



From Toolkit to Practice:

Emerging reflections on faith,
GBV and dialogue in practice



SVRI Faith & GBV Community of Practice
Working Group 3
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Acknowledgements

Pilot Reports

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Introduction & background

Recognition of the complex and influential role that faith actors play in shaping community responses to gender-based violence (GBV) is growing. In many contexts, faith leaders, religious institutions, and faith-based organisations are deeply embedded within everyday community life and may be among the first people survivors approach for guidance, support, mediation, or spiritual counsel. But faith spaces can also reflect and reinforce broader gender norms, power hierarchies, stigma, and silences surrounding violence. Engagement between faith actors and GBV policymakers and practitioners is crucial, particularly because both groups are often working with the same communities, responding to overlapping realities, and influencing how violence is understood, addressed, or silenced in practice. However, meaningful engagement between these groups remains relatively rare, often shaped by institutional silos, mutual hesitation, differing frameworks and language, and broader questions of trust, legitimacy, and power.

In response to these realities, the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) established a [Faith & GBV Community of Practice \(CoP\)](#) building on a longer history of collaborative work at the intersection of faith and GBV. The CoP brings together researchers, practitioners, activists, policymakers, and faith actors working at the intersection of religion and GBV. Within this initiative, three Working Groups were established. Working Group 3 (WG3) focused specifically on communication between faith actors and policymakers.

During Year 1, the working group developed the [GBV & Religion Dialogue Toolkit](#), a practical resource designed to support more constructive engagement around GBV and religion. The toolkit emerged from a collaborative process involving members from diverse geographical, professional, and religious backgrounds. It aimed to provide practical guidance on navigating conversations related to GBV, faith, legitimacy, power, language, and engagement processes.

Year 2 focused on exploring the toolkit in practice through three member-led pilot projects in **Kenya, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe**. The intention was not to test a single model of dialogue, but to explore how conversations around GBV and faith unfold across different contexts, and what these experiences reveal about engagement in practice.

This report synthesises **reflections emerging from the three pilots** together with **wider working group discussions and collective learning processes** throughout the year. It should be read as a reflective practice report rather than a formal evaluation or comparative research study. The aim is not to present definitive findings, but to document emerging insights, tensions, and lessons from attempting to facilitate engagement around GBV and faith in different settings.



Across the pilots, participants reflected on issues including:

- Trust and relationship-building
- Language and framing
- Participation and hesitation
- Institutional dynamics
- Power relations
- Facilitation approaches
- The role of faith within conversations about violence, justice, and care

Together, the pilots highlighted the deeply relational and contextual nature of dialogue processes around GBV and faith.

From toolkit to practice: Year 2 approach

Year 2 of Working Group 3 aimed to move from conceptual discussions toward practical exploration of the toolkit in real-world settings. Through a small grant mechanism, three working group members were supported to pilot the toolkit within their own contexts and generate reflections on:

- How the toolkit was used
- How participants responded
- What kinds of conversations emerged
- What these experiences revealed about engagement around GBV and faith

The three pilots reflected different religious and institutional contexts. The Kenya pilot focused primarily on engagement within Muslim communities. The Ethiopia pilot explored engagement between faith-based organisations and development actors within a mixed Muslim-Christian context. The Zimbabwe pilot focused on Catholic contexts and women's leadership structures within the Church.

The toolkit itself was never intended to function as a rigid or standardised intervention. Instead, it was designed as a flexible framework to support reflection, facilitation, and dialogue. As a result, the pilots differed significantly in methodology and structure. Activities across the pilots included workshops, interviews, participatory discussions, storytelling, case scenario analysis, faith reflections, guided dialogue questions, and other facilitated reflection exercises.

Alongside the pilots, the working group continued to meet throughout the year, creating space for peer learning and collective reflection. These discussions became an important part of the learning process, allowing participants to reflect together on:

- Communication challenges
- Facilitation experiences
- Institutional dynamics
- Language
- Broader tensions surrounding GBV communication between faith actors and policymakers

As the year progressed, the pilots generated reflections not only on the toolkit itself, but also on the realities shaping engagement processes in practice more broadly. Participants repeatedly returned to questions related to:

- Who participates in conversations and why
- How trust is established
- How language shapes openness or defensiveness
- What kinds of facilitation approaches create meaningful engagement
- How institutional and social dynamics influence dialogue spaces
- These reflections form the basis of this report.



