

SVRI sexual
violence
research
initiative

Non-Violent Parenting and Faith:

Reclaiming sacred teachings
for child dignity, protection,
and flourishing



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Dialogue Brief 2, Faith & GBV Community of Practice



Background

This brief is the second in a series which draws on interactive learning dialogues between adult participants on the SVRI's global course "Faith and Helping Children Thrive without Violence". This is coordinated by SVRI's Working Group on Faith and Violence against Children, which is part of the [Faith & Gender-Based Violence Community of Practice](#). The course is led and designed by [Selina Palm](#), who is also chair of the Working Group. [Noor ur Rehman](#) is a course graduate, trainee co-facilitator and course contributor.

This virtual course was developed in 2025 and brings together experienced adult practitioners from diverse country contexts and different religious faiths to co-create multimedia content and to reflect and learn together through shared testimonies, lived experience, and practice-based knowledge. The insights below centre participants' own voices and experiences in homes, faith spaces, and communities. The course emphasises the specific realities of the African continent whilst drawing on those from other contexts too.

This Dialogue Brief forms part of a series on the value of courageous conversations on these sensitive topics. It aims to equip readers to continue this conversation within their own faith contexts and therefore includes key discussion questions that can be used in small group settings.¹

Why this theme matters

Across many geographical contexts, certain forms of violence against children are still widely normalised as "discipline" and can be framed as "godly correction" by some faith leaders across different religious traditions. This offers an aura of morality to practices which [evidence](#) increasingly shows are damaging to children. A [global scoping study](#) by the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities identified **violent discipline** as a key contested issue for faith actors working on violence against children today. Recognising this is important in a world where many are part of religious systems and where religious norms still hold significant power.

Violent discipline is when children are raised using methods that rely on physical force or verbal intimidation to punish unwanted behaviours and encourage desired ones. Physical discipline and psychological aggression frequently occur together, exacerbating the short- and long-term harm they inflict... Violent discipline is the most widespread and socially accepted type of violence against children. (World Health Organisation, 2024)

Course participants consistently noted that faith spaces are often the first place where many parents and caregivers seek guidance, making faith institutions powerful both as drivers of harm and as agents of positive change. Faith systems can form authoritative pre-existing containers for meaning-making across families, schools, and communities, shaping the formation of families in ways that legitimise harm or catalyse positive change. Participants repeatedly described intergenerational patterns which transmit violent discipline as underpinned by harmful religious norms and beliefs.

A female faith leader participant from Kenya notes, "While some religious traditions justify physical discipline as divinely ordained, this perspective conflicts with contemporary understandings of child rights and well-being. Faith leaders play a crucial role in shaping narratives around discipline and must be at the forefront of advocating for non-violent, nurturing approaches to challenge the notion that physical punishment is a form of moral correction. Faith communities should foster parenting practices that align with principles of love, patience, and respect" (Purity, March 2025).

Faith systems span multiple generations. According to many participants, faith leadership, if well-equipped, can form a key leverage point for sustained prevention and change around patterns of violent discipline.

"Children are gifts from Allah, entrusted to our care and deserving of compassion and protection. True strength lies in mercy and self-control—not anger" (Enan, woman doctor from Sudan, November 2025).

¹ Fifty adult participants graduated from this course in 2025. They included faith leaders, doctors, lawyers, social workers, psychologists and child ministry teachers and came from multiple religious traditions and over 20 countries, primarily from the Global South. All quotations and insights in this dialogue brief are taken (with permission to use first names) from a thematic analysis of participant discussion forums and contributor videos which formed a key aspect of the course pedagogical approach.



1. Dialogues with adult survivors of violent discipline

Place survivor stories at the heart of shared learning

Course participants and contributors included several adult survivors of violent discipline in childhood. They described fear, injury, trauma, and learning difficulties as immediate negative outcomes, as well as other long-term impacts on their lives. At the same time, participants also included some faith leaders who believed strongly that their faith allowed or mandated certain violent disciplinary practices.

The course approach opened safe spaces for direct testimony by survivors who were also people of faith. Interactive engagement with those stories of harm was identified by participants as a vital entry point for challenging faith-informed justifications. Although the phrase ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’ is not a direct quote from the Bible, it is common in Christian spaces and reflects similar Biblical verses used to legitimate violence. One female participant from Cameroon explained that the verse “‘Spare the rod’ has been gravely misinterpreted...”, and pointed to significant childhood trauma caused by its misuse (Ngum, October 2025).



