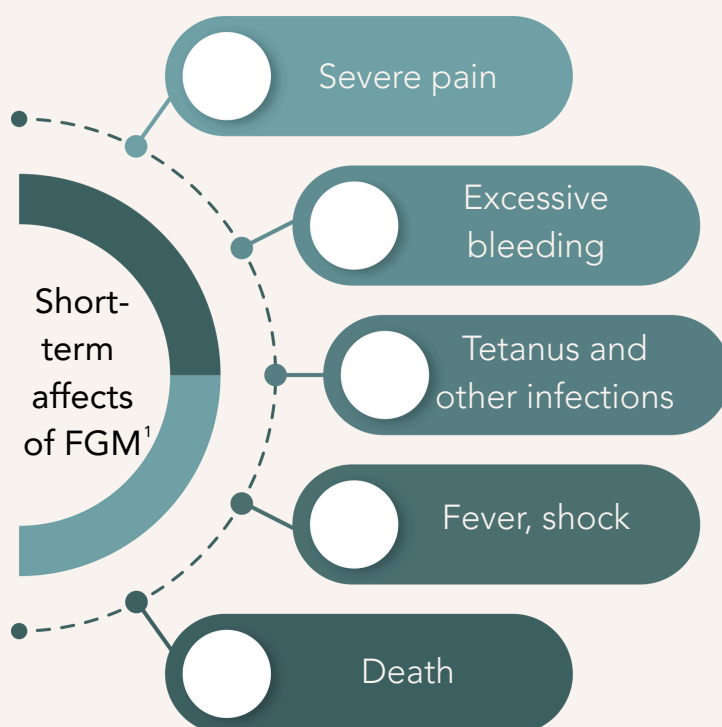
4.4.1. Session Themes

- **Know your Rights and Health:** An educational session informing youth about their human rights (e.g., right to bodily integrity, right to consent in marriage, right to education) and basic health facts related to FGM and early pregnancy. This session might use creative methods like quizzes or myth-busting games. It ensures that the participants understand that complications like menstrual problems, infections, or trauma they may experience are not "normal" or "*God's punishment*" but direct results of FGM – and that these are preventable by ending the practice. Boys learn about the impact on their sisters and future wives. Both genders learn that their religion supports them in pursuing education and health (for example, Islam's Prophet said seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim, male and female, and the Bible praises wisdom and the care of one's body). By rooting the concept of rights in faith language (e.g., our bodies are gifts from God to be cared for, and children are blessings to be nurtured), youth see that advocating for their rights is part of honouring God's gifts. Laws against FGM and child marriage can be referenced here, so they know these practices are illegal in many countries – adding weight to the argument. It builds their confidence to say no.

A 2022 pastoral letter from the Council of Bishops urged all churches to treat child marriage as a form of abuse and report cases to authorities.



- Critical Thinking – Challenging Harmful Traditions:** This session invites youth to question harmful traditions openly and compare them with the core values of their faith and the positive aspects of culture. An interactive approach might be to split them into small groups to debate statements like *"FGM is needed to control girls' sexuality"* or *"Marrying early makes a girl's future secure."* One group defends the "traditional" view, and another opposes it with faith and reason. Then, they swap and ensure both sides of the argument are understood. The facilitator then helps the group deconstruct the pro-FGM/child marriage arguments using facts and theology. For example, a claim that child marriage prevents immorality can be countered with the notion that forced virtue is no virtue. Both Christianity and Islam value intentional, heartfelt moral behaviour rather than compliance through coercion – God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7) and *"there is no compulsion in religion"* (Qur'an 2:256). Also, discuss alternatives: *How can we preserve cultural values like coming-of-age or family honour without cutting or child marriage?* Encourage youth to suggest ideas (many communities have developed alternative rites of passage, education ceremonies, and purity pledges that celebrate maturity in non-harmful ways). Highlight examples of "reformed traditions" – perhaps a story of a village that replaced FGM with a day of prayer and gift-giving for girls reaching puberty or a family that decided to keep their daughter in school as a point of pride rather than marrying her off. The goal is to show that culture is not static; young people can create new norms aligning with faith and human rights. As part of critical thinking, emphasise that **questioning unjust practices is not the same as rejecting one's faith or culture**. It can be an act of deep faith to stand against injustice (like prophets in Scripture often challenged the status quo when it was wrong). This can be tied to stories like young David bravely challenging Goliath or the young companions of the Prophet who stood by him to challenge the oppression in Mecca. Youth often resonate with heroism and moral courage.



- **Peer Influence and Solidarity:** A session focusing on how youth can support each other and lead change. Adolescents listen more to peers than lectures and this session might involve peer education training. For example, equip some youths as "ambassadors" who can talk to their friends or younger siblings about these issues. Brainstorm youth-led initiatives: forming school clubs that campaign against FGM and child marriage, using drama, music, or social media to spread awareness. Given that this is an interfaith effort, they could create joint Christian-Muslim youth events or media campaigns (perhaps a short video or a skit) that reinforce unity on this message. This session also addresses how to handle peer pressure: e.g., girls who have not undergone FGM might be teased – how can they respond, and how can peers ally with them to stop the bullying? Boys, too, should be engaged as allies: teach them that true manhood in both faiths means protecting and respecting women, not demanding harmful rituals. Perhaps incorporate a pledge for boys to never seek or approve FGM on their future daughters or wives and for girls to support each other to pursue education and late marriage. This is where faith can deeply motivate. For instance, a Muslim boy might pledge this by saying: *"I will be a qawwam (protector) for the women in my family as the Qur'an instructs (Qur'an 4:34), ensuring they are safe and respected, and I know forcing them into harm is against Allah's trust."* A Christian girl might say, *"I believe I am fearfully and wonderfully made by God (Psalm 139:14), and I will not let anyone make me feel otherwise by cutting me or marrying me off before I am ready."* By articulating such commitments, youth reinforce their values.



4.4.2 Tailored Content

To make the sessions resonate, the youth module uses religious and historical examples that appeal to young minds.

Christian Perspective: Use biblical narratives of youthful courage and breaking oppressive cycles. For instance, discuss how young David confronted Goliath not with the armour of tradition but with faith – drawing a parallel that young people today can encounter the "giants" of harmful culture with faith and new thinking. The story of Mary, Jesus' mother—though often cited as a young bride—emphasises how God empowered her to question the status quo with her Magnificat song, which is about lifting the lowly. Also, the early Church broke many social norms (for example, Christians in the first century often rescued and raised baby girls that others left to die; they challenged the Roman practice of infanticide). Shows that Christianity has long been about transforming culture to align with God's love.

Bring up Galatians 3:28 again about neither Jew nor Greek, enslaved person nor free, male nor female – in the early Christian context, this was revolutionary equality, and today, it still calls us to ensure no girl or boy is treated as second-class. Perhaps include a session element where youth read a short biography of a Christian leader (like William Wilberforce for slavery or a modern example like a youth activist) to inspire them that faith in action can change the world. A local example: if there is a youth from the Church who refused FGM or helped a friend escape a child marriage, have them share their story.

The breaking of oppressive cycles can also be taught through a devotional on the Exodus – Israelites left slavery in Egypt (which can symbolise leaving harmful traditions), and God led them to a new way of life. Compare FGM and CM to a form of bondage that God wants to deliver communities from into a "Promised Land" of freedom and dignity. Such analogies stick in young minds and give a sense of divine purpose to their quest for change.

Women who marry as children make 10% less money than women who marry as adults.⁵



Muslim Perspective: Highlight historical examples from Islamic history of reform and progressive thought encouraged by the faith. One powerful example is how Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) ended certain harmful customs of his time. For instance, he ended the killing of infant daughters (Qur'an 81:8-9 speaks to the sin of burying girls alive). This shows that being a good Muslim sometimes means not following your forefathers' tradition if it was unjust; it means embracing the better path Islam calls you to. Another example: the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, at one point suspended the cutting off of hands (the prescribed punishment for theft) during a famine because justice demanded understanding context – this illustrates Islamic law's flexibility to prevent harm. Use that to argue: if a strict law like hudud could be suspended to avoid harm, then indeed a cultural practice causing harm (FGM) can be eliminated to uphold Islam's higher objectives (Maqasid al-Shariah like preservation of life and health).

Emphasise that questioning practices are not imitating the West but following the Prophet's model of removing oppressive customs. The value of education can be stressed by recounting how the Prophet's young wife, Aisha (RA), became a renowned scholar and teacher – she could not have done that if her life had been limited by early harm or lack of consent. Also, highlight progressive voices: perhaps mention how many predominantly Muslim countries have set 18 as the marriage age and their religious scholars support that, understanding it is for the good of society (e.g., the laws in Morocco and Algeria, if relevant).

Encouraging ijtihad (independent reasoning) among the youth – that Islam always promotes thoughtful analysis and not blind following – can empower them to be critical thinkers. A faith activity might be to study a few Qur'anic verses that show Islam's intent to gradually improve society (such as how alcohol was phased out or how orphans' rights were strongly enforced), then discuss: "What social ill might God be calling us to phase out today?" Let them conclude that perhaps FGM or child marriage is one such ill. By tying their identity as young Muslims to being agents of positive change, you give them ownership: They can be the generation of believers that helps their community better embody Islamic compassion and justice.

Treating the health complications of FGM costs \$1.4 billion every year.⁶



4.5. Men's Module (*optional but strongly recommended*)

Given men's significant influence in many communities, a module focusing on men (fathers, husbands, religious brothers, and community leaders) is crucial. As one reviewer noted: "In most African communities... men have the upper hand as custodians of culture". If we exclude men, efforts may be seen as "women's issues" only, and the status quo might persist among male decision-makers. This module brings men into the conversation as allies, helping them reflect on the impact of these practices and empowering them to champion change. It stresses that protecting daughters and honouring women is fulfilling their role, not a betrayal.

The men's module seeks to create male advocates who stand alongside women in this cause. Together with the women's and youth modules, engaging men ensures a "diverse and all-rounded perspective" is harvested. Men's buy-in also paves the way for community decisions (since male elders or officials often are final gatekeepers for community norms and law enforcement). By the end of this module, the ideal outcome is a group of men publicly committing to support the abandonment of FGM and child marriage and forming a committee or network for ongoing advocacy. The presence of scriptural key messages throughout gives them the confidence to use religious language when talking to other men who may still need convincing – they can quote the Qur'an or Bible to back up their stance. This transforms potential resistance into informed dialogue among men, weakening the argument that "religion supports keeping these traditions." Instead, it becomes evident that faith supports change, and men of faith should lead that change.

