



SVRI sexual
violence
research
initiative

Faith as Resource:

Engaging Muslim leaders in addressing GBV at community level



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Introduction

Established in 2019 with headquarters in Mombasa, Kenya, the Africa Muslim Women Action Network (AMWAN) is a Muslim women-led organisation that works to advance the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of women and girls by addressing social injustices and promoting gender equality within communities. AMWAN's work focuses on strengthening community awareness, advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), preventing and responding to Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and supporting access to justice for survivors.

Through projects such as Access to Justice at the Kadhi's Court on Family Law Matters, Access to Justice at Shamzu Court on SGBV Matters, and Advocacy and We are Members of CUC Court Users Committee, AMWAN engaged community members, faith leaders, local authorities, and service providers to challenge the harmful social and cultural norms that often prevent survivors from seeking support and justice. Delivered in Kenya's Coastal region between 2019 and 2022, this work strengthened awareness of SRHR, improved referral systems for survivors, and promoted survivor-centred approaches to GBV response. AMWAN also worked closely with relevant institutions to ensure that survivors could access legal, psychosocial, and health services, contributing to improved accountability and access to justice.

Over the course of the projects, AMWAN reached over 400 community members through awareness sessions, community dialogues, training, and community engagement activities. These projects created spaces for conversations on rights, protection, and justice while strengthening community capacity to respond to GBV and SRHR issues.

Following the completion of the projects, a Practice-Based Knowledge (PBK) harvesting process was conducted to reflect on the experiences, lessons, and changes that emerged from the projects. In carrying out this PBK harvesting process, AMWAN participated in the pilot cohort of the SVRI Faith & GBV PBK Practice Lab. The Practice Lab brought together a small group of members from the SVRI Faith & GBV Community of Practice in a structured and supportive learning space. Through this process, Practice Lab members reflected on the lessons emerging from their organisation's work, exchanged experiences, and worked together to transform these insights into a practical knowledge product that could be shared with others working in the field.

The insights for this learning brief were gathered through interviews and conversations with five religious leaders, four volunteers, sixteen community members, and two project staff, creating space for honest reflection on what had changed and what challenges remained.

Key Learnings

Four key learnings emerged through the PBK harvesting process.

1. Awareness alone does not guarantee justice

One of the strongest lessons from the harvesting process was that awareness of rights does not automatically translate into access to justice. Through AMWAN's work on improving access to justice at the Kadhi's Court on family law matters, and through supporting survivors seeking justice through Shamzu Court on GBV cases, it became clear that many women and girls already understand that violence is wrong and are aware of available support services. However, knowing one's rights and being able to safely exercise those rights remain two different realities.

Community dialogues, legal awareness sessions, and engagement with faith and community structures revealed that survivors continue to face multiple barriers, including fear of retaliation, economic dependence on perpetrators, pressure from families, concerns about reputation, limited trust in formal justice systems, concerns about confidentiality, and challenges accessing services. Some women shared that, although they knew where to seek help, they feared the consequences of speaking out, particularly when reporting could affect their children, family relationships, or social standing. A practical example from the harvesting process came from a community discussion where one woman explained that she knew where to report violence, but that she had no money for transport and was afraid of what her husband and in-laws would do if she spoke out. Her comment made it clear that information alone was not enough. It helped AMWAN see more clearly that survivors need practical support,



not just messages about their rights. As a result, the project placed greater emphasis on linking awareness sessions to trusted referral points and on strengthening relationships with justice actors who could help survivors move from disclosure to action.

A recurring message from survivors was that knowing their rights and being able to exercise those rights are two very different things.

“I know where to report, but I fear what will happen to me after I speak out.” – GBV Survivor

AMWAN’s engagement with the Court Users Committee (CUC) further showed that some survivors begin the justice-seeking process but face difficulties completing it due to transport costs, delays, and limited follow-up support. This highlighted that awareness efforts must be connected to practical support systems, including survivor-centred referrals, legal assistance, psychosocial support, and justice mechanisms that are accessible and responsive. For example, through collaboration between community advocates, faith leaders, and CUC members, survivors who were initially reluctant or unable to continue with their cases were referred to appropriate legal and psychosocial services and received guidance on navigating the justice process. While systemic challenges remained, these coordinated referrals helped some survivors stay engaged with available support services and strengthened trust in community-based response mechanisms. This experience demonstrated that combining awareness with practical, survivor-centred support can reduce barriers to justice and improve access to protection and accountability.

From an Islamic perspective, this learning reinforced the importance of upholding the principles of justice, dignity, compassion, and the protection of those experiencing harm not only in religious teachings but also in everyday community practice. It highlighted the vital role that faith-based engagement plays in encouraging survivors to seek support and ensuring that religious values are never misused to justify silence or tolerate injustice. This experience reaffirmed that true justice requires more than awareness; it also depends on accessible, trustworthy systems that enable people to exercise their rights safely, confidently, and with dignity.