Featured Story: No Peace at Home

Ogechi grew up in Nigeria with a father who was deeply involved in the Pentecostal Church. Despite being a chronic abuser, his philanthropic reputation meant the church and wider community did not see him as such. He regularly used Bible verses from Proverbs to justify beating Ogechi and her siblings with a rod, often causing serious injuries. Each child was affected differently; some withdrew socially, while others struggled academically. When Ogechi’s mother sought help from their pastor, blame was placed on her and the children rather than on the perpetrator. Because her father was a major financial supporter of the church, other pastors were reluctant to intervene, and his use of religious justifications meant many did not recognise the abuse. As an adult, Ogechi now works with pastors in Nigeria to educate them about the harms of violent discipline. She develops premarital counselling approaches that include non-violent parenting education. She believes pastors often want to help but lack knowledge or prioritise their church’s reputation and income, leading them to blame children instead of addressing abuse.

Open safe spaces for listeners to connect to their own experiences

Ogechi’s bravery in sharing her own story as part of the course content opened a safer space for other course participants to reconnect to and share their own childhood experiences of violent discipline justified by faith. A male course participant from Liberia noted, “Ogechi’s story reminds me of my own experience with my father. He not only physically harmed me and my siblings but also our mother... As a consequence of his wickedness, we lived in such fear of him that we could not communicate with him at all. When I faced trouble, I found it difficult to express myself, leaving me emotionally traumatised and acting out of fear” (Kuieh, March 2025). A female Christian participant from Cameroon pointed out that mothers can also be abusive, saying, “Oge’s story reminds me of my childhood experience with our mother” (Fola, May 2025).

A Muslim participant from Kenya also reinforced her negative experience at home as a child saying, “It’s true that when there is no peace at home for the child, it affects the academics and performance of the child. I remember my father was a police man and always used his rod to beat us at home” (Ulfat, November 2025).²

Participants insisted that in these situations, these specific sacred texts need to be critically engaged and reinterpreted in the specific light of these powerful survivor testimonies.

“When the (Bible) verse about the ‘rod’ is taken literally or out of context, it turns guidance into a tool of fear and harm. The ‘rod’ should symbolise loving correction and not physical punishment.” (Grace, October 2025)

² Participants also shared lived experiences of violent discipline by caregivers within other faith settings, such as in religious schools, also frequently justified by the misuse of sacred texts, but this topic is beyond the scope of this brief.



Speak about the lifetime impact of violent discipline

Stories shared by participant survivors powerfully embodied what research evidence already shows: the immediate and lifelong impact that violent, punitive action by caregivers can have, especially when religiously justified as corrective discipline, or as required for learning. Experiences shared included fear, injury, emotional trauma, and poor school performance, and a lost ability to communicate safely in families.

Key Shift: Moving from silencing or blaming our inner child to speaking up about our own lived experiences of harm to heal as adults. This also helps break intergenerational cycles of violent discipline that can continue to be justified by faith.

Creating spaces for participants to connect to their inner child offered opportunities to gently explore how patterns of violent discipline experienced in childhood can be normalised and then passed on. Hearing about impact directly from survivors helped critical self-reflection on long held faith beliefs and practices.



Questions for further dialogue:

1. Discuss what you feel your inner child has to say to you about how they were treated growing up.
2. How have your own childhood experiences, and the faith beliefs learnt back then, shaped how you may discipline children as an adult?

2. Dialogues with families for non-violent parenting

Parental love, fear, and the legacy of violent discipline

Across diverse faith traditions, participants who were parents described carrying deep love for their children and also deep fears of getting parenting ‘wrong’. Many grew up in homes where obedience was demanded through silence and force, and now find themselves repeating harmful patterns they never chose.

One course contributor, who is a faith leader and qualified family therapist, invited participants to think more deeply about what is often going on when adults hit children. Her psycho-social exercises encouraged them to connect with their own inner child before discussing the topic together. She noted that **“trauma that is not transformed will be transmitted”**, a reflection viewed by many of the participants as a key course insight.