4.5.1 Session Themes

- **Understanding the Issue:** Facts and figures for men: Men often are less informed about the intimate harm of FGM (since it is considered "women's domain") or the dangers young brides face. This session educates men on the physical and psychological trauma of FGM and child marriage. Present medical facts (like how FGM can lead to complications that also affect husbands – e.g., difficult childbirths that endanger mother and child or marital disharmony due to painful intercourse. Also, emphasise the economic and social toll – child marriage often means wives with less education, which can keep families in poverty. When men realise that these practices are not beneficial but rather "steal and destroy" the abundant life of their families, they may be more willing to reconsider them. Tie this to their protective instincts: most fathers deeply love their daughters; if cutting or marrying them off young is likely to hurt or even kill them, no loving father would want that. Sometimes, men feel they are doing the right thing (e.g., "ensuring my daughter is marriageable by FGM and marrying her early before she 'dishonours' us"). Gently dismantle this by showing the consequences and clarifying that honour can be upheld better. This session might include testimony from a father who chose not to cut his daughters or an imam/pastor explaining why he preaches against these practices – male voices that model empathy.

- Religious Reflections on Fatherhood and Responsibility:** In this session, men delve into Scripture and teachings about their responsibilities toward their children and community. For example, discuss what it means that men are often described as protectors and maintainers of their families (Qur'an 4:34). To maintain does not mean to control or harm, but to ensure safety and well-being. In the Bible, fathers are instructed, *"Do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord"* (Ephesians 6:4); provoking to anger could be interpreted as not inflicting pain or injustice on them lest they become bitter or harmed. Have the men considered whether forcing a daughter to be cut or wed early *"instruct her in the Lord,"* or might it instead cause her trauma and anger towards God/family? Most will see it is the latter. Highlight positive male figures: e.g., Saint Joseph in the Christian tradition protected Mary and the infant Jesus from danger – a model of a man listening to God and putting his family's safety first. In Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) showed great love for his daughters: it is recorded that he would stand up and kiss his daughter Fatimah when she came to him, breaking Arab customs of son preference. He did not treat her as a commodity or a burden – quite the opposite. Use such examples to prompt discussion: *What legacy do we, as fathers, want to leave for our daughters?* Perhaps do a values clarification exercise: ask each man to list dreams for his daughter (e.g., healthy life, good marriage, education, faith), then examine if FGM or child marriage helps or hinders those dreams. Almost invariably, those practices hinder them (e.g., education cut short, health jeopardised). This realisation, coupled with the idea that God entrusts children to parents as a sacred responsibility, can be powerful. Emphasise that on Judgment Day, according to Islam, parents will be asked how they cared for their children – they must be able to say they did not knowingly harm them. Similarly, in Christianity, children are seen as blessings to nurture, not possessions to manage.



- **Men as Champions of Change:** This session encourages men to actively support and speak out against FGM and CM. Acknowledge that men who take this stance might face social pressure or ridicule (some might be called "weak" or "controlled by their wives" for opposing traditional practices). Provide a space for men to express these fears or actual experiences. Then, use group problem-solving: *how can men support each other in this?* Consider forming a fathers' alliance or having a few influential men publicly declare their commitment so that it becomes acceptable. Reiterate that true courage is doing what is right despite criticism – and faith supports them here. Introduce key messages (with scriptures) to encourage and affirm men's efforts. For example, quote Micah 6:8: *"He has shown you, O man, what is good. Moreover, what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy..."* – acting justly and loving mercy could mean ensuring no girl in your community is harmed unjustly. Alternatively, a Sunna: *"The best of you is he who is best to his family"* – therefore, the best men are those ensuring their wives and daughters are safe and flourishing. Encourage influential men (like chiefs and religious leaders) in the group to share statements like: *"In my household, we will not be doing FGM or child marriage because our faith and conscience will not allow it."* When other men hear peers saying that, it legitimises the stance. The session can conclude with men brainstorming actions they can take: e.g., hosting a fathers' forum in the village, preaching about it at Friday prayers or Sunday service, intervening if they see a neighbour planning to cut a daughter, mentoring younger men, or partnering with women's groups to support alternative rites. They could also commit to talking to their sons about valuing uncircumcised wives and to their in-laws about not cutting granddaughters. Each man (or each group of men) can write an action pledge.



4.5.2. Tailored Faith Content

The men's module uses the language of duty, honour, and protection that resonates with men, reframing those concepts in light of compassionate values from each religion.

Christian Perspective: Emphasise servant leadership and sacrificial love modelled by Christ. Many Christian men may be familiar with the idea of being the "head" of the family. Clarify that Christ showed headship by serving and sacrificing for His loved ones, not domineering. For example, when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, a true leader cared for the needs of others. So, a father or husband should be willing to forego harmful traditions for his wife's or daughter's well-being; that is Christ-like love. Cite Ephesians 5:25 again: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her". Ask: Would Christ ever harm His "bride" (the Church)? No – He gave himself up to save her. Likewise, a husband or father should never be complicit in harming the women under his care; instead, he should protect them even if it costs him socially. Also, draw on verses like "Fathers, do not embitter your children" (Colossians 3:21) and "Children are a heritage from the Lord" (Psalm 127:3).

The idea is to shape a narrative that a man's glory in God's eyes is when his family thrives. Any practice that endangers them is something he must oppose to fulfil his God-given role. The module might include a short Bible study on Joseph (as mentioned) or on Jesus' earthly father figure, Joseph, listening to the angel flee to Egypt to protect baby Jesus – he broke standard plans to save his family. Alternatively, even in Abraham, who stopped at nothing to obey God, men are asked to stop harmful traditions to follow God's higher command to love and protect. A decisive moment could be a prayer of commitment by fathers, dedicating their daughters to God's care and renouncing any cultural practice that would harm them. This spiritual step cements their resolve with God's help.

44,000 girls die every year from complications of FGM.⁷



Muslim Perspective: Use concepts of amanah (trust), rahmah (mercy), and justice (ADL) to appeal to Muslim men. Children, particularly daughters, are an amanah (sacred trust) from Allah to their parents. On the Day of Judgment, a father will be asked how he fulfilled this trust. The Prophet said: "Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock." Fathers are shepherds over their families – a shepherd would never deliberately wound his sheep; his job is to ward off wolves and keep the flock healthy. So, if FGM or child marriage are "wolves" that harm little girls, a father's job is to keep those wolves away from his daughter. Emphasise mercy (rahmah): The Prophet's sayings about kindness to daughters can be highlighted. One famous Sunna: "Whoever has three daughters and is patient with them, feeds and clothes them from his wealth, they will be a shield for him from the Fire."

Another, "When a man informed the Prophet that he never kissed his children, the Prophet replied that one who does not show mercy would not be shown mercy (in some narrations, he said he could not help someone who has had mercy taken out of their heart)". Use this to show that tenderness towards children is a prophetic trait, not a weakness. Also, justice: the Qur'an repeatedly emphasises not to kill children out of cultural motives (as in pre-Islamic times) and not to "bury the truth". Draw a parallel: while people no longer bury infants physically, cutting them or marrying them off too early is, in a sense, "burying" their potential and causing suffering – a modern parallel to a practice the Qur'an condemned. The Qur'an (Surah 16:58-59) even describes the horror of a father who is ashamed at the birth of a daughter – condemning that attitude. So, Islam uplifted the status of daughters and reminded the men that continuing FGM is a relapse to Jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic ignorance), where people thought they needed to mutilate or control women.

Modern Islamic scholarship is evident: FGM is categorised as "munkar" (an evil to be forbidden). It is an unjust injury to an innocent (punishing someone without crime, as the toolkit noted. It falls under the Quranic principle "forbid what is wrong". Encourage the men to see themselves as mujahids (strivers) in a moral jihad to eradicate this unjust practice – a peaceful jihad of the pen and tongue for their daughters' well-being. This framing can appeal to their sense of religious duty and honour. They protect their family's honour far more by ensuring their daughters are safe and educated than by clinging to a custom that Islam does not require.

Note

Including a men's module has the added benefit of signalling that this is not a "women versus men" issue but a collective moral issue. It prevents polarisation and brings unity. Additionally, consider an intergenerational module or session where youth and parents, or mothers and fathers, talk together in a culturally sensitive way, as Rev. Chemei suggested. Such a dialogue can allow, say, a daughter to safely express to her father her fears about FGM or child marriage with a facilitator mediating. This can be incredibly eye-opening for the men and bonding for families, reinforcing unified voices and actions across age and gender.

4.6. Replacing Harmful Practices with Positive Alternatives

Communities are more likely to abandon FGM and child marriage if they have culturally acceptable alternatives to achieve the underlying social or ritual goals. Work with participants to brainstorm and implement alternatives that uphold the spirit of the culture and faith without causing harm. Some effective examples:

- **Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP) for Girls:** Many communities in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have created ARP ceremonies where girls undergo a period of seclusion or participate in workshops to learn about womanhood, cultural values, sexual and reproductive health, and their faith's teachings on purity and respect. Then they have a public celebration – often with songs, dances, blessings from elders and religious leaders, and certificates of completion – but no cutting. Families and community members are invited to honour the girls. This satisfies the community's desire to mark the transition to adulthood and publicly recognise a girl's maturity without resorting to violence. Encourage participants to design an ARP tailored to their specific context. For instance, in a Muslim community, it could involve the girls completing a Qur'an recitation course and holding a graduation ceremony during which an imam prays for them. In a Christian setting, perhaps a special "rite of blessing" for teenage girls during a Sunday service, giving each a Bible or cross to symbolise their coming of age in faith. Traditional elements (like specific clothing or a coming-of-age name given) can be incorporated to maintain continuity with heritage. Stress that community buy-in is key – involve the older women (often traditional circumcisers) in planning the ARP, possibly retraining them as "aunties" or educators in the new ritual.

In 2020, a gathering of 70 Muslim scholars from across Africa concluded that FGM is not following Islam and should be eliminated.



- **Educational and Economic Incentives:** Sometimes the "why" behind child marriage is economic – a bride price or one less mouth to feed. To counter that, create community support, such as a scholarship fund or faith-based sponsorship for girls who remain in school and uncut. Many churches and mosques have zakat/charity funds; they propose a portion specifically for supporting the schooling of vulnerable girls so parents feel less financial pressure. Some communities hold public ceremonies where families who keep daughters uncut receive a small gift or recognition (this flips the script: instead of celebrating cut girls, celebrate uncut ones for their courage and families for their enlightenment). However, be careful not to create hostility – frame it as "model families" awards in a broad sense of championing girls. In Cameroon, for example, a programme called "Our Pride, Our Daughters" provided farming tools and microfinance to families that pledged not to marry off their girls early, linking economic benefits with the desired social change. Faith leaders can partner with NGOs to introduce such incentives.