Methodology and scope of reflections

This report draws upon:

- The three pilot reports
- Working group meeting discussions and collective toolkit adaptation reflections

The pilot reports documented reflections from the three country pilots, including reflections from pilot facilitators and participants on facilitation approaches, participant engagement, emerging themes, contextual challenges, and lessons from attempting to use the toolkit in practice.

The report does not aim to evaluate the pilots against fixed indicators or compare them systematically. The pilots differed significantly in terms of:

- Context
- Methodology
- Participant composition
- Facilitation approach
- Institutional setting

Instead, the report synthesises emerging reflections from practice.

The pilots explored conversations around GBV and faith in settings shaped by different:

- Religious traditions
- Community norms
- Institutional structures
- Engagement histories

As a result, the reflections presented here are intentionally grounded and contextual rather than generalisable.

Participants and working group discussions also reflected on the importance of positionality within engagement processes. In several contexts, institutional, ethnic, religious, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics shaped participation and perceptions of legitimacy in ways that were not always immediately visible or easily recognised, including within locally embedded organisations and faith communities themselves.

Working group discussions and collective reflections became an important part of the learning process throughout the year. Participants repeatedly reflected on tensions surrounding language, participation, survivor-centred engagement, institutional trust, and the challenges of creating spaces for honest dialogue across different contexts and positions.

One recurring theme concerned language and accessibility. While some participants emphasised the importance of careful and context-sensitive language to create openness and participation, others cautioned against approaches that might unintentionally soften or obscure the realities of violence itself.

Participants also repeatedly stressed the importance of survivor-centred approaches and creating spaces where survivors can speak for themselves safely.

These discussions reinforced that conversations around GBV and faith are not only technical or informational processes. They are also shaped by emotion, identity, lived experience, institutional positioning, and perceptions of safety, legitimacy, and power.



Kenya pilot

The Kenya pilot was facilitated through Safe Hands Women Rights Defenders and focused on dialogue sessions within a Muslim community context in Gilgil Town, Nakuru County, Kenya. The setting can best be described as mixed/peri-urban, bringing together participants from both the town centre and surrounding communities. Two separate dialogue sessions were conducted. One session brought together women participants from different age groups, including both married and unmarried women. A second session focused on youth participants, including both young men and women. Participants were primarily women and youth drawn from the local Muslim community, creating space for reflections grounded in everyday family and community experiences. Local faith leaders were also engaged in the dialogue process and contributed reflections on GBV prevention, community norms, and the role of faith in promoting justice and wellbeing within families and communities.

The sessions aimed to create a culturally sensitive and faith-conscious environment where participants could openly discuss issues that are often treated as private, stigmatised, or difficult to name publicly. The facilitation process drew from the participatory structure of the toolkit and included:

- Storytelling
- Faith reflections
- Guided discussion questions
- Case scenario analysis
- Group discussion

Religious framing emerged as one of the strongest entry points for engagement. Facilitators incorporated Qur'anic verses and Hadiths related to kindness, dignity, justice, and non-harm. Participants reflected that grounding conversations in familiar religious teachings helped create greater openness and legitimacy for discussing violence within marriage and family life.

One recurring reflection within the pilot was that many participants initially associated GBV primarily with severe physical violence. Through guided discussion and practical examples, conversations gradually expanded to include emotional abuse, economic control, coercion, and restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy.

Participants shared examples such as:

“A woman being denied money or prevented from working.”

Others described emotional abuse as:

“Being insulted, controlled, or constantly threatened at home.”

The use of storytelling and practical examples helped participants connect formal GBV terminology to lived realities within their own communities.

The sessions also highlighted how violence can become normalised within family and social structures. Several participants reflected that women are often encouraged to remain silent or endure violence to avoid shame or preserve family unity.

One participant shared the example of:

“A woman who was beaten repeatedly but only told her mother, who advised her to be patient.”

Participants repeatedly discussed fear of stigma, economic dependence, family pressure, and fear of retaliation as major barriers to reporting violence.