This captured a growing recognition that violence in parenting is often less about discipline and more about unhealed stress, fear, and inherited pain. This was reinforced by other participants. One Muslim participant from Uganda said, *“When an adult hits a child, it is the adult having a temper tantrum, but it is the child who should be allowed temper tantrums because their brain is still developing”* (Fatuma, April 2025).

Addressing violent discipline as unhealed trauma

Participants also spoke about the invisible weight of intergenerational trauma, and how they feel that violent discipline, especially when framed as punishment, can leave lifelong trauma, an inferiority complex, fears of doing wrong and reduced confidence from childhood, which can be carried into adulthood:

“Many parents still carry traumatic traces and need healing, so they do not transfer these traits to their children...part of this transition to non-violent parenting involves us healing first” (Ngum, November 2026).


Ngum’s Baptist church network in Cameroon runs a family week each year focused on preaching, teaching and addressing common issues in families, including violent discipline and abuse. Groups of children, mothers, fathers and relatives meet separately to share their experiences and heal, to then come together in an intergenerational way.



Featured Story: Breaking The Cycle

Micaiah is a Pentecostal pastor from Ghana who shared, *“My mother, feeling mistreated by my father, directed her anger towards me, which could have been mitigated if her faith leader had provided better guidance and support. Similarly, my father could have benefited from advice that would have helped him nurture me without resorting to harsh discipline”* (Micaiah, November 2025).

Despite this difficult upbringing, Micaiah chose to become a faith leader and he has founded a specific local ministry focusing on the responsibility to protect and nurture children, ensuring that they flourish without harsh discipline. He represents stories from a number of participants who spoke about how the failure of faith leaders to act in their own childhood had inspired them to become faith leaders who break this cycle.



Faith leaders’ roles in reframing godly parenting and supporting families

Godly parenting was a recurring theme consistently referred to by many participants as commonly used in faith settings. One participant from Europe suggested that, rather than avoiding the term because of its connotations, it could be reframed: *“I think re-framing godly parenting as explicitly non-violent godly parenting is very necessary. How can we devise more specific messaging to support this to effectively undo a long tradition in some faiths of seemingly condoning the opposite?”* (Sarah, April 2025).

Other participants resonated with reinterpreting godly parenting in ways that can challenge violent discipline. Premarital and family counselling were repeatedly named as key entry points to foster non-violent practices and build transformed parents. Faith leaders already conduct these activities and are often respected and trusted within communities. A social worker from Zimbabwe noted, *“Faith leaders have the moral authority and influence to challenge harmful parenting norms and promote child protection values grounded in both scripture and human rights, as many families still rely on outdated, punitive discipline”* (Alice, May 2025).

An educational psychologist participant in South Africa concurred that with the right support, faith leaders can be trained to support parents to raise children in a non-violent environment. From her Hindu tradition, she notes that spiritual leaders have regular contact with both parents and children and know family dynamics well: *“The process can start with a young couple’s pre-marital training...and this will provide with a vision of how they hope to raise their children and this will be based on a mutual spiritual vision”* (Sumeshni, November 2025).

Social worker participants agree but insist that faith leaders must receive proper training to deliver content that addresses sensitive issues such as abuse, discipline, and trauma. Faith institutions can also collaborate with child protection experts to develop culturally relevant, biblically aligned materials on these issues, with one Zimbabwean participant noting, *“The potential ripple effect on families and communities could be transformative, making parenting more loving and safer for children”* (Alice, May 2025).

Modelling compassionate, gentle parenting in faith traditions

Participants repeatedly contrasted approaches where faith is used to justify or underpin violent discipline with alternative faith models of gentleness and dignity. Course contributor Noor from Pakistan reflected that, *“The Prophet ﷺ never used physical punishment to teach prayer; instead, he guided through love, wisdom, and patience”*. He and other Muslim participants recalled a well-known story of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ remaining in prostration for prayer while his grandsons climbed on his back to play, choosing to extend his prayers so as not to disturb them. This offers an image of authority rooted in mercy rather than control or anger (Sunan al-Nasa’i Hadith 1141). Sayings of the Prophet ﷺ note that, *“he who doesn’t show affection and care to the children and doesn’t respect the elders, they are not amongst us”* (Jami’ at-Tirmidhi Hadith 1919).