- **Marriage Alternatives and Vows:** To delay marriage, introduce alternative milestones, such as graduation ceremonies at secondary school or vocational skill certifications, that the community celebrates in a manner akin to a wedding. The goal is to establish new standards for achievement. Also, engage boys/young men through pledges – for instance, Christian boys could take a promise of “Real love waits”, not only by abstinence but also committing not to marry a girl under 18 and to be allies. Muslim boys likewise can pledge to follow the Prophet’s (PBUH) example of honouring women and not be part of harmful traditions. These youth-driven commitments can shift peer norms: a teenage boy might speak up: “I wouldn’t want my little sister to be cut because I want her to be healthy – that’s how I show I’m a man, by protecting her.” Creating a culture where youth themselves reject these practices is crucial for sustainability.
- **Public Declarations and Religious Ceremonies:** Encourage communities to hold a declaration event – often done after months of dialogue when enough consensus is built. It can be interfaith or single-faith. For example, gather villagers in the presence of religious leaders of all sides and have a statement read: “We, the people of ____, guided by our faith in God/Allah and respect for our culture, hereby declare that we will no longer practice FGM or marry our children before 18. We commit to new ways to celebrate our daughters... etc.” Everyone signs or affirms verbally. This collective affirmation, especially when done in a sacred space or witnessed by local authorities, adds a sense of solemnity. Follow it with celebratory food, prayer, and perhaps a tree-planting ceremony (symbolising a new generation free from these harms).

Group Work

Have participants design an alternative ritual or community initiative suitable for their context and faith. Provide art supplies or charts. Each group presents a mini-plan – e.g., “In our mosque community, we will start a ‘Sisters’ Day’ where older women mentor girls, and there’s no cutting, and we give girls gift bags as they turn 13 reminding them, they are whole and beloved by Allah.” Encourage creativity and ensure its culturally resonant. Plan how to involve key stakeholders (the elder who is respected, the youth club, etc.). This exercise empowers leaders to be proactive architects of new traditions, not just critics of old ones.

4.7. Supporting Survivors and Speaking with Compassion

Faith communities must address how we care for those already affected and how we discuss these issues without alienating them. Faith leaders are often confidants and counsellors; they should be prepared to:

- **Provide Pastoral Care:** If a girl has undergone FGM or is a child bride, she may experience trauma or health issues. Leaders should provide a safe and non-judgmental space. For example, a priest might facilitate access to a doctor and pray for her healing, making clear that what happened is not her fault and that she's loved. An imam might counsel a young husband to be gentle and not force relations if his child-bride wife is fearful or injured, maybe involving her parents to renegotiate living arrangements until she's older. Show empathy in sermons, too – acknowledge that many women listening might be FGM survivors: *"To our sisters who went through this pain, we commit to make yours the last generation that suffers it."* Similarly, for women married young: *"We honour your sacrifices and will strive so your daughters have a different path."* This inclusion prevents them from feeling attacked when we condemn the practice.
- **Trauma-awareness:** Understand signs of trauma (anxiety, withdrawal) and know referral paths (local clinics, NGOs). Religious communities can set up support groups – like a "Women of Strength" circle where older women who endured FGM or early marriage gather to share experiences and collectively heal, possibly guided by a faith counsellor or using prayer/meditation as therapy. Some have found that giving these women a role in activism helps turn pain into purpose (e.g., training them as outreach advocates or peer educators).
- **Language Matters:** Use respectful terminology. Avoid words like "mutilation" when speaking to practising communities initially – it can sound accusatory (though in advocacy, we call it FGM, with communities, we might say "cutting" or the local term, then emphasise "harmful cut"). For child marriage, rather than "child bride" (which normalises it), say "marriage involving a minor/child." Emphasise the child-ness: "our daughters who are still children." In many cultures, calling someone's married daughter a "child" might make them think twice. Also, avoid blaming individuals; instead, target the practice and the conditions that enable it. Instead of "Parents who do this are cruel," say: "Parents love their daughters and often think they're doing right, but now, with knowledge, we see it hurts them." Invite everyone to be part of the solution, not dividing "good vs bad."

- **Men as Allies:** Bring husbands and fathers into the conversation of support. A husband of a child bride may also be a product of societal norms – if he can be enlightened, he might become her defender (e.g., allow her to continue schooling, delay consummation). Similarly, encourage fathers to speak to other men. Perhaps form a Fathers’ Forum where those who decided not to cut their daughters mentor other men through that decision. When men publicly declare: “I will not allow my daughter to be cut/married early,” it permits others to do the same. Use faith language to appeal to their protector instincts (in Christianity, Joseph protected Mary and infant Jesus; in Islam, the Qur’an tells men to be maintainers of women in a just way).

The body is the temple of God

and must not be mutilated (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)



- **Celebrate Champions:** When a family bucks the trend or a survivor speaks out, recognize them in the community. It could be as simple as a mention in church: “We thank God for Sister Y, who, despite pressure, did not marry off her daughter, and now the daughter has finished high school!” Or a mosque announcement praising a local khatib (preacher) who convinced many to stop FGM. People like recognition, and it motivates others. Even government officials or law enforcers who uphold the law fairly could be appreciated (e.g., a judge who annulled a child marriage). This fosters an environment where doing the right thing is seen as honourable and rewarded, not risky.



CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

Activity Kits and Interactive Tools

5. Introduction

This section introduces an activity kit to move participants from conversation to action. Drawing from the *Mind & Heart Dialogue Facilitator's Guide*, the kit includes creative tools that help faith communities internalise key messages through experiential learning. The activities from role-plays and visual aids to myth-busting posters and scripture-based infographics—are crafted to touch the mind and heart. They bring faith teachings to life, make abstract ideas relatable, and empower facilitators to address complex topics sensitively. The kit also includes practical resources for medical, legal, and psychosocial support, ensuring that participants are equipped to take action. Whether used in a workshop, sermon, or youth club, these tools help create lasting impact by combining faith, empathy, and practical solutions.

5.1. Key Components of the Activity Kit

- **Interactive Workshops:** These are structured activities such as role-plays, group discussions, and scenario-based learning exercises. For example, one activity is child marriage role-play – participants act out a scene where a young girl is pressured to marry, with others playing her parents, a faith leader, and a friend. After the role-play, the group discusses what each character might think and what arguments convinced the parents to delay the marriage. Another interactive exercise is a Female Anatomy Lesson or FGM Anatomy Guide (as referenced in the original toolkit – using diagrams or models to show the female genital anatomy and exactly what FGM does. Here the facilitator can invite a gynaecologist to explain female anatomy. This is because many communities practising FGM do not know the biological specifics; seeing a visual can be powerful communication. The kit could include a flipchart with illustrations of the consequences of pregnancy on an underage girl's body (perhaps comparing pelvic development at age 13 vs 18. These workshops are done in a sensitive, culturally appropriate manner – perhaps separating by gender for the anatomy part, if needed – but they ensure learning by seeing and doing.
 - Additionally, include case study discussions: small groups can read a short story (maybe a composite of actual cases) about a girl affected by FGM or child marriage and then answer guided questions. It helps participants practice empathy and problem-solving. Interactive learning reinforces knowledge and helps participants practice having conversations about these topics, which they will need to do outside the workshop in real life.

Facilitation Tip

Use the activity kit elements in each session – e.g., start with an icebreaker like a quiz or an "agree/disagree" line-up on controversial statements to get people moving. Human barometer exercise: Put "Strongly Agree" at one end of the room and "Strongly Disagree" at the other; read a statement like "My religion requires FGM" and have people stand along the spectrum. Then, let them explain their positions, use the information sheet to correct their views and non-confrontationally surface beliefs, and allow peer learning.)

- **Visual Aids:** People often grasp concepts better with visuals. The kit provides posters, infographics, and multimedia content communicating key messages. For instance, a poster could illustrate "FGM: Myth vs Fact" – on one side, a myth like *"FGM is required by our religion"* and on the other, the fact *"No, it is not – neither the Bible nor Qur'an mentions it. It can harm health, which our religions value."* Another infographic might show a timeline in a girl's life: one path if she undergoes FGM and child marriage (e.g., drops out of school at 13, married at 14, complications at childbirth by 15) versus another path without those practices (finishes school at 18, gets a job or marries at 20+, healthier outcomes). Such a visual starkly highlights the difference; scripture on visuals is practical too: e.g., a banner with *"...for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* or *"And do not kill your children out of folly; We provide for them"* (Qur'an 17:31, which forbids causing death to children, often cited against both infanticide and by extension any harmful practice). If technology allows, a short video or slideshow can be played.
 - For example, showing a medical doctor explaining the woman anatomy; a religious leader speaking on the issue or a survivor telling her story can help shape the conversations on the harmful effects of FGM (there is a mention of a video titled "Scarred for Life" in the toolkit comments, which shows a six-year-old girl undergoing FGM; though very sensitive, such footage, if used carefully and with consent, can leave a profound impact and evoke compassion and resolve never to let this happen again). The kit ensures that even low-literacy audiences can understand through pictures and that facilitators have something concrete to point to during talks. Visual aids often help "break the ice" when displayed around the venue, prompting people to ask questions about them.
- **Resource Lists:** The kit contains practical resource lists and reference materials for further support. It includes contact information for local support services: for example, the phone numbers of nearby clinics or healthcare providers knowledgeable about FGM complications or NGOs that offer rescue or shelter for girls fleeing forced marriage. The resource list needs to contain legal aid and police contacts for reporting cases (if, say, a girl is at imminent risk and someone needs to alert authorities). Another resource list is on counselling and psychosocial support – organisations or trained individuals (maybe in the faith community itself) who can counsel families or help reintegrate a girl who said "no" to FGM. Also, provide references to educational or economic support programs: one reason child marriage happens is economical, so pointing men and women to microfinance, scholarship programs, or vocational training for girls can offer alternatives. The idea is to equip participants with knowledge and link them to allies and tools beyond the training. For facilitators, include a list of further readings or websites if they want to deepen their knowledge, such as WHO fact pages, UNICEF reports, or local research on FGM and child marriage prevalence. Essentially, the resource list functions as a directory so that the momentum from the workshop can continue – participants are motivated to act immediately and know where to turn for help or more information.



CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6

Addressing Religious Misconceptions on FGM and Child Marriage

6. Introduction

This section will equip participants with facts. Each myth unravelled is one step toward breaking the chain of justification that keeps FGM and CM alive. Facilitators should memorise or have handy a few key points from these reality checks, including scripture quotes, to use in conversations or whenever they hear a myth uttered. It is about “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15) – kindly but firmly correcting false beliefs with empathy for why people held them and guiding them to a new understanding illuminated by faith. Many participants may experience an “aha!” moment when a long-held belief is corrected – like realising, “So our religion never required this after all, and it might be displeasing to God.”

6.1. Myths and Realities

A pivotal part of this manual is directly confronting the myths and misinterpretations that allow FGM and child marriage to persist under the guise of religion or culture. Both Christian and Muslim communities have narratives that have been used (or misused) to justify these practices. This section outlines common misconceptions and provides scripture-backed responses for participants to challenge false beliefs. It is important to present these points in clear, accessible language and support them with references to authoritative religious texts and contemporary scholarship by debunking myths and affirming truths that align with our faith values of compassion, justice, and protection of life. Below are some of the most prevalent myths and the reality check for each.

6.1.1 Myth 1: *FGM is a religious requirement – our faith demands it to ensure purity or obedience*

Reality: Neither Christianity nor Islam requires FGM. **Nowhere in the Bible or the Qur'an is female circumcision mentioned as a religious obligation.** This practice predates both religions and is a cultural tradition later given a religious colouring. Modern religious scholarship has thoroughly examined this claim and found it baseless. Islamic authorities have classified the often-cited Sunnas on FGM as weak (*da'if*) and not valid evidence. For instance, claims that “circumcision is an honour for women” come from unreliable reports and, even if taken at face value, do not command the practice. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) never instructed women to be cut; on the contrary, he did not approve of it when he encountered it, and he emphasised kindness and not harming the innocent. Islam's overarching principles consider FGM a harmful alteration of Allah's creation, which is deemed perfect. The Qur'an warns against following Satan's inducement to “change the creation of Allah” (Qur'an 4:119) and affirms that humans are created. Thus, performing FGM – a permanent change and injury to the body – is actually against God's will. It is considered an injustice to girls done in the false name of preventing sin. As one commentary noted: “Acts such as FGM punish the innocent in the absence of a crime... an injustice before Allah”. From the Christian side, there is absolutely no religious precedent for FGM; it is not in the Bible and was not historically practised by the Church.

On the contrary, Christianity teaches that the body is the temple of God and must not be mutilated (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Early Christian missionaries in Africa often opposed the practice when they encountered it because they saw it as harmful and not required by faith. The idea that FGM ensures purity/chastity is a misinterpretation of religious purity. True purity in both faiths is a matter of the heart and moral behaviour, not physically cutting organs. Jesus taught: *"Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes from a person that defiles them"* (Mark 7:15), meaning moral impurity comes from evil intentions and sins, not from one's natural body parts. Similarly, Islam teaches that intentions (niyyah) and actions determine one's purity, and there is no concept that an uncut woman is impure. In summary, FGM is not a God-ordained rite. Instead, it is a harmful custom that our faiths tolerate no longer, especially now that we understand the damage it causes. Both Muslim and Christian leaders worldwide have publicly declared that FGM has no religious justification and must end. Any practice that causes such harm to God's children contradicts the core of our religions, which value mercy and health. As a result, continuing FGM is not an act of faithfulness but of ignorance – and ending it is not a betrayal of religion but a fulfilment of our duty to "do no harm" and to love our neighbour (or daughter) as ourselves.

6.1.2 Myth 2: *Cutting girls keeps them chaste or morally upright – if we don't cut, girls will be promiscuous*

Reality: Moral behaviour comes from values and education, not from cutting body parts. There is no evidence that FGM prevents promiscuity; in fact, problems from FGM (trauma, marital disharmony) can undermine stable family life. All religions teach self-control and fidelity as matters of the heart and character. Circumcising a girl does not magically instil virtue – raising her with love and guidance does. From a faith view, this myth is dangerous because it justifies harm under the guise of morality. Moreover, it often masks the real issue: controlling women's sexuality. We can counter this by affirming that genuine chastity and modesty are spiritual qualities. For example, the Qur'an encourages both men and women to be modest and faithful – it does not say: "Women must be cut to achieve this." Christianity teaches that virtue is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, not of surgery. We should highlight positive rites or mentorship programs that teach ethics without any mutilation. For instance, many communities have "Girls' forums" or initiation classes (common in churches and among some ATR rites) where elders teach girls about adulthood, respect, and faith – these can replace FGM. As faith leaders, we pledge to support such alternatives that truly foster virtue.

6.1.3 Myth 3: *Child marriage (or forced marriage) is encouraged by religion to protect girls from immorality – once a girl reaches puberty, our faith says it is time for her to marry.*

Reality: No major faith advocates child marriage or forced marriage – rather, both Christianity and Islam stress the importance of consent, maturity, and justice in marriage. People married younger on average in older times, but today, we understand childhood and adolescence as phases of growth and education. Both the Bible and the Qur'an contain principles that, when applied, strongly favour marrying at a responsible age and with free consent. In Christianity, marriage is a sacred covenant meant to mirror the loving relationship of Christ and the Church – something two adults entered freely and knowingly. The biblical marriage model assumes maturity: "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife" (Genesis 2:24) – leaving parents implies adulthood. Moreover, Christian teaching holds that marriage should be "honoured by all" (Hebrews 13:4) and is a joyful union, which is impossible if one partner is coerced or too young to understand the commitment. Early and forced marriages, which often lead to abuse and curtailed life opportunities for girls, contradict foundational Christian doctrines of equality and love. The Apostle Paul advised that marriage involves mutual consent and the ability to fulfil one's duties to each other (1 Corinthians 7) – a child cannot reasonably do this.

The Christian review in this toolkit put it clearly: "In Christian circles, marriage is understood to be a loving union of two consenting adults who are holistically mature enough to navigate the marriage". Therefore, marrying an immature girl denies her the chance to grow and flourish as God intended, and it is not a true Christian marriage but rather a violation of her God-given dignity. In Islam, while it is true that historically, marriages could occur at younger ages, the spirit of Islamic teaching on marriage emphasises readiness and welfare.

The Qur'an sets a guideline in 4:6 that orphans (a proxy for minors) should only be married off "when they reach a marriageable age" and are found to be "sound in judgment" – implying a level of maturity. Classical jurists have opined that if marriage would cause harm, it should be delayed; as noted in the toolkit, Islamic jurisprudence considers it haram (prohibited) for a guardian to marry off a person if the marriage is likely to cause harm to them or their spouse. Indeed, prominent scholars today say child marriage is not in line with the Qur'an's intent, especially with the modern understanding of harm. The oft-misunderstood verse, Qur'an 65:4, which mentions the waiting period for those who "have not menstruated", is NOT an endorsement of child marriage but a stipulation for handling existing cases at that time, and many argue it is a scenario to be phased out, not perpetuated.

The Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) example: While there are reports that he married Aisha at a young age, those circumstances are not comparable to today's, and importantly, he did not consummate the marriage until she was considered ready. Moreover, he unequivocally required consent: "A woman (or girl) cannot be given in marriage except with her permission" (Sunna in Sahih Bukhari). There is a famous incident where a young woman came to the Prophet stating her father married her off without her consent, and the Prophet gave her the choice to annul the marriage – highlighting that forced marriage goes against Islamic principles of justice and free will. The purpose of marriage in Islam – Sakina (tranquillity), Mawadda (love), and Rahma (mercy) between spouses (Qur'an 30:21) – cannot be attained if one spouse is terrified, unprepared, or oppressed.

As the Muslim toolkit emphasized, a marriage where one party is not ready or willing will not achieve the tranquillity, love or compassion intended and instead becomes a source of pain. Far from preventing immorality, child marriage can create lifelong issues, including divorce, infidelity (due to unhappy unions), or health crises – outcomes that neither faith would condone. Chastity and moral behaviour can be encouraged in youth through education and spiritual formation without resorting to child marriage. Indeed, Islam provides alternatives for managing sexual urges in youth (the Prophet said, "whoever is not able to marry should fast" as a way to control desire), showing that immediate marriage is not the only path. Our religions fundamentally seek to protect the vulnerable, not to place them in harm's way. Therefore, child marriage is not a religious safeguard but a harmful practice based on social customs and fear. Both church and mosque leaders around the world affirm that keeping girls in school and allowing them to mature before marriage is more in line with God's will to "prosper and not to harm" them (Jeremiah 29:11).

Lastly, many countries with majority Christian or Muslim populations have set the legal minimum age for marriage (often 18). These laws often have strong support from religious leaders who understand it is in the best interest of society and aligns with faith when properly understood. As faith leaders, we clarify that our scriptures do not require child marriage, and protecting children until they are ready for marriage is a righteous act endorsed by our values of justice and mercy.

6.1.4 Myth 4: *These practices are our culture and identity: stopping them is betraying our heritage or bowing to foreign influence.*

Reality: While FGM and child marriage have indeed been part of many cultures for generations, no culture is static, and all cultures have aspects that evolve – mainly when those aspects cause harm. Notably, both Christianity and Islam encourage filtering cultural practices through the lens of faith and ethics, retaining what is good and just. What is incompatible with fundamental moral teachings should be discarded, no matter how long standing. In the African context, there is understandable pride in cultural heritage, especially after colonial eras attempted to stamp it out. However, not every old practice is worthy of preservation – some are "life-denying" and conflict with the culture's core values, which include love for offspring and community well-being. Ending FGM and child marriage is not about importing foreign values; it is about returning to the core humanitarian and spiritual values that our own cultures and religions hold at heart. African traditional values often emphasise community welfare ("it takes a village to raise a child") – well, community welfare is harmed when girls suffer trauma or drop out of school.

Both faiths teach that good traditions should be upheld and harmful traditions should be left behind (Mark 7:8, where Jesus criticises clinging to human traditions that violate God's commandments of love; and in Islam, many pre-Islamic Arab traditions were abolished by the Prophet). Moreover, numerous African communities have already demonstrated that cultural rites of passage can be maintained without the cut and that celebrating a girl's coming-of-age can be done in enriching ways (with education, mentorship, and ceremonies of blessing) that add new depth to culture rather than destroying it. Far from losing culture, communities that abandon FGM often find they gain healthier, stronger members and can still celebrate their identity (for example, alternative rites introduced in Kenya allow girls to have a cultural graduation with songs and traditions – just minus the mutilation – and these have been successful and widely accepted).