The pilot also highlighted the intergenerational impact of violence. Participants reflected on children becoming fearful, withdrawn, or accepting violence as normal after growing up in violent households.



Facilitators observed that trust-building played an important role in enabling participation. Participants became more willing to speak openly once principles of confidentiality, respect, and non-judgement were clearly established.

The pilot also generated important reflections around language, framing, and accessibility. Facilitators and participants reflected that discussions became more open and participatory when conversations were grounded in familiar religious teachings, everyday experiences, and culturally meaningful examples rather than abstract policy language alone. Religious framing helped reposition GBV not only as a social issue, but also as a question of justice, dignity, compassion, and collective responsibility within family and community life. Facilitators also reflected that conversations became more engaged once GBV was framed as a form of injustice (“dhulm”) that contradicts Islamic teachings on dignity, justice, and non-harm. Participants also discussed the gap between religious teachings promoting compassion and protection and cultural practices that sometimes misuse religion to justify violence.

Wider working group discussions connected to the pilot also raised questions about whether language around GBV should be softened to allow engagement or whether doing so risks minimising violence itself. This tension reflected a broader question running across all three pilots: how to create conversations that feel accessible, culturally grounded, and safe, while still naming violence clearly and ethically.

A key lesson emerging from both the pilot and wider working group discussions was the importance of supporting facilitators and those leading dialogue processes to anticipate and navigate these tensions before they arise. This includes reflecting on which religious teachings, concepts, and narratives are drawn upon, why they are selected, and how they may be interpreted by different audiences. Such preparation may help facilitators create conversations that remain both accessible and accountable to the realities of violence.

The pilot highlighted how faith-based framing can create important entry points for engagement around GBV, particularly when discussions are grounded in compassion, justice, dignity, and collective responsibility. At the same time, participants recognised that dialogue itself cannot automatically transform deeply rooted gender norms, stigma, or unequal power relations.

Participants also emphasised that dialogue alone would be insufficient without wider community and institutional support. Reflections highlighted the need for greater engagement of religious leaders, confidential reporting mechanisms, mental health and psychosocial support, economic empowerment opportunities for women, and dedicated youth support and mentorship spaces.

Ethiopia pilot

The Ethiopia pilot explored dialogue between faith-based organisations (FBOs) and development actors within a mixed Muslim-Christian context. It was designed as a cross-sector exchange, bringing together faith actors and GBV stakeholders to reflect on engagement, cooperation, legitimacy, and communication around GBV.

Partnerships were established with the [Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia \(IRCE\)](#) and the [GBV Area of Responsibility network](#) linked to UN structures. Considerable effort went into outreach and preparation. The pilot ultimately included an in-person workshop in Addis Ababa and a follow-up online session aimed primarily at development actors and GBV practitioners.

The in-person workshop involved approximately 10–11 representatives from faith-based organisations, one GBV-implementing organisation, and one participant occupying a hybrid position between the two sectors. A follow-up online session brought together approximately ten participants, primarily Ethiopian GBV officers, alongside one Japanese participant and one international staff member.

A key finding from the pilot was that the cross-sector dialogue it was designed to facilitate did not occur in the way intended. While faith-based organisations participated actively, development actors were largely absent from the in-person workshop. As a result, the balanced exchange between faith and development stakeholders that formed the core rationale for the pilot was not realised, and the workshop became primarily an FBO-focused engagement space.



Facilitators later reflected that challenges in the invitation and communication process may have contributed to low attendance despite reported initial interest. More broadly, the experience raised questions about competing institutional priorities, organisational gatekeeping, perceptions of the relevance of faith engagement to GBV work, and possible hesitation around participating in discussions that combined religion and GBV. These factors could not be fully explored within the scope of the pilot, but they became an important part of the learning process because they point to the practical challenges of convening meaningful dialogue across the faith and development sectors.

This shaped the kinds of conversations that emerged during the pilot:

Facilitators reflected on how absence itself became part of the learning process, revealing broader structural barriers to cross-sector engagement around GBV and faith. The uneven participation suggested differing levels of institutional readiness for dialogue, with faith-based organisations engaging readily while participation from development actors remained limited despite significant outreach and reported interest. This highlighted that convening itself is shaped by organisational priorities, institutional cultures, and broader structural dynamics—not simply by the availability of dialogue tools.