Christian participants noted similar tensions in their traditions, particularly around well-known verses from the Bible that seem to endorse harsh discipline. Many preferred non-violent readings rooted in love. One young Sunday School leader from South Africa insisted that *“godly’ parenting should evoke love, not fear in children”* (Amy, November 2025). A Zambian participant, herself a survivor of violent discipline, noted that guiding children in the way of the Lord calls for compassion, patience, and dignity-affirming, non-violent parenting.

³ This symbol is an honorific in Arabic used to denote special respect in relation to the Prophet Muhammad.



Move from punitive religious authority to sacred partnership

Across diverse faith traditions, participants point to the need for caregivers to make a mindset change from punishment to restorative discipline, where the goal is not to hurt, but to teach, repair, and reconnect. A social worker participant from Cameroon suggested that beliefs that “*children are supposed to be loved and cared for*” can help caregivers understand why children behave the way they do in different settings and development stages, and support approaches to handle this without violating them (Ngum, November 2025).

Another Buddhist participant from Sri Lanka shared an example where a Buddhist monk collaborated with educators and parents to speak out against corporal punishment in homes and schools, advocating for more compassionate teaching methods to create a more nurturing environment for children. She noted, “*Buddhist monks are deeply respected in our communities, and their teachings often shape family values and behaviour. Incorporating child protection messages into pre-marital counselling or Dhamma discussions could be a powerful and culturally grounded way to promote responsible parenting, especially since principles like compassion and non-harming align closely with positive parenting*” (Chiranthi, May 2025). Faith actors can support families to imagine parenting not as enforcing obedience through fear, but as a sacred, shared responsibility rooted in theologies of child dignity, compassion, and hope.

Key Shift: The need for a deeper theological reframing of parental spiritual authority, from patterns of dominating control to those of sacred partnership.

An American participant from the Mormon church insisted that, “*Religious communities must reimagine parenting and mentorship through a lens of sacred partnership. This requires humility from adults to surrender the idol of absolute authority and embrace a theology that mirrors God’s patience and respect for human agency*” (Suzie, May 2025). Child discipline then becomes about emotional regulation, setting boundaries with clear explanations, modelling the values that adults hope children will learn, and repairing these relationships with humility when harm occurs.

Questions for further dialogue:

- 3. What support do you feel parents need from faith communities to help heal, break intergenerational cycles of harsh discipline and learn alternative non-violent ways of correction and discipline?**
- 4. How can faith teachings shift away from authoritarian approaches of control over children towards responsible partnerships for child dignity and wellbeing, where discipline and responsibility are taught without fear?**



3. Dialogues with theological beliefs around violent discipline

Course participants identified sessions focused on engaging with and reimagining specific harmful theological beliefs and sacred texts that suggest violent discipline is divinely ordained or mandated as the most powerful. When these were juxtaposed with dialogues with survivors, they had a powerful catalysing impact through interactive discussions across faiths and disciplines. While these theological conversations are difficult, participants claim they are essential. This space needs to be held by those with expertise and credibility as faith leaders in a way that also holds openness for a diversity of religious views.

Reinterpreting harmful theological scripts

Participants consistently highlighted the theological misuse of Bible verses, such as exhortations not to spare the ‘rod’ if you love your child, as a weaponising of sacred texts which is out of alignment with the spirit of faith. A Kenyan participant working for a Christian organisation said, “*I feel that the verse in Proverbs deeply misrepresents the spirit of Scripture. When taken literally and out of context, it turns a teaching about guidance, care, and moral discipline into a tool of fear and harm. The weaponisation of sacred scriptures not only damages children physically and emotionally but also distorts their understanding of who God is - loving and just*” (Grace, November 2025). She insisted that contextual interpretation, faith education, and pastoral modelling can combine to make change possible. If faith leaders reinterpret the rod as a symbol of guidance, wisdom, and loving correction, not physical punishment, scriptures become sources of healing, not of harm.



Other participants pointed to a misinterpretation of wider faith language, imagery and doctrines to justify violent parenting. Behind these often sits the image of a violent (and often male) divine figure that needs critical engagement. One male faith leader from Uganda noted the powerful impact reflecting together with others on how faith language can be misused to justify violent discipline had on him as a father of two boys..

“The message that ‘we create an image of a violent God when we use God’s name to harm children’ deeply challenged me and reshaped my understanding of godly parenting” (Christian, November 2025).