Similarly, for child marriage – many communities had age-old practices of older women teaching girls about marriage and life; those can continue at the appropriate time without forcing the marriage itself early. Religion supports such positive cultural adaptation: Paul became "all things to all men" to save some, meaning the Gospel can work within cultures (1 Cor 9:22), and Islam famously adapts across many cultures, only forbidding what is harmful or unjust.

In short, ending these practices does not betray who we are; instead, it affirms our highest cultural and religious ideals. It shows that we, as Africans/Asians/Middle Easterners (wherever applicable), have the strength to solve our problems in line with our faith. Many prominent local leaders have spoken to this: for instance, numerous Somali and Gambian Islamic scholars have said stopping FGM is entirely in line with Islamic and African values of protecting children, and many Christian chiefs in Uganda and elsewhere have championed laws against child marriage citing both the Bible and the principle that "our culture is a living culture, not one that kills our children."

It is also worth noting that holding on to harmful practices because they are cultural can undermine the culture in the long run – as more educated generations come up, they may reject the harmful practice and the culture entirely if forced to choose between them. By proactively letting go of the harmful parts, cultures preserve what is beautiful (music, language, family structures) and shed what is harmful.

Please think of this process as akin to pruning a tree: we trim away the diseased branches (FGM, child marriage) so that the tree of culture can grow healthier and bear better fruit aligned with our faith (prosperous families, educated daughters). In doing so, we are not bowing to "Western" pressure; instead, we are heeding the moral pressure from within our scriptures and consciences, which has been there all along. Indeed, both global human rights ideals and our faith convictions are pointing in the same direction regarding safeguarding girls. That convergence is something to celebrate, not resist. Ultimately, ending these practices will become a point of cultural pride: "We used to do this, but we learned better, and now our daughters thrive – our community chose life over tradition." That is a legacy to be proud of, and it is deeply faithful to God's command in Deuteronomy 30:19 to "choose life, so that you and your children may live."

Facilitation Tip

Handling these myths in a Q&A format might be effective during community forums. Encourage participants to voice any other beliefs or questions they have heard. Treat each seriously, and respond with the knowledge and references provided

Remind Everyone: The goal of this training is not to attack culture or blame our elders but to continue evolving our traditions in light of God's will for abundant life. We honour our ancestors by caring for our descendants. Both the Bible and the Qur'an urge believers to discard unjust practices – for example, Isaiah 1:16-17 calls to "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression," and the Qur'an 2:177 defines righteousness in terms of faith, charity, and freeing those in bondage, not in clinging to rituals. Thus, correcting these misconceptions and ending harmful practices is an act of collective righteousness and repentance.



CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7

Case Studies

7. Introduction

This manual examines real-world case studies from various countries where faith-based interventions have made a difference. The stories illustrate challenges, successes, and lessons learned in the fight against FGM and child marriage. We present brief examples from five contexts – Ethiopia, The Gambia, Mali, Somalia, and Uganda – each providing a unique perspective on how Christian and Muslim communities have tackled these issues. Each case study includes a small quantity of context, the intervention approach (especially the role of faith leaders), and the outcomes or impact observed. These can be shared during training to inspire and inform local strategies.

7.1. Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, FGM and child marriage rates have been high in certain regions, but the country also has a strong inter-religious collaboration for change. The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) launched a nationwide communication campaign (in which the April 2024 Christian Perspective manual was produced to protect children from FGM and child marriage). Context: Ethiopia's population is roughly two-thirds Christian and one-third Muslim, giving interfaith efforts particular importance. Intervention: Christian priests and Muslim imams, through the IRCE, jointly delivered sermons and community dialogues highlighting scriptural support for ending these practices. For example, priests cited Ethiopian Orthodox teachings on the body as sacred, and imams issued khutbas (sermons) explaining that FGM is not in the Qur'an and quoting the national fatwa against it. They also integrated anti-FGM messaging into rites like baptism and other family blessings. They promoted the legal marriage age of 18 as part of obeying the law of the land (which in Christianity is tied to obeying governing authorities as long as it is not against God's law, and in Islam, to the notion of public interest *maslaha*).

Outcome: Within communities reached by IRCE's programme, surveys indicated improved attitudes – many families pledged not to cut their daughters. In one district, the prevalence of FGM for new births reportedly dropped by half after sustained. Within communities reached by IRCE's programme, surveys indicated improved attitudes and behaviour. Many families pledged publicly to stop FGM. For instance, religious leaders in Afar and Somali regions (where FGM is highly prevalent) reported a notable increase in families bringing uncut girls for blessing ceremonies. Several villages declared themselves "FGM-free" after joint prayer rallies. In areas of Amhara where child marriage was common, clergy worked with government officials to enforce the law and keep girls in school, resulting in significantly fewer under-18 marriages being recorded in the years following. Testimonials emerged: A mother in Bahir Dar said, "I was hesitant, but when I heard my priest and imam together say cutting my daughter is not God's will, I stopped. Now my girl is healthy and in school." The Ethiopia case shows the power of a united interfaith front: it lent credibility to the message (people could see it was not about one religion versus another or foreign influence, but a genuine shared concern) and created broad-based social pressure for change.

7.2. The Gambia

In The Gambia, a small West African nation, many Muslim communities practised FGM as a traditional rite, and child marriage was also prevalent in rural areas. Over 90% of Gambians are Muslim, with a Christian minority. Intervention: In the 2010s, Gambian religious leaders became increasingly vocal against FGM. A turning point came in 2015 when the Gambian government banned FGM by law. This move was bolstered by years of groundwork by the Gambian Supreme Islamic Council and the Christian Council, who had been educating communities that FGM is not a religious requirement. Imams worked within their mosques, using Quranic reasoning similar to what is in this manual, to declare FGM harmful ("munkar") and not mandated in Islam. On the radio and in village seminars, they quoted verses like "We have perfected your form" and the Prophet's example of not circumcising his daughters.



Christian pastors, for their part, spoke in their churches about the dignity of the body and the equal value of sons and daughters. They also engaged in dialogues with village chiefs (alkalos) and women's circumcisers, offering alternative livelihood training to the circumcisers. Outcome: By 2018, surveys showed a significant reduction in support for FGM among the younger generation of Gambians. Importantly, communities in regions like the Upper River Region – once an FGM stronghold – held public declarations to abandon FGM, often led by the local imam who had undergone training. One such imam said: "I realised our religion never asked for this pain. Now even my wife, who was a cutter, has stopped and teaches others why." The prevalence of child marriage also declined as local qadis (Islamic judges) and priests began refusing to officiate marriages where either party was under 18. This religious refusal carried weight. Gambia's case study highlights that change accelerates when national policy and local religious authority align. It also shows the importance of supporting former practitioners (like ex-circumcisers) in transitioning away from the practice – a component facilitated by faith groups emphasizing forgiveness and new beginnings.

7.3. Mali

Mali has one of the highest rates of FGM (around 90% of women affected) and lacks a national law banning it. Child marriage rates are also high. The population is overwhelmingly Muslim, with strong traditional leadership structures. Resistance to outside pressure is strong, so change had to come from within. Intervention: In Mali, Islamic scholars and local imams have taken on the challenge in recent years, working region by region.

A notable effort occurred in the Kayes region through a project where imams were trained on health and Islamic perspectives. They then held community dialogues where they used Islamic arguments to counter pro-FGM sentiments. In their sermons, they clarified that Sunna used to justify FGM are weak and that "harm must be removed" (a fiqh maxim). They engaged traditional cutters; some of whom surprisingly said they would stop if the community and religious leaders supported them (many had themselves undergone it and thought it was required). Concurrently, Christian minority communities (mainly in the South) led by priests and nuns worked to end the practice among their flocks, citing biblical principles. Outcome: Change in Mali has been gradual but visible in pockets and several villages of Kayes. FGM prevalence in newborn girls dropped to around 30% from near-universal after local religious declarations against it. Those villages held ceremonies where the imam symbolically broke the blade used for cutting, and villagers celebrated with prayer and song, asking God's forgiveness and blessing for abandoning the old practice. These ceremonies often referenced the Quranic verse, "Whoever saves a life, it is as if he saved all mankind" (Qur'an 5:32), framing the move as life-saving.



"Whoever has two daughters and treats them kindly,
they will be a protection for him from Hellfire." (PBUH)

Regarding child marriage, some towns in Mali have started instituting local bylaws (endorsed by imams), setting 18 as the minimum marriage age, even though there is no national law, showing community-driven rulemaking. A key lesson from Mali is the need for persistent engagement: even without national legislation, local faith leaders can use their influence to chip away at acceptance of harmful customs. It also underscores the role of social-moral prestige: when respected imams publicly shift their stance, many followers, even if reluctantly, go along, and over time, attitudes genuinely change.

7.4. Somalia

Somalia has one of the world's highest FGM rates (estimated >95%) and child marriage is also standard in certain areas. The population is virtually 100% Muslim and religious authority is significant. Intervention: Recognising that only religious messaging would be persuasive, Somali scholars and organizations have worked for years to "delink FGM from Islam." A breakthrough occurred in the northern region of Somaliland in 2018: The Ministry of Religious Affairs, together with the highest religious leaders, issued a historic fatwa (religious edict) banning all forms of FGM. The fatwa declared FGM un-Islamic and punishable, directly citing the harm it causes and the lack of Islamic basis. It came after extensive dialogue among sheikhs, where those still supporting a milder form ("Sunna cut") were convinced by evidence and peers to join the zero-tolerance stance. In south-central Somalia, influential imams like Sheikh Mohamed Idris have campaigned through mosque tours and radio programs to educate the public that Islam opposes FGM. They use simple logic that resonates: "If FGM was good, why would it cause so much death and infection? Islam forbids harming the body that Allah gave in perfect form." In Somaliland, the fatwa paved the way for drafting legislation and gave community activists a powerful tool – they could now say: "Our religious leaders forbid it."

Some communities there have seen a perceptible drop in FGM cases reported by clinics. In Somalia, national change is slow due to instability. However, there are positive signs: In areas around Hargeisa and Garowe, many younger religious leaders have wholly stopped performing or blessing FGM ceremonies. Instead, they hold naming ceremonies for newborn girls without cutting, incorporating Quran recitation and blessings for their health and purity. It provides an Islamic alternative to the 'festivity' that used to surround cutting events. Regarding child marriage, Somalia's situation is complicated by lawlessness. However, even there, religious voices promote education: a network of imams in Mogadishu has encouraged families to keep daughters in school by issuing sermons like, "Seeking knowledge is obligatory – let your daughters fulfil this Islamic duty before fulfilling marriage."