Participants reflected extensively on:

- Donor relationships
- Institutional trust
- Legitimacy
- Perceptions of secular GBV organisations
- The positioning of faith actors within development spaces

These discussions revealed complex and sometimes ambivalent perceptions of engagement between faith actors and development institutions. Several participants discussed experiences of feeling misunderstood, instrumentalised, or excluded from decision-making processes. Conversations also included moments of self-reflection among faith-based participants regarding internal institutional dynamics, limitations, and the ways faith actors themselves engage within development spaces.

One exercise invited participants to discuss:

- Who sets agendas
- Who controls resources
- Whose knowledge is treated as legitimate
- How power shapes engagement processes

Participants repeatedly returned to the issue of institutional power rather than theological disagreement alone.

One participant expressed:

“Power relations, incentives, and institutional constraints shape dialogue more than values.”

This captured one of the central insights emerging from the Ethiopia pilot: barriers to engagement were often located less in theology or beliefs than in the institutional conditions that enable—or constrain—meaningful collaboration across sectors.

The toolkit itself proved useful as a framework for structuring discussion and encouraging reflection. Participants particularly engaged with exercises exploring legitimacy, bias, institutional dynamics, and perspective-taking.

One improvised exercise focused on “how to make the donor listen,” encouraging participants to discuss donor language, institutional culture, communication strategies, and the ways faith actors navigate development systems. Case studies and practical examples also helped move discussions beyond abstract debate and into more grounded conversations about relationships, communication, and institutional realities.

Alongside this, the pilot generated important reflections around contextual adaptation. Some exercises designed



with international development actors in mind did not always resonate in the ways originally expected, particularly where participants were locally embedded practitioners rather than international staff.

Reflections throughout the pilot consistently suggested that meaningful engagement around GBV and faith requires more than technical dialogue tools alone. Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of trust-building, self-reflection, community engagement, local context, and institutional legitimacy before formal dialogue spaces can function effectively. Several participants also stressed that mindset shifts — including reflection on institutional assumptions, bias, and positioning — were an important part of creating more meaningful engagement across sectors.

Rather than suggesting that dialogue itself is ineffective, the pilot demonstrated that successful cross-sector engagement depends on careful preparation before dialogue begins, including institutional buy-in, appropriate participant selection, trust-building, attention to power dynamics, and clear communication about the purpose and value of engagement. These reflections suggest that future applications of the toolkit—and similar cross-sector dialogue initiatives—may benefit from placing greater emphasis on these enabling conditions—not only on facilitation during dialogue itself, but also on the preparatory work needed to create the conditions under which meaningful cross-sector engagement can succeed.

Zimbabwe pilot

The Zimbabwe pilot explored the toolkit through a series of individual in-depth interviews conducted both in person and telephonically with Catholic women's guild members (lay church groups that provide fellowship, mutual support, and community outreach), clergy, and representatives of church-affiliated social justice organisations working on community wellbeing, justice, and social issues. Rather than a facilitated group dialogue, the pilot focused on gathering reflective perspectives through individual interviews with participants occupying different roles within Catholic structures. Participants were identified with support from key informants across several Catholic parishes and church-based networks. Participants included women's guild members and leaders, clergy, and representatives of Catholic organisations engaged in social justice and community wellbeing initiatives. Most participants were based in Harare, with one participant representing a Catholic organisation in Mutare. Facilitators reflected that the interview-based format enabled participants to speak openly about sensitive issues and share personal experiences, while also providing fewer opportunities to observe or facilitate direct engagement between different stakeholder groups than a group dialogue approach might have allowed.

The pilot recognised that the Catholic Church plays an important role in shaping social norms, family life, and moral discourse within Zimbabwean communities. Discussions around GBV therefore intersected with broader conversations around marriage, authority, gender roles, pastoral care, forgiveness, and family responsibility.

Participants generally responded positively to the toolkit's emphasis on empathy, listening, and respectful dialogue. Many reflected that these principles aligned strongly with pastoral traditions within the Church.