Survivors pointed to the theological responsibility all adults of faith hold in shaping how children may connect divine love and violence. One noted the profound impact on her of the image of a violent God that often stands behind a violent parent. She highlighted the responsibility which caregivers carry in shaping how children perceive faith and divine love. When violence and discipline are connected, this can distort a child’s early view of God and their own sense of self-worth, rather than embodying values of love and protection.

Reclaiming and amplifying positive child-centred theological beliefs

Theological themes around love, protection and trust were regularly shared as important, with the need identified for sacred stories and images to counter those of violence. Participants offered various examples from their sacred stories involving, for example, figures like Jesus and other founders to embody positive ways to treat children kindly. Participants insisted that when the sacred texts of faiths are re-interpreted carefully and contextually, they can become powerful tools to instil positive godly child safeguarding values. Because religious leaders hold spiritual capital, participants felt they play a unique role in influencing cultural beliefs within which families raise children. One faith leader working with diaspora communities in Europe noted, *“In collaborating with families, safeguarding practices can be infused into the doctrinal practices of the church and parents can instil these as Christian values to their children”* (Felicity, October 2025).

This theological reframing of godly parenting to avoid misrepresenting the Divine was seen as vital by many faith leaders on the course. One said, *“True godly parenting is rooted in love, guidance, and protection — not violence. Discipline should build a child’s character, not harm them. God calls parents to nurture children with patience and care, reflecting His own gentle, loving nature. When we justify violence toward children in God’s name, we misrepresent His character of love and mercy. Children learn about God through our actions, so it’s our duty to show them a God who protects, forgives, and loves unconditionally”* (Christian, November 2025).

Educating perpetrators of violent discipline using sources that are authoritative for them

Participants stressed that those using violent discipline need to be educated and allowed space to engage, heal and change in ways that can align authentically with their core faith commitments and not just be shamed, ignored or contradicted. When child rights or non-violent parenting are positioned in opposition to faith, change is unlikely. Survivors themselves note that it is often ineffective to shame or punish parents in a cycle of punitive discipline, but instead to offer supportive spaces for learning, growth and accountability.



Featured Story: Rethinking Scripture

Michael is a senior faith leader in Southern Africa who joined the course believing the Bible supported violent discipline. Through hearing survivor testimonies and having respectful theological discussions, he began to reinterpret his beliefs: *“The course was very impactful. It changed my life. I realised God doesn’t want us to punish children as we’ve thought. We need to discipline in ways that are loving, protective, and comfortable”*. He admitted struggling with Bible verses around sparing the rod and spoiling the child, which have long been used to justify punishment, saying, *“We believe so much in punishing children when they are wrong, but sometimes we miss what Scripture really means. We also lack the skills to raise children without harmful punishment. Faith leaders need help to understand this”*. Michael reflected that in the past, he had advised parents by using texts that allowed violent discipline, and he valued having a safe theological space in the course to explore alternative interpretations in community with survivors.

Other faith leaders shared similar experiences to Michael. One youth pastor from East Africa said, *“This course has been truly transformative for me, personally and in my work. It challenged some long-held assumptions I had about child discipline, strengthened my commitment to protecting children, and opened my eyes to how deeply faith can shape safe, loving environments for them”* (Christian, November 2025).

Key Shift: Moving from approaches that ignored or dismissed sacred texts or traditions, towards holding space for respectful, critical dialogues with specific harmful theological scripts.

This shift towards explicit and respectful engagement with sacred texts and traditions that offered alternative forms of interpretation what could be recognised within those traditions, was seen by participants as crucial for dismantling resistance by people of faith, and for building genuine long term allies in faith spaces.

Questions for further dialogue:

5. How can faith leaders hold safe spaces for engaging critically with specific harmful theological scripts and sacred texts around violent discipline with their communities?

6. What faith-related stories, values, rituals and resources exist within your own faith tradition that can help to positively support and encourage practices of non-violent parenting as a faith imperative?

4. Dialogues with gender experts

Conversations with gender experts and practitioners who were course participants consistently returned to one uncomfortable truth: that violence in parenting is not gender neutral. It is shaped by gendered assumptions and expectations about masculinity, authority, and power inside families and within wider communities. These gendered expectations often harm children in distinct ways.