Over time, these efforts aim to reduce child marriage rates, too. Somalia's case study demonstrates the importance of high-level religious decrees – a fatwa or similar statement can be a game-changer in a context where secular law is weak but religious edict is respected. It also shows the strategy of replacing a harmful practice with a religiously harmonious alternative (like a benign ceremony) to satisfy social needs without harm.

"There is no religious or cultural basis for FGM." (Somali Fatwa)

7.5. Uganda

Uganda has outlawed FGM since 2010 and has a predominantly Christian population with significant Indigenous beliefs influence; FGM is only practised by a few groups (such as the Sabiny and Pokot in the east), but child marriage has been more widespread nationally. Intervention: Faith leaders from both churches and mosques have been instrumental in enforcing the anti-FGM law and campaigning against child marriage. In the Sabiny community of Eastern Uganda, the Church of Uganda (Anglican) partnered with local government and elders to create Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP) for girls. Pastors and catechists organised "coming-of-age" camps for adolescent girls, including biblical teaching on purity, health education, and a celebratory passage ceremony with the girls' families – all without cutting. They invited Sabiny cultural leaders to incorporate traditional songs and blessings (minus the knife), thus keeping the cultural flavour. At the graduation ceremony, clergy would bless the girls and pray over them, declaring them women in the community's eyes. Simultaneously, local imams in districts with Pokot communities (who are Muslim) preached against FGM and encouraged ARP-like initiatives, sometimes jointly with Christian leaders, which was remarkable cross-faith cooperation.

On child marriage, Ugandan priests have been outspoken. For example, Catholic and Anglican bishops issued pastoral letters reminding parents that marrying off a schoolgirl is against Christian teaching and urging them to heed the government's 18+ marriage law as a matter of conscience. Muslim leaders through the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council likewise issued guidance that forced marriage has no place in Islam and that "education for the girl child is a must." They even set up madrasa classes for married teen girls to continue learning to show that marriage should not end a girl's growth. Outcome: The Sabiny's Alternative Rite proved successful – over several years, hundreds of girls graduated through this program instead of being cut, and the community's support grew as they saw girls could become respected women without FGM. The prevalence of FGM among the Sabiny reportedly dropped from 50% to below 20% in a decade. A Sabiny elder said, "We thought our culture would die if girls were not circumcised, but we see now it is thriving – our girls sing our songs with joy, not tears." In Uganda's Muslim communities, there is anecdotal evidence that child marriage is decreasing as literacy rises, in part thanks to local imams enforcing the government's stance. One imam refused to officiate a nikah (marriage contract) for a 16-year-old girl, quoting the Prophet's example of seeking a woman's consent and her maturity – the family relented and kept her in school for two more years. These stories from Uganda teach us about the power of culturally sensitive alternatives and the importance of religious figures using their authority to uphold state and moral law in tandem. They also highlight that success is measured by the laws passed and the changes in community ceremonies and narratives.



CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8

Faith-Based Strategies for Ending Harmful Practices

8. Introduction

This section outlines broader strategies in which faith leaders can participate as part of a comprehensive approach to eliminating FGM and child marriage. Religious leaders wear many hats in their communities – spiritual guide, educator, counsellor, advocate – and thus are uniquely positioned to attack the problem from multiple angles. Here, we detail the role of faith leaders in three critical areas: Community awareness and education, Advocacy and policy engagement, Grassroots mobilisation and sermon guides. Each of these is a pillar in creating lasting change, often overlapping. By engaging in all three, faith leaders can ensure efforts are holistic – changing minds, changing systems, and changing social norms.

Rates of FGM in Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Benin have dropped by at least 30% over the past 30 years.⁸



8.1. Community Awareness and Education

Faith leaders can organise and lead various educational initiatives to inform the community about the harms of FGM and child marriage and the teachings of faith on these issues. It includes hosting workshops, seminars, and interfaith forums where medical experts, theologians, and survivors may speak. For example, a church might hold a "Family Health Sunday" or a mosque a special madrasa class, inviting a doctor to explain FGM's consequences and a religious scholar to discuss why the practice is not required by religion. Since clergy and imams are trusted, people listen when they endorse the information. In sermons, they continue to raise awareness: integrating lessons from scripture that relate (as we have outlined) keeps the message in people's minds. Distributing informational materials is another key task – pamphlets, booklets, or even simple flyers (perhaps drawn from the Information Sheets and conversation points in this toolkit) can be handed out after services. Some communities have used creative arts: skits during youth group or composing songs/hymns with anti-FGM lyrics that can be sung in the local language. Faith leaders should also encourage open dialogue – maybe set aside time after prayers or in women's fellowship meetings for question and answer. As these topics were taboo, creating a norm that it's okay to talk and ask in a faith setting is transformative. Religious leaders act as educators and myth-busters, correcting misinformation with compassion and patience. Over time, this shifts the collective understanding – people begin to see, "Our faith teaches us to value our daughters; it does not require these harmful customs." That awakening at scale is the foundation for the abandonment of the practices.



"Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and oppression" (Qur'an 16:90)

8.2. Advocacy and Policy Engagement

Faith leaders can significantly influence policy and its implementation with their moral authority and social standing. In many contexts, religious leaders communicate directly with local authorities and national policymakers on programmes protecting vulnerable citizens. For example, interfaith coalitions can lobby for stricter enforcement of existing anti-FGM or child marriage laws or for the passage of new legislation where gaps exist. Because politicians know faith leaders represent large constituencies, their support or pressure can be decisive. A concrete action might be a delegation of prominent clerics visiting the parliament or Ministry of Gender to present a faith-backed declaration calling for action. Additionally, faith leaders can use their platforms to push for resources, allocate a budget for girls' education, healthcare for FGM complications, or rescue shelters. On the community level, religious leaders often sit on local councils – they should advocate for community rules (bylaws) against FGM/CM, aligning customary law with national law. For public advocacy, they can participate in media campaigns – a respected pastor or imam speaking on national radio or TV against FGM has a considerable impact (Somalia's example of radio sermons by sheikhs is a case in point). They can also leverage religious events or holidays – for instance, give a keynote at an Eid gathering or a Christmas service on protecting girls, thereby framing the advocacy in a holy context. Another aspect is using the religious platform to call for policy change during services, e.g., organising faithful to sign petitions or to support local officials who champion women's rights, thus creating political will. In essence, faith leaders become the voice of conscience for the community's power structures, insisting that laws and policies reflect the compassionate values of the faith. As World Vision's advisor noted, united faith voices can "slay the dragon" of gender-based violence (GBV) sooner, and indeed, when churches and mosques team up to demand justice, it is hard for authorities to ignore.

8.3. Grassroots Mobilisation

Changing attitudes and laws is vital but insufficient if not accompanied by changing social norms. Religious leaders can trigger changes at the community level by engaging their congregants. For instance, faith leaders can help establish community committees that include representatives from various sectors – the imam, the priest, the traditional chief, the women's leader, and a youth representative. This committee can plan outreach activities like village meetings, door-to-door campaigns, school visits, and alternative rite ceremonies. Because it is inclusive, it sends a unified message. Faith leaders often have access to the most remote families through their rural clergy, lay catechists, and madrasa teachers – they can train these local emissaries to spread the message and report any planned cutting or underage marriage, creating a community surveillance and response system. Another aspect of grassroots mobilisation is supporting local initiatives and champions: for example, if a group of teenage girls start a "Let Girls Be Girls" club to speak out against child marriage, religious leaders can endorse them, give them meeting space in the church/mosque compound, or feature them in service. This validation empowers grassroots actors. Mentorship is key too: faith leaders can mentor emerging advocates – perhaps a midwife against FGM or a father who stood against marrying off his daughter – helping them share their testimony widely and grooming them to mentor others. It creates a ripple effect of change agents. Engaging cultural leaders is often crucial: many traditional chiefs or elders are also custodians of ceremonies; when faith leaders approach them not with confrontation but with respect and shared concern, they often find common ground (for instance, an elder may agree that "our culture values children, so yes, we should stop a practice that harms them"). There have been cases where chiefs become champions and enforced communal fines on those who cut girls, greatly accelerating abandonment. Faith leaders should seek out these partnerships.



8.4 Sermon Guidelines

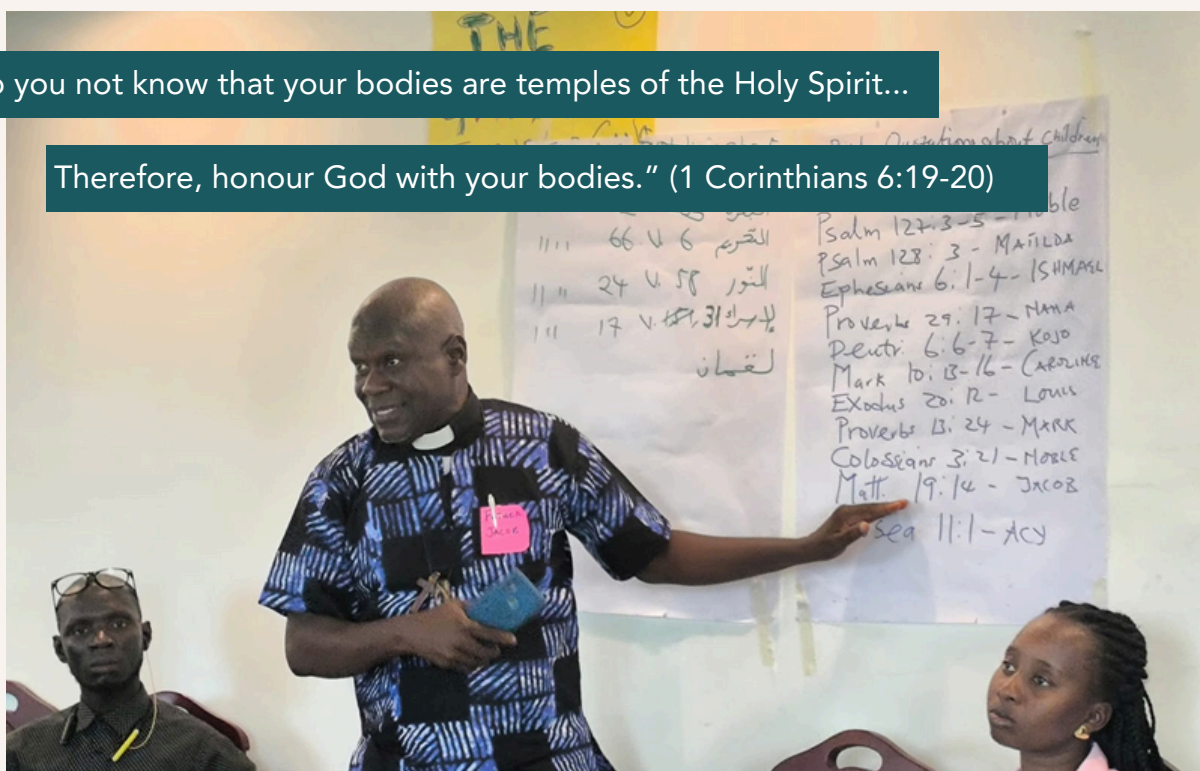
8.4.1 For Christian Leaders

Build sermons around themes of “Protecting the least of these” or “Your body is a temple.”