2. Building trust creates spaces for conversation, but social norm change takes time

A significant learning from the harvesting process was the difference between creating spaces where communities can discuss GBV and SRHR issues and transforming the beliefs and practices that sustain GBV and discrimination.

At the beginning of many community engagements, conversations around GBV, family conflicts, and reproductive health were often sensitive and difficult. Some community members viewed these issues as private family matters, while others felt that discussing SRHR openly went against cultural or religious expectations. Through continuous engagement, dialogue sessions, legal awareness forums, and collaboration with female religious teachers, AMWAN observed gradual changes in openness and willingness to engage. For example, during one community dialogue, a woman who had remained silent throughout previous meetings later approached a female religious teacher privately to ask where she could get help for a relative experiencing violence at home. Although she was not ready to report the case immediately, she accepted information about available support services. This small but significant step showed that repeated engagement can build trust and create safe spaces where people feel more comfortable seeking guidance and support.

Faith leaders played an important role in creating safe spaces for discussion because they are respected voices within communities. Through Islamic teachings that emphasise justice, kindness, dignity, and responsibility towards others, religious leaders were able to support conversations that challenged harmful beliefs while remaining sensitive to community values. Women and girls became more comfortable asking questions, seeking guidance, and sharing experiences through trusted faith and community actors.

However, the process also showed that increased willingness to talk does not always mean that harmful norms have changed. Some community members continue to believe that family matters should remain private or that reporting abuse could bring shame on the family. These beliefs continue to influence whether survivors seek justice.

“Starting these conversations is often challenging, but I believe the more we talk, the more people will begin to listen.” – Religious Leader



This learning highlighted that trust-building is the foundation for meaningful engagement, but changing deeply rooted attitudes requires patience, consistency, and long-term commitment. AMWAN recognised the need to continue working with faith leaders, communities, and local structures to address the beliefs and power dynamics that normalise violence and discourage survivors from seeking help.

3. Trusted faith and community voices open doors that formal systems often cannot

Another important lesson was the powerful role of trusted community actors, particularly religious leaders, female religious teachers, volunteers, and community advocates, in supporting survivors and increasing access to information and services. At the same time, the discussions revealed that views on justice and protection were not always the same. While many faith leaders supported referral to legal and protection services, some community members preferred resolving cases within the family to avoid shame or protect family relationships. Some women also expressed concern that pursuing formal justice could lead to stigma or financial hardship. These different perspectives highlighted the importance of respectful dialogue and working with trusted community actors to gradually build understanding that seeking safety and justice is consistent with faith and dignity.

Throughout AMWAN's work, community members demonstrated greater willingness to discuss sensitive issues with individuals they already knew and trusted. Female religious teachers, in particular, often became important points of support for women and girls seeking guidance on family challenges, violence, relationships, and reproductive health concerns.

“My students ask me questions more freely because they are speaking to someone they know and trust.” – Female Religious Teacher

Because these actors are part of the community, they are often able to identify concerns before survivors reach formal justice systems. Their influence also provides an opportunity to address harmful interpretations of culture and religion that may discourage reporting or encourage silence. When messages about dignity, protection, justice, and the rights of women and girls are shared through respected faith leaders, they often reach communities in ways that feel more relevant and acceptable.

The harvesting process showed that engaging faith actors is not only an awareness approach but a pathway for strengthening prevention, referrals, and survivor support. Religious leaders and female religious teachers can play a critical role in promoting values of justice and compassion while supporting communities to respond more effectively to GBV. Furthermore, a distinctive lesson from AMWAN's experience was the different roles played by various faith actors. While male religious leaders often influenced community attitudes through sermons, mediation, and public guidance, female religious teachers were more likely to receive private disclosures from women and girls who felt uncomfortable discussing family violence with male leaders. Many women viewed them as approachable, confidential, and better able to understand their experiences. This reinforced the importance of involving both male and female faith leaders, as they reached different people and complemented one another.

4. The normalisation of violence remains a major barrier to justice

One of the most significant lessons from the harvesting process was the continued influence of social norms that normalise violence and discourage survivors from seeking justice.

Through AMWAN's work on family law matters, GBV cases, and community advocacy, participants shared experiences where survivors were encouraged to remain silent, forgive perpetrators, or avoid reporting in order to protect family unity and community reputation. In some situations, violence was not openly accepted, but it was treated as something that should be resolved privately within the family rather than through justice systems. The harvesting process showed that these beliefs remain deeply rooted and continue to affect how communities respond to violence grounded in gender inequality. Even where awareness of GBV and SRHR increased, ideas around family honour, obedience, gender roles, and reputation continue to influence decisions made by survivors and their families.

Despite the awareness creation efforts, one community discussion highlighted a case where a survivor sought support after experiencing violence but was encouraged by relatives to withdraw her complaint to avoid bringing



shame to the family. This demonstrated how social pressure can prevent survivors from accessing justice even when support systems exist.