Discussions also highlighted the importance of stronger engagement and cooperation between faith actors and policymakers around GBV. Participants particularly valued the toolkit's emphasis on listening, communication, and identifying shared values, viewing these as a basis for more constructive collaboration across sectors. Several reflected that both religious institutions and state actors share important responsibilities for community wellbeing and protection, despite their different institutional roles and forms of authority. Many saw the toolkit as offering a practical framework for strengthening this engagement.

The pilot also generated important reflections around language and disclosure. One of the clearest findings was that the term “gender-based violence” itself was not commonly used within congregational settings. Instead, participants often referred to violence through softer or more indirect language, including colloquial expressions such as *kusawirirana* (“disagreement”) or *musindo* (“conflict” or “quarrel”). This reflected broader cultural and institutional norms surrounding privacy, family unity, conflict within marriage, and theological expectations related to reconciliation and endurance within relationships.

Importantly, many participants still recognised emotional abuse, financial control, and harmful gender expectations



as serious concerns, even where violence was discussed indirectly rather than explicitly.

These reflections connected to wider working group discussions throughout the year regarding language, accessibility, and the challenges of discussing GBV within culturally and religiously sensitive contexts. Importantly, participants' use of indirect language did not necessarily indicate denial or minimisation of violence. Rather, it appeared to function as a culturally familiar entry point for discussing experiences that remained difficult to name directly.

The pilot also highlighted the role women's guilds play as informal support spaces within church communities. Participants described these spaces as places where women:

- Share personal struggles
- Provide emotional support
- Discuss family challenges
- Quietly accompany one another through difficult situations

At the same time, discussions also revealed limitations within institutional responses. Some noted that clergy and church leaders may lack:

- Formal GBV training
- Referral pathways
- Confidence in responding to disclosures appropriately

These reflections also suggested that the toolkit may serve as an important entry point into broader GBV capacity-building processes, helping faith actors reflect on their role in responding to violence while identifying areas where additional training, support, and referral mechanisms may be needed.

Listening emerged as one of the strongest themes throughout the pilot. Participants repeatedly described listening not simply as a communication skill, but as an ethical and pastoral practice grounded in dignity, accompaniment, and care.

One participant reflected:

“People often want advice immediately, but first they need to feel heard.”

Wider working group discussions also reinforced survivor-centred and relational approaches to engagement, including the need to create spaces where survivors can speak for themselves safely.

The pilot also highlighted the need for greater contextual adaptation of the toolkit. While clergy and advocacy-oriented participants engaged relatively comfortably with policy-oriented concepts, some grassroots participants found sections of the toolkit too technical or abstract.

Suggested adaptations included:

- Simpler language
- More locally grounded examples
- More story-based approaches
- Greater facilitation support for grassroots contexts

Overall, the Zimbabwe pilot underscored how conversations around GBV within faith communities are deeply shaped by pastoral relationships, institutional culture, theological interpretation, and community norms surrounding marriage, privacy, and care. The pilot highlighted how violence is often discussed through indirect or softened language rather than formal GBV terminology, the important role women's guilds play as informal spaces of support and accompaniment, and the need for greater support, training, and referral pathways for clergy and church leaders responding to disclosures of violence. Together, these reflections reinforced the importance of culturally grounded and relational approaches that prioritise listening, trust-building, and survivor-centred engagement.



Cross-cutting practice reflections

Across all three pilots, several shared themes emerged despite the differences in context, methodology, and religious setting.

One of the clearest reflections was the importance of **trust and relationship-building** within dialogue processes. Participants across several pilots reflected that meaningful engagement depends not only on bringing people together, but also on creating conditions where participants feel respected, listened to, and safe enough to engage openly.

These dynamics emerged differently across the three pilot contexts. In Kenya, facilitators observed that participants became more willing to discuss sensitive issues once confidentiality and respect were clearly established. In Zimbabwe, participants reflected on the difficulty of discussing family violence publicly within church settings because of stigma and expectations around privacy and family unity. In Ethiopia, discussions frequently focused on institutional trust and questions of legitimacy between faith actors and development organisations.