Address the gendered formation of boys

Participants shared common beliefs about how boys being or needing to become ‘tough’ shaped their vulnerability to violent discipline and other forms of humiliation designed to toughen them up to become “strong men”. Participants across faiths described how boys are frequently subjected to harsher physical discipline than girls, as well as ruthless emotional silencing. One South African pastor observed, *“Boys are often told not to cry or show weakness, which suppresses their emotions and creates long-term psychological harm”* (Thembelani, May 2025).

Across many cultural contexts, but especially in contexts of social conflict, participants shared examples of public beatings, initiation-related violence, and dangerous labour imposed on boys, emphasising that such gendered humiliations tend to foster fear rather than build strength, leaving wounds that often travel into adulthood. Participants highlighted a gendered normalisation of violent discipline in boys’ upbringing—often overlooked in a global focus on girls’ vulnerabilities, which is fuelling ongoing cycles of trauma, silence, and violence.



Reimagining gendered patterns of authoritarian parenting

Participants highlighted how families are commonly organised around rigid gender roles, with fathers often positioned as distant disciplinarians, breadwinners and moral authorities, and mothers seen as primary caregivers of children and emotional buffers. This strict division not only overloads women but also narrows men's roles to that of punitive control rather than care. This hierarchy often shapes faith narratives that exist across multiple cultural contexts, as was noted by one women participant from Denmark:

“There are power discrepancies in families whose voice matters more, whose authority is unquestioned, and this is deeply linked to gender” (Sarah, March 2025).

Another participant from the UK added that religious teachings, which present the father as the unquestionable 'head of the family household', are dangerous: *“When whatever the father does, including verbal or physical violence is seen as acceptable, scripture becomes a shield for harm rather than a care guide”* (Tanya, May 2025). Participants also spoke about the need to engage with gender-transformative approaches in faith settings and to hear from people of faith who were fathers who supported different parenting approaches.



Featured Story: Fathering Differently

Noor lives in Pakistan and is a Muslim father of two children, a girl and a boy. Despite experiencing violent discipline in his own family and school upbringing, he and his wife made the joint decision to eliminate the use of harsh punishment and to replace it with negotiation and dialogue with their children. He has seen the success of these alternative practices of non-violent discipline, especially when they are practised consistently from early childhood. In this way, Noor provides a key contribution as a father to disrupt the cycle of intergenerational violence, which he experienced but did not want to pass on. Noor points out that this decision also benefits him as a father, enabling him to have a close, trusting and loving relationship with his children. He draws for inspiration on his faith tradition and historical stories of the last messenger of Allah and spiritual leader of his faith (the Prophet Muhammad, ﷺ) positioned as a playful father and grandfather. This has positioned him to work with Islamic male faith leaders across Asia on non-violent parenting.


Address underlying patterns of power

Several participants stressed that violent discipline is not simply a parenting or a violence issue, but is also about patriarchal power. Hierarchical models of gendered power where obedience is enforced through fear shape how children experience both family and faith, as seen earlier, where a male violent God-image can shape family structures. In this family set up, children experience violent discipline both directly and indirectly when they may also witness gendered punitive violence between adults, learning early that love and harm can coexist and that it can be mis-justified by faith beliefs that are used to support patriarchal ideas as God-given. A male Catholic leader from Kenya noted that in such contexts, children may experience *“fractures, academic decline, and the trauma of witnessing intimate partner violence”* (Michael, May 2025). This also reshapes their own formative understanding of intimate relationships and safety in the home. Male faith leaders pointed to the complex entanglement of cultural and religious norms that still promote male dominance or spiritual headship.

Train faith leaders in gender-sensitive approaches to family systems

Participants noted that faith traditions can enable change if their leaders receive gender-sensitive training. A Buddhist participant explained that while religious principles of compassion can align with positive parenting, untrained faith leaders may unintentionally reinforce harmful gendered norms. With proper training, they can promote shared caregiving and healthy fatherhood through offering education, mentoring, and support.

Participants repeatedly returned to the need to reimagine families beyond religiously legitimated patterns of control and hierarchy: toward patterns of sacred co-parenting, emotional presence from fathers, and faith communities that hold both men and women accountable for children's wellbeing and dignity. As a child protection expert in Kenya pointed out, improved intergenerational communication is key:



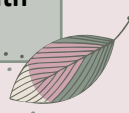
“Many harmful practices come from misunderstandings, generational gaps and a lack of open dialogue between parents and children. By promoting respectful, two-way communication, faith leaders can challenge harsh disciplinary methods, encourage empathy and build trust within families” (Charles, May 2025).