From an Islamic perspective, this learning reinforced the importance of distinguishing between preserving family values and protecting against injustice. While family unity is valued, it should not come at the expense of a person's safety, dignity, and right to justice. Faith and community structures can play an important role in challenging harmful practices and promoting responses that protect survivors rather than silence them.

“In many cases, survivors are pressured to keep quiet to avoid bringing shame to their family, making it even harder for them to speak out and access help.” – Community Member

Ultimately, AMWAN's experience demonstrated that improving access to justice requires more than strengthening institutions and increasing awareness. It requires addressing the social, cultural, and religious norms that shape how communities understand GBV, accountability, and protection. Sustainable change depends on working with communities and faith structures to ensure that survivors are supported, heard, and able to seek justice with dignity.

AMWAN's engagement with the Kadhi's Court also provided an important insight. Many family disputes presented before the court involved underlying issues of violence, economic dependence, or emotional abuse that were not always raised at the beginning of the case. This highlighted the need for stronger links between faith-based justice processes and referral services so that survivors could access legal, psychosocial, and protection support where needed.

Recommendations

The PBK harvesting process highlighted several practical actions that could strengthen future programming, policy, and practice:

- Move beyond awareness by strengthening referral pathways: Community awareness activities should be linked to practical support, including legal aid, psychosocial services, transport assistance where possible, and stronger coordination between faith actors, the Court Users Committee, Kadhi's Court, health providers, and other service providers.
- Continue investing in trusted faith and community actors. Religious leaders, female religious teachers, and community volunteers should receive ongoing capacity strengthening on survivor-centred approaches, referral mechanisms, and the rights of survivors so they can provide informed and appropriate support within their communities.
- Recognise the complementary roles of male and female faith leaders. Future programmes should intentionally engage both groups. While religious leaders are well placed to influence community attitudes, female religious teachers often provide safe spaces where women and girls feel comfortable seeking guidance and disclosing sensitive concerns.
- Support long-term dialogue to address harmful social norms. Changing attitudes around GBV, family honour, and gender roles takes time. Continued engagement with families, faith institutions, and community structures is essential to build trust and encourage responses that will prioritise safety, dignity, and justice.
- Strengthen collaboration between community and justice systems. Closer coordination between community organisations, faith leaders, the Kadhi's Court, the Court Users Committee, and other justice actors can help identify survivors earlier, improve referrals, and reduce barriers that prevent women and girls from completing the justice-seeking process.





Conclusion

Through its work on access to justice at the Kadhi's Court on family law matters, support for GBV cases at Shamzu Court, participation in the Court Users Committee (CUC), and community advocacy engagements, AMWAN gained deeper insight into the realities survivors face when seeking support and justice. The learning process reaffirmed that addressing GBV requires more than awareness raising. While many women and girls understand that GBV is wrong and are aware of their rights, barriers such as stigma, fear of damaging family reputation, economic dependence, limited trust in justice systems, and challenges accessing services often prevent them from seeking help.

A key lesson from this work is the importance of strengthening systems that enable survivors to act on their rights. Awareness efforts must be accompanied by accessible referral systems, legal assistance, psychosocial support, survivor-centred reporting mechanisms, and stronger coordination between communities and justice institutions. AMWAN's engagement with courts, community structures, and local actors demonstrated that survivors are more likely to seek support when they are guided by trusted individuals and understand how justice processes work. The involvement of religious leaders, female religious teachers, volunteers, and community leaders further highlighted the important role of faith and trusted community structures in creating safe spaces for conversations on GBV and SRHR. These actors helped communities engage on sensitive issues that are often difficult to discuss openly. However, the experience also showed that dialogue alone is not enough; continued engagement is needed to challenge harmful social norms, beliefs, and practices that continue to normalise violence and discourage reporting.

The process also reinforced the need to intentionally reach underserved communities, particularly women and girls in rural and remote areas who face additional barriers to information, justice services, and support systems. Sustainable change requires community-based approaches that build trust, strengthen local networks, and ensure that those furthest from formal systems are not left behind.

These lessons emerged from AMWAN's work in Kenya's coastal region, where Muslim faith leaders, Kadhi's Courts, community elders, and family networks all play an important role in how people seek advice, resolve disputes, and access justice. In this context, decisions about reporting violence are often shaped not only by the availability of services but also by concerns about family relationships, community reputation, and trust. AMWAN's experience suggests that programmes are more effective when they recognise these realities and work with existing faith and community structures while keeping survivors' safety and choices at the centre.

AMWAN hopes this experience encourages others to reflect on a few questions: Are awareness activities linked to practical support that survivors can realistically access? Are women and girls able to speak to trusted people within their own communities? How can faith leaders and local justice structures work together to support survivors while upholding dignity, compassion, and justice?

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