Language and framing also emerged as central themes across both the pilot reflections and wider working group discussions. Across several pilots, facilitators observed that participants often engaged more openly when discussions were grounded in lived realities, shared values, familiar religious references, and culturally meaningful language. Wider working group discussions, however, repeatedly returned to tensions surrounding language and accessibility. While some members emphasised the importance of careful or indirect language to create safer entry points for conversation, others expressed concern that violence itself could become obscured or minimised in the process.

Rather than suggesting a single approach, the pilots indicate that this is a facilitation challenge that requires ongoing judgement and contextual adaptation. In practice, participants often appeared most willing to engage when conversations began with familiar language, values, and lived experiences, while still creating opportunities to name and examine violence more directly as trust and reflection deepened. The reflections therefore suggest that the question is not whether violence should be named clearly, but how facilitators can do so in ways that remain accessible, culturally grounded, and ethically accountable to survivors.

Questions of power also emerged repeatedly across the pilot reflections and wider working group discussions. Reflections frequently returned to:

- Who sets agendas
- Whose knowledge is treated as legitimate
- Who feels confident participating
- How institutional, theological, gendered, and interpersonal power shape dialogue spaces

Importantly, the pilots also stressed that “faith actors” or “policymakers” are internally diverse groups. Across the different contexts, pilot participants expressed diverse and sometimes contradictory views shaped by institutional roles, theological perspectives, personal experiences, gender dynamics, and differing levels of engagement with GBV work. In several discussions, tensions also emerged between grassroots experiences, pastoral concerns, advocacy approaches, and more institutional or development-oriented perspectives.

Across the pilot reflections and wider working group discussions, the toolkit was most often described not as a rigid dialogue manual, but as a flexible facilitation and reflection guide. Reflections across the pilots and working group discussions reinforced the usefulness of several elements already embedded within the toolkit in creating more open and reflective conversations around GBV and faith, including:

- Guided dialogue questions
- Storytelling
- Faith reflections
- Exercises exploring legitimacy, bias, and perspective-taking
- Other facilitated discussion approaches grounded in local context

The pilots and wider working group discussions also reinforced the importance of long-term relationship-building and ongoing engagement processes within dialogue work.

Lessons for toolkit adaptation & facilitation

The pilots and wider working group discussions confirm that the toolkit's core principles and facilitation approaches resonate across very different contexts and institutional settings. They also identified specific areas where facilitators needed more support in practice.

Across all three pilots, facilitators found the navigation of moments of tension or defensiveness difficult – particularly when discussions touched on institutional power, gender roles within religious structures, or experiences of feeling marginalised within development spaces. Future versions of the toolkit could include practical guidance on how to hold these moments without shutting down conversation or losing the thread of the dialogue.

The pilots showed that language adaptation requires more structured support than provided in the current toolkit. Facilitators must make real-time judgements about framing, terminology, and cultural reference – judgements that worked in the pilot because of facilitator skill and local knowledge. Companion materials with context-specific examples and guidance on adapting language without minimising violence could further strengthen the toolkit's consistency and reach.

These reflections suggest that future Working Group engagement could usefully focus not only on dialogue itself, but also on the practical facilitation, relationship-building, and engagement challenges practitioners continue to navigate in real-world settings. This includes strengthening practical guidance on navigating tension, adapting language across contexts, managing power dynamics, and creating emotionally safe and participatory dialogue spaces. Finally, and very importantly, the pilots showed that the toolkit works best as part of a longer engagement process, not a standalone event.

Concluding reflections

The Year 2 pilots provide important insights into the realities of engaging at the intersection of faith and GBV across diverse contexts. While discussions around faith and GBV are often assumed to be constrained primarily by theological disagreement, the pilots suggest a more complex picture. Across the three contexts, barriers to engagement were frequently rooted in questions of trust, institutional relationships, legitimacy, participation, power, and context.

The pilots therefore highlight that successful engagement requires more than agreement on ideas or access to dialogue tools. It depends on long-term investment in relationships, contextual understanding, skilled facilitation, and sustained opportunities for reflection and exchange. The toolkit offers one resource for supporting these processes, but its effectiveness appears strongest when embedded within broader, ongoing engagement efforts rather than used as a standalone intervention.

While these reflections are necessarily contextual and exploratory, they contribute to a growing body of learning on what meaningful engagement between faith actors and GBV stakeholders involves in practice, and what conditions are needed to support it.

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