- Use biblical narratives: the story of Jesus raising Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:41–42) – highlights how Jesus calls a 12-year-old “Talitha kum” (little girl, arise) and restores her to life. Parallel: we are called to let our little girls arise into the fullness of life, not cut them down or marry them off prematurely.
- Invoke the image of the Church as the Bride of Christ – pure and unblemished (Ephesians 5:25–27). Explain that this purity is spiritual and comes from love and sacrifice, not physical cutting. The “circumcision of the heart” (Romans 2:29) is what Christians focus on, not on the flesh. Therefore, any physical act that harms is contrary to the New Covenant.
- Quote church statements: e.g., “The Lord has sent me to bind up the broken hearted” (Isaiah 61:1) – then say, “How can we bind up the broken hearted if we are the ones breaking our daughters’ hearts through forced practices? We must end this.” Mention that many church organisations (like the All-Africa Conference of Churches or Pope Francis in his *Amoris Laetitia*) advocate ending child marriage.
- Teaching in Bible classes: use simple analogies – if we wouldn’t give a stone when our child asks for bread (Matthew 7:9), why give her pain when she asks for love? Encourage questions and reaffirm that rejecting harmful traditions is not a sin but aligned with Christ’s mission of abundant life (John 10:10).

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit...

Therefore, honour God with your bodies.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)



8.4.2. For Muslim Leaders

Utilise khutbahs (Friday sermons) and madrasa lessons

- Focus on Qur'anic ethics: talk about the dignity of children in Islam (e.g., Luqman advising his son in Qur'an 31). Emphasise amanah: daughters are a trust from Allah, and parents will be accountable for how they treat that trust. Hurting the child breaches the trust.
- Sunna examples: The Prophet's (PBUH) kindness to children (like shortening prayer when hearing a child cry). Mention explicit Sunna: "Whoever does not show mercy to our young ones is not one of us." Ask, is cutting a form of mercy? Certainly not; hence, we must abandon it to truly follow the Prophet's sunnah of rahmah (mercy).
- Sharia objectives (Maqasid al-Shariah): Preservation of life and progeny are key goals. FGM and child marriage threaten the lives and the well-being of future generations, so they contradict the maqasid.
- Clarify misconceptions: If some argue weak Sunna about the Prophet telling a cutter: "Just remove a little," explain the consensus of scholars that this narration is either not authentic or not a general command. Instead, highlight that many majority-Muslim countries (like Egypt and Indonesia) have banned FGM with the support of scholars. In your sermon, say, "Our great scholars like Sheikh So-and-so have said this practice should stop because Islam is a religion of kindness, not harm."
- Stress mutual consent in marriage: Quote Qur'an 4:19: "O you who believe, you are forbidden to inherit women against their will..." and the Prophet's example of consulting his daughter Fatima. Reinforce that Islam requires baligh (puberty) and rushd (sound judgment) for marriage (Qur'an 4:6), so marrying off a 13-year-old contravenes this guidance.
- Offer the Quran study circles on verses about marriage, care of daughters, etc., to slowly shift perspectives.

8.4.3 Additional Mobilisation

Additionally, mobilisation involves using religious gatherings as launchpads for community campaigns – e.g., declaring an "Anti-FGM week" where after Friday prayers, teams go out to each household, or during Lent season, encouraging Christians to "fast" from harmful traditions and instead do charitable works (like supporting girls' schooling). By infusing the movement with spiritual significance, people feel part of something larger than themselves – almost like a revival or jihad for a noble cause. Finally, faith leaders should avoid involving men and boys at the grassroots. As noted, men's voices in the community can reinforce the message in male circles (e.g., at the well or marketplace). Possibly start male champions groups who pledge to be "protectors, not perpetrators." All these grassroots actions, when coordinated, create a powerful social norm shift: the community collectively starts to view FGM and child marriage as "things of the past, not approved by our faith," and the new norm – protecting girls – as a shared value.



CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 9

Harmonised Interfaith Framework for Ending Harmful Practices

9. Introduction

In the spirit of unity and shared humanity, the following framework serves as a charter of commitment by diverse faith communities to protect girls' rights. This section distils the essence of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Bahá'í, and African Traditional religious teachings into core values and action principles that guide our collective efforts to end FGM and child marriage. Faith leaders can adopt this framework as a moral compass for interfaith collaboration, ensuring our different voices harmonise on the fundamental truth: our daughters are cherished blessings entrusted to our care by the Divine, and it is our sacred duty to help them thrive.



9.1. Core Shared Values

Despite theological differences, our traditions converge on values that categorically oppose the harm of FGM and child marriage. These shared values form the moral foundation of our united stance. When we invoke them, we speak not as Christians or Muslims or others alone but as custodians of a collective spiritual heritage that holds life sacred, demands justice, and enjoins compassion. They reinforce one another – compassion fuels justice, education enables dignity, and freedom honours sanctity – painting a holistic vision of communities where girls are safe and cherished.

- **The Sanctity of Life and Body:** Every human life is a gift from God (or the Sacred), and the body is its vessel. All faiths command us to safeguard life and not to inflict unjust injury. We, therefore, regard practices that endanger a girl's life or health – such as FGM's risk of infection or a too-early pregnancy's risk to life – as violations of the sanctity bestowed by the Creator. The body's integrity is to be respected; as one Christian scripture says: "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19), and likewise, Islam teaches that our bodies have rights over us to be cared for.
- **Human Dignity and Gender Equality:** Every girl is endowed with inherent dignity and worth equal to that of a boy. Where women and girls are honoured and allowed to flourish, God is pleased. Where they are debased or harmed, we all suffer. This echoes across traditions: the Qur'an (17:70) asserts that God honoured the Children of Adam – all humans, male and female. Sikhism's Guru Nanak asked: "Why call her inferior? From her, kings are born." Bahá'í writings proclaim equality as a fundamental truth. Therefore, practices predicated on the idea that girls are lesser or must be controlled (through cutting their bodies or trading them into marriage) offend this universal principle of dignity. Treating girls as full persons means listening to their hopes, educating them, and letting them consent to life decisions – this is a holy duty in every faith.

- **Compassion and Protection for the Vulnerable:** The measure of any community's righteousness is how it treats those most vulnerable – and often, young girls have been among the most susceptible. Our religions call us to be protectors, not perpetrators. The Bible enjoins defending “the orphan and the widow” (which by extension means any vulnerable child). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is called “Rahmatan lil-‘alamin” (a mercy to all creation), demonstrating that mercy is at the core of Islamic ethics – and he specifically showed extraordinary compassion to children. In ATR, elders are entrusted by the ancestors to protect the young, ensuring the lineage prospers. Compassion (karuna in Sanskrit, daya in many languages) must override any attachment to harmful customs. This means that even if a practice is longstanding, the moment we recognise that it causes suffering, mercy dictates that we discontinue it. We commit to empathy-led action: listening to girls' pain and refusing to turn away.
- **Justice and Equity:** All faiths believe God is just and loves justice. Justice demands that we right the wrongs and remove the inequalities that FGM and child marriage perpetuate. These practices are fundamentally unjust: they deprive girls of bodily autonomy, education, and equal standing in society. In many communities, they are forms of gender injustice and age injustice. A just society, as envisioned by our spiritual teachings, is one where no one is oppressed or exploited – “Let justice roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24) and “Allah commands justice and excellence...” (Qur'an 16:90). We, therefore, see ending these practices as part of establishing God's justice on earth. Justice also involves legal accountability – supporting laws that protect minors and punish perpetrators fairly – as well as social justice in addressing the root causes (poverty, lack of education) that fuel these practices.
- **Freedom of Choice and Informed Consent:** True religion uplifts free will and personal conviction in moral actions. Marriage, in particular, is universally held as valid only when entered by free consent. Christianity regards marriage as a covenant – meaningless if coerced. In Islam, a marriage contract is only valid with the bride's consent (a Sunna narrates that the Prophet (PBUH) annulled a forced marriage). Hindu marriage (swayamvara tradition) ideally involves the bride choosing from eligible grooms. Bahá'í law explicitly requires the consent of both parties and also the parents, underscoring mutual agreement. Thus, child marriage violates a core moral law – a child cannot give informed consent. Likewise, altering someone's body permanently (as in FGM) without their informed consent is ethically unacceptable and, we affirm, religiously unsupportable. God, who gave humans the freedom to choose good, does not want us to strip that freedom from our daughters before they are even old enough to choose their path. The exercise of conscience – a gift from the Divine – is denied by these practices, and so we unite in upholding freedom for girls to grow and choose.

- **The Primacy of Education and Enlightenment:** Knowledge is light in every tradition. Ignorance is often the midwife of harmful practices. Conversely, when communities are enlightened by both religious wisdom and scientific knowledge, harmful practices wane. All our faiths extol the pursuit of knowledge: Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said it's obligatory for every believer, Buddha taught that dispelling ignorance leads to the end of suffering, the Guru Granth Sahib opens with an invocation to truth and knowledge, and the Bible says: "Wisdom is supreme – get wisdom." Therefore, one of our shared missions is to educate, to bring the truth about FGM and child marriage's effects to every corner, and to educate our girls and boys so that the next generation will not revert to these practices. The Bahá'í writings specifically prioritise girls' education, recognising that educated mothers raise enlightened families. This core value drives us to ensure that ending FGM/child marriage isn't just stopping something but also starting something – the opportunity for girls to learn, thrive, and contribute. Enlightenment also means continually re-examining traditions in the light of ethics and evidence, a process encouraged in our sacred texts (e.g., the Quran's emphasis on using reason, the Upanishads' tradition of questioning).



9.2. Shared Action Principles

Building on the above values, we outline practical principles to guide faith leaders and communities in collaborative action. These principles are derived from successful faith-based initiatives and reflect what our doctrines and values indicate we should do in real-world efforts to eliminate FGM and child marriage.