The above four insights suggest that non-violent parenting is deeply connected to patterns of gender justice.

Key Shift: Move away from approaches where patriarchal power goes unexamined and violence against women and children is normalised, towards approaches where harmful gender norms are questioned to allow co-parenting rooted in dignity, shared care, and accountability.

Some faith leaders resist these changes, citing parental rights, selected scripture verses or a God-ordained hierarchy that places men at the top and women and children below, and positioning gender as an ideology that threatens the ‘family’. However, many other faith leaders are working alongside gender experts to reclaim sacred co-responsibility within families as a God-given task that disrupts patriarchy and supports gender justice. These faith voices can be engaged and amplified for long-term transformational change.

Questions for further dialogue:

- 7. How may gender norms shape who is allowed to use power in families, and how can this be either reinforced by faith teachings or re-interpreted to support gender-just shared responsibility and care?**
 - 8. What practical steps are needed to make gender-sensitive training standard for faith leaders working with families and children in ways that help to form fathers as caregivers, not just disciplinarians?**
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Conclusion

Violent discipline cannot be ended without engaging critically yet respectfully with a wide range of faith systems. On its own, laws are not enough to challenge the deep-rooted, morally justified social norms and beliefs around parenting and family life. Deliberate, respectful yet self-critical engagement with harmful theological scripts and with positive theological resources is essential. Faith leaders hold significant social and spiritual power across many child, family and educational spaces in society. They can be harnessed as genuine allies or do great harm. They have trusted access to many family caregivers who turn to them for support and advice.

At the same time, many caregivers are themselves survivors of and inheritors of patterns of violent discipline. Without safe, compassionate spaces for caregivers to heal, reassess and move forward in ways that do not disrespect the intentions of past generations, the cycle of intergenerational trauma will continue. For this to take place, faith leaders must themselves be educated to understand that children are entrusted to families and institutions not to be owned or controlled, but to be protected, guided, and enabled to flourish. This requires intentional engagement with patriarchal power and imagery within many religious traditions that reinforce ‘the rule of the father’, equipping faith leaders in gender-sensitive interpretations of their faith.

When faith leaders are trained and held accountable for how to interpret their faith traditions, texts and dogmas in child-centred, non-violent ways, when parents are equipped with practical non-violent alternatives for discipline, when children have safe ways to speak up and be heard, and when all institutions adopt and live by codes of conduct that protect children, harmful norms begin to shift. As one survivor of childhood violence insisted, faith can become a source of dignity and life rather than of fear, shame, silence, and obedience enforced through violence.

“When children experience faith as a space where their voices matter, they learn to envision God not as a tyrant but as a loving guide who dignifies their journey” (Suzie, November 2026).

Key Messages

- ☀️ **Adult caregivers in faith communities may themselves carry unhealed childhood wounds.** Moving from silencing their inner child towards speaking openly about their lived experiences of personal harm is a vital step for healing and breaking intergenerational cycles of violent discipline.
- ☀️ **Faith actors are invited to embrace a theological reframing of spiritual authority,** from dominating control towards sacred partnerships that mirror God’s patience and respect for human agency. Then child discipline becomes about emotional regulation, setting boundaries, and modelling key values.
- ☀️ **Approaches that merely ignore or dismiss sacred texts are insufficient.** Intentional space is needed for respectful, critical dialogues with specific harmful theological scripts that underpin violent disciplines. This is essential for dismantling resistance to change and building allies in faith spaces.
- ☀️ **Normalised patriarchal power in faith communities must be confronted as a root cause of violence against both women and children,** by using gender transformative approaches to question harmful gender norms, and create space for co-parenting rooted in dignity, shared care, and accountability.



Additional Resources

1. Churches for Non-Violence. 2015. [Ending Corporal Violence Against Children- a handbook for worship and religious gatherings.](#)
2. Grobbelaar, J., & Jones C. 2020. [The contentious issue of corporal punishment in South Africa.](#)
3. UNICEF. 2025. [Child Rights in Islam](#), Training manual for religious leaders.
4. [Peace Discipline](#) resources and website
5. Sonke Gender Justice. [Does sparing the rod really spoil the child? A factsheet to explore religious justifications of corporal punishment.](#) [Positive Discipline Factsheets.](#)

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