

National dialogue to prevent violence against women



Religious leaders in Lebanon, and throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, are highly influential figures. They directly and indirectly affect laws, policies, and social norms. They also have an untapped potential to play a key role in the prevention of violence against women (VAW). They can reach out to their communities, influencing beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, in many communities, religious leaders are often more influential than local governments or secular civil community leaders.

ABAAD has been pioneering the field of engaging men and boys in MENA since 2011. This case study is based on a project that was led between 2012 and 2015 and focused on engaging with religious leaders in Lebanon on preventing VAW and developing a shared vision for gender equality.

ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS

As part of this project, ABAAD succeeded in holding seven national dialogue sessions between 10 feminist organisations and six religious leaders, representing various religions and sects in Lebanon, to discuss common ground in ending VAW. The goal of these sessions was to explore both commonalities and differences on the topic could be explored and identified.

The project succeeded in obtaining buy-in from different religious leaders regarding the prevention of VAW, where they committed to act as advocates for ending it. By the end of the national dialogue, feminist organisations were aware of the different areas where they could build alliances with religious leaders in an effort to end VAW, as well as the topics that were more difficult to agree upon. As a result, it became clear which religious leaders could be approached for support on topics such as violence against women, child custody, marital rape, inheritance and from which perspective each religious structure could be engaged to work together on these issues.

The second part of the project targeted heads of religious structures in Lebanon. In a first-of-a-kind consultative roundtable, which gathered religious leaders and figures in Lebanon, a common platform was created. This platform committed religious leaders to act as advocates for promoting gender equality and ending violence. These commitments were recorded and became part of a nation-wide campaign called “We Believe” that highlighted verses from the New Testament, Qur’an, and quotes from the highest religious authorities in Lebanon that condemned VAW. This approach was successful in engaging the general population and also supported many women survivors from receiving court orders to break the cycle of violence within intimate partnerships.

The approach of engaging religious structures must be done strategically and gradually. For interventions that require the buy-in of local religious leaders in a specific area, bilateral meetings or discussion tables is the best approach to ensure that they support and advocate for the need of the implementation in their area. Yet, when attempting to reach the general national population, it is most effective to engage the high religious authorities that are followed by the masses. Ideally, both strategies should be applied jointly.

THE IMPACT

Through the facilitation of national dialogue and by engaging simultaneously at multiple levels of society, ABAAD and partners succeeded in raising broad awareness of VAW throughout Lebanon.

The work with religious leaders in Lebanon is an example of an initiative attempting to catalyze systemic change through influential stakeholders and gate-keepers in the country. It is an approach that was done in parallel with grass root strategies and targeted both the community and individual levels of society. It is when these approaches are in harmony with one another, and informed by a feminist framework, that sustainable and holistic change for women and children in Lebanon becomes possible.