- **Speak with One Voice:** When diverse faith leaders publicly stand together against FGM and child marriage, it amplifies the message and leaves no doubt that "this is the right thing to do." We commit to interfaith solidarity on this issue, organising joint declarations, events, and messages whenever possible. Division is detrimental; unity is our strength. As seen in Ethiopia, when Orthodox priests, Protestant pastors and Muslim imams collectively pledged to end child marriage, thousands of families followed. We will create inter-religious committees or coalitions in our localities to coordinate efforts, ensuring consistency and mutual support. In practice, this means that if one community takes action (e.g., a church group stops a child marriage), leaders of other faiths will endorse and support them rather than undermine their efforts. We present a united front so that those who resist cannot play one faith against another.

- **Lead by Example and Policy:** Faith institutions should model the change internally. Each congregation or community should adopt clear policies: for example, a mosque stating it will not allow any nikah (marriage) for under-18 girls on its premises, a church deciding it will not solemnise a marriage involving a minor, or a temple committee resolving that any member who performs FGM cannot hold leadership roles. By institutionalising these rules, we demonstrate our seriousness. Additionally, leaders must lead by personal example: clergy members, imams, chiefs, and others should ensure their daughters are neither cut nor married early (many already do, but publicly sharing this fact can be powerful). When congregants see that “Our pastor’s daughters are in university” or “The sheikh refused an FGM ceremony for his baby,” it carries weight. We also encourage faith-based schools and clinics to integrate anti-FGM/child marriage education into their services. Essentially, we put our own house in order as a testament to our convictions.



- **Engage and Educate through Every Channel:** We will utilise all available channels of communication to spread awareness and shift norms, from sermons and scripture study to media and the arts. This means preaching regularly on the topic (not just a one-off), incorporating lessons into madrasa, Sunday school, and gurdwara katha (talks), as well as celebrating positive developments in our newsletters or notice boards. When appropriate, utilise mass media – such as radio programs featuring interfaith panels, TV spots with religious endorsements, and social media campaigns that feature imams and priests speaking directly to youth. We will also leverage cultural arts to encourage the creation of songs, dramas, and poems within our faith cultural context that denounce the practices and exalt girls’ value (for instance, Christian youth choirs can sing about daughters being “fearfully and wonderfully made” and not needing alteration). By saturating the community with the message in diverse forms, we quicken the change of attitude. Crucially, we tailor messages to the audience: compassionate for elders (addressing their fears of dishonour), empowering for youth (calling them to become change agents), and informative for midwives/circumcisers (offering alternative livelihoods and explaining the harm). Our principle is education with empathy – persistent, kind, truth-telling in local languages and metaphors people understand.

- **Offer Safe Havens and Support:** As faith communities, we must be havens of refuge. Suppose a girl flees cutting or has a forced marriage. In that case, she should find sanctuary – whether shelter in a convent/mosque compound or figuratively in supportive members willing to host her or advocate for her. We encourage establishing or supporting “safe houses” or assigning trained congregants to be guardians ad litem for threatened children. For instance, local women’s fellowship groups or Muslim women’s associations can be mobilised to discreetly monitor girls in the community and intervene or alert clergy/imams when a harmful event is planned. We will also develop a network of “faith champions” – individuals in each community (such as catechists, alims, or youth leaders) designated as point persons to handle cases compassionately and confidentially, linking them with legal and health services. Furthermore, our institutions should provide healing support, including counselling (spiritual counselling alongside psychological first aid) for survivors and their families, as well as rituals or prayers for healing. For example, a pastor might hold an anointing service for a girl who was cut, asking God to heal her body and soul; an imam might do a special dua for a divorced teen mom to reassure her that she’s valued and welcome in the community. No girl or survivor should feel ostracised – instead, she should feel the faith community rally around her with love and tangible support (medical care, continuing education, etc.).
- **Remain Steadfast and Patient:** Ultimately, we recognise that ending practices so deeply rooted in culture and economic factors is not a quick or easy task. We pledge to persevere with patience, humility, and faith. When there are setbacks – an incident of FGM happens or a child marriage slips by – we will not despair or shame but respond by doubling our efforts in awareness and support for the girl involved. We understand that change often faces resistance; we address it through continued dialogue, prayer, and by demonstrating that our commitment is unwavering. Just as scripture likens teaching to sowing seeds on various soils, not all seeds sprout at once; however, we continue to sow. We trust in God’s timing for the harvest of change. If we maintain unity and keep our messaging consistent and compassionate, over time, hearts will soften. We also continuously self-reflect and seek divine guidance to ensure we are approaching this work in line with our faith virtues – not with arrogance or mere activism, but with love and integrity. Our endurance itself will be a witness to our sincerity.

9.3. Conclusion of Framework

In conclusion, we affirm that ending FGM and child marriage is not only a social imperative but a deeply spiritual mission. It is a journey of aligning our cultures more closely with the compassionate, just, and life-affirming tenets of our faiths. By uniting across pulpits and prayer mats, temples and sacred groves, we amplify the call that no practice harming our daughters can be justified in the name of tradition or religion. We go forward together – clergy and lay, elders and youth, men and women – committed to being the keepers of girls' dreams. In doing so, we plant seeds of change that will bloom into healthier families, stronger communities, and a more righteous society in the eyes of God and humanity. "May our collaborative efforts bear the fruits of hope: a generation of girls who grow up educated, respected, and empowered to fulfil their God-given potential and communities that can proudly say they upheld the divine mandate to "do no harm and do abundant good." This is our prayer and our promise.



"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8)



CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 10

Faith Leaders' Role in Community Awareness and Advocacy

10. Introduction

Faith leaders play a vital role in positively transforming community attitudes and inspiring collective action to end FGM and child marriage. This section emphasises the importance of collaboration across sectors—bringing together religious and cultural leaders, government actors, development partners, and grassroots communities—to drive meaningful change. Faith leaders can challenge harmful traditions by using their moral authority and trusted voices while grounding advocacy in shared values of compassion, justice, and human dignity.

This section also provides resources for further learning. These include theological texts, historical analyses, real-world case studies, practical guides, and multimedia tools—curated from both Muslim and Christian perspectives. These tools empower faith leaders to speak out and lead their communities toward lasting values-driven transformation.

10.1. Resources for Further Learning

Here are recommended resources, including books, articles, and guides on FGM, child marriage, and the intersection of faith and culture. These offer insights, analyses, and practical tips that can enrich one's understanding and ability to teach others.

- **Historical Analyses of FGM and Child Marriage:** Resources on this topic delve into the origins, distribution, and evolution of these practices.
 - *Female Circumcision: The History, the Myth* by Asma El Dareer – examines FGM in African societies and clarifies what is cultural vs. religious.
 - *UNICEF/UNFPA joint report* on child marriage trends globally. These writings help one appreciate the broader context and debunk the idea that “it has always been this way” by showing how practices can and have changed over time.
- **Theological and Ethical Critiques:** These works specifically address FGM and child marriage from religious perspectives.
 - *Female Genital Mutilation: A Guide to Islamic Positions* – a compilation by scholars that includes fatwas from Al-Azhar and other Islamic institutions condemning FGM.
 - *When Tradition Hurts: Christian Reflections on Female Genital Mutilation* by theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye (hypothetical example) might be listed, or publications by the World Council of Churches on gender justice. Such resources provide robust scriptural exegesis and doctrinal arguments that can be used in sermons or teaching. They reinforce that opposing these practices is supported by high-level religious scholarship (not a fringe idea), giving faith leaders more confidence in their stance.

- **Practical Guides and Case Studies:** Include manuals or reports documenting successful interventions.
 - *Stories of Change: Ending Cutting Together* – a report detailing community abandonment stories from Senegal or Kenya, or "From Pilot to Policy: Faith-Led Approaches to End Child Marriage in Bangladesh" by a development agency. These illustrate real examples (like some we summarised) with data and testimonials, which are helpful for planning programs.
 - The *Mind & Heart Dialogue Facilitator's Guide* is listed as an essential resource that complements this toolkit. It provides strategies for engaging diverse groups and fostering empathetic listening—extremely useful skills for anyone facilitating interfaith community conversations on sensitive issues.
- **Multimedia and Online Resources:** We also suggest online platforms
 - Websites like *Girls Not Brides* (a global partnership with faith-specific resources on ending child marriage)
 - *28 Too Many* (research on FGM in African countries, including faith perspectives). Many have downloadable fact sheets, training videos, or sermon outlines. Digital libraries such as BibleGateway or Quran.com can be handy for quick access to scripture references. This manual's user could benefit from short documentary films (some NGOs have produced videos of faith leaders speaking out, which can be shown in community meetings). We list a few reputable links for further exploration.
- **Contacts and Networking:** Provide a list of organisations and key contacts in the country or region engaged in this work. For instance, the national anti-FGM board or child protection unit, local NGOs, or women's rights groups that welcome collaboration with faith communities. Building a network is crucial – it gives access to training, materials, and sometimes funding for community initiatives. We include, for example, the contact of the Inter-Religious Council or similar agency coordinating faith-based efforts so that individual leaders can plug into more extensive campaigns or report progress.



"I will be a qawwam (protector) for the women in my

family as the Qur'an instructs (Qur'an 4:34),

ensuring they are safe and respected, and I know

forcing them into harm is against Allah's trust."

Anti-FGM Legal Glossary with example clauses in Africa

<u>Term</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)	The umbrella term is used to describe all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons.
Prohibition	Many laws include “Prohibition of FGM” in their title or within their provisions, indicating a complete legal ban.
Offence/Criminal Offence	FGM is criminalised and categorised as a punishable offense. The act, aiding, abetting, or failure to report are often criminal offences.
Child Protection	FGM is often addressed within broader child protection or children's rights frameworks, invoking special penalties when minors are involved.
Consent is Irrelevant	FGM is unlawful even with the victim’s consent.
Cross-border FGM	Offence committed if a person is taken out of the country to undergo FGM.
Attempt/Aiding/Abetting	Criminalisation of efforts to support or organise FGM even if not performed.
Health Professional Ban	Medicalisation of FGM is also criminalised.
Awareness/Education Provisions	Some laws include mandates for public awareness
Mandatory Reporting	Health workers, educators, religious leaders or others may be legally required to report suspected FGM cases. Failure to report can also be a criminal offence.
Protective Orders	Courts may issue orders to prevent FGM.

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African Council of Religious Leaders
Religions for Peace

G15, PAVILION COURT, MEMBLEY ESTATE, OFF NORTHERN BYPASS
P.O. BOX 42117-00100, NAIROBI KENYA
TEL: +254 727 531 170 OR +254 737 531 170
EMAIL: SECRETARIAT@ACRL-RFP.ORG
WEBSITE: WWW.ACRL-RFP.ORG

