

WG4-1 Session Report

Naming the Contested Ground

Sacred Texts, Harmful Norms: Engaging Theology as a Site of GBV Prevention and Response

Wednesday 21 October 2026 · 14:00 to 15:30 SAST · Zoom

In brief. Members chose **survivor shaming and silence** as WG4's Year One contested issue (64% of the vote). After an input on spiritual abuse and three faith voices, 93% of those who voted found spiritual abuse a very helpful lens to explore further. Members asked to read sacred texts together, within and across traditions, at our next session.

1. Session basics

- **Date and format:** Wednesday 21 October 2026, 14:00 to 15:30 SAST, on Zoom. The session was recorded.
- **Facilitators:** Noor Ur Rehman (Chair) and Dr Nontando Hadebe (Co-chair). Paula Haltmann (SVRI) provided technical support, including polls, breakout rooms and slides.
- **Input on spiritual abuse:** Suzie Greco, WG4 core group, who studies practical and ethical theology at the University of Edinburgh.
- **Faith voices:** Dr Scholastica (Scholar) Kaaria, Faith to Action Network (Catholic, Kenya); Reverend Father Limbani Jeromy Juttah, Anglican priest and lecturer, University of Malawi; Dr Ntsikelelo Colossa (ubuntu and African traditional spirituality, South Africa).
- **Participants:** over 20 members and guests, joining from at least nine countries across Africa, Asia, North America and Australia, including Bangladesh, Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka and the United States.
- **Purpose:** to name, together, the one contested issue that anchors WG4's Year One, and to test spiritual abuse as a possible root-cause lens.

2. Opening and spiritual grounding

- **Reflection (Noor):** carried forward from induction, that before we transform others we first need to transform ourselves; every day is an examination hall, and the way we treat those closest to us is the first test of whether we can speak about gender justice. Members were invited into emergent dialogue: coming not as experts with answers, but as people willing to be changed by what we hear.
- **Grounding (Nontando):** a secure, welcoming space for every person's thoughts, opinions and experiences, where each voice is heard with the same reverence we give to those we trust. We are here because of a shared commitment to a faith response to GBV and to the inequalities affecting women's lives, rooted in the values of love and compassion within our faiths.

3. Ground rules and safeguarding: ratified

The ground rules co-created at induction were presented as the group's own and agreed, with no objections raised in the chat.

- **Being heard:** be properly heard, and listen without judging.

- **Learning:** be open to learn and to unlearn through deep listening.
- **Pursuit of truth:** expect disagreement, and keep it robust yet respectful.
- **Posture:** come as human beings with a learning posture, not wearing a hat.
- **Respect:** respect every religion and culture, and say nothing that diminishes others.
- **Sacred texts:** draw on any sacred text with care; no proof-texting, and no speaking definitively for a tradition that is not your own.
- **Clarity:** leave no one in uncertainty; listen first and look for ways forward together.
- **Dignity and confidentiality:** nothing is published in a member's words without their consent.
- **Time:** manage time well, so small groups have enough of it.
- **Etiquette:** keep your name visible, and say your country when you speak.

Safeguarding in place: an incident response process; an agreed definition of terms; and a named person to turn to if anything is distressing. Members were invited to propose further additions at any time.

4. Questions from induction: held, not closed

- At induction, members asked who has the authority to interpret our texts, and which scholars we should listen to.
- Members proposed a way forward: first agree shared values rooted in each of our faiths, then test any interpretation with three questions, which now serve as our **compass**: *What fruit does it bear? Who does it harm? Who does it benefit?*
- Each tradition is given equal time and space, a principle reflected in the session design.
- The bigger questions were not settled. They are held, and we expect the answers to unfold as we walk this path together.

5. Our Year One issue: Poll 1

Members chose from the three issues ranked highest in the recruitment survey, by anonymous poll.

Which contested issue should WG4 explore first in Year One?	% of votes
Survivor shaming and silence	64%
Guardianship, bodily autonomy and consent	29%
Interpretive authority	7%

- **Survivor shaming and silence** is WG4's Year One issue. It is the lens for this year, not the only thing WG4 will explore; the other two issues remain connected to it and will continue to shape our dialogue.

6. Breakout 1: what survivor shaming and silence looks like

Three groups discussed two questions: *What does survivor shaming and silence look like in your community or tradition? What makes it hard to speak about?* Contributions are summarised without names.

Group 1

- Survivor shaming is very real across all the communities represented, and often rooted in a culture of keeping silent, so speaking up itself brings shame.
- Power imbalance: perpetrators are often already powerful in the community and can define the narrative.
- Speaking up carries real social consequences within families and among neighbours, often more severe for the survivor than for the perpetrator.

- Survivors are blamed even when they speak to hold the perpetrator accountable.
- Faith leaders need training in trauma-informed care, recognising how many people carry stories they have never told.

Group 2

- Once labelled a victim, a woman can face rejection across her whole life: family, social and professional.
- Gossip and informal networks within families and faith communities can do lasting damage.
- Breaking intergenerational cycles requires education, including open teaching about sex and consent, which remains taboo in many religious settings. Some perpetrators do not recognise what they do as rape; marital rape was named as a strong example.

Group 3

- Male survivors face particular shame, including being questioned or mocked when they report to the police.
- Men are often raised not to express emotion, which deepens the harm.
- Culture and tradition shape all of this. No survivor should ever be blamed for another person's violence, and survivor care and support must be provided wherever possible.

Plenary synthesis (Nontando): shame falls on survivors across the gender divide; trauma and power are embedded in these experiences and in culture; and the group already shares a common grasp of an issue we now need to unpack together. Points from the chat added gender norms that promote a culture of silence, religion used for vested political interests that fuel impunity, religious gatekeepers who benefit, too much respect for leaders, and the misuse of love and care.

7. Input: understanding spiritual abuse (Suzie Greco)

Suzie opened with a content warning and a question for each tradition to hold: *can something be abusive if the person doing it sincerely believes they are acting for God?* Much spiritual abuse is done by people who believe they are being faithful: husbands, parents, in-laws, respected leaders, and sometimes people who love the person they harm.

Two definitions

- **Lisa Oakley (UK):** a form of emotional and psychological abuse, characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. One harsh sermon is not spiritual abuse; a relationship structured by control through religion is.
- **Chowdhury and Hannan, in Abuse in World Religions:** the violation of a person's spiritual self through the misuse of religious position and trust, sacred texts or faith principles. Its injury reaches a person's core and can block their connection with the divine: *my husband hurt me using the words of God, and now I cannot hear God without hearing him*. Survivors describe a double loss, of the relationship and of their faith.

Why it may be a root of GBV, not only one form of it

1. It makes an unequal order seem sacred: when male authority is presented as God's will, control is experienced as obedience, and questioning a husband or the church feels like questioning God.
2. It often happens at home, where daily life is enmeshed with religious practice and a husband, mother-in-law or parent can become a spiritual authority.
3. It silences: disclosure is treated as the offence, endurance as the highest virtue, and leaving as a spiritual danger. It disguises violence as piety and keeps survivors inside it.

Six patterns found across Jewish, Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Sikh contexts

- **Divine mandate:** "this is not me speaking, it is from God".
- **Enforced obedience:** disagreement reframed as sin, disloyalty or rebellion against God.
- **Weaponised scripture:** selected texts used without context, while texts of justice are left out.
- **Isolation:** the community or household becomes the only world, and leaving costs everything.
- **Censorship of decision-making:** a woman is taught not to trust her own conscience, body or judgement.
- **Silencing disclosure:** the person who speaks up becomes the problem, rather than the person who did harm.

These mechanisms belong to no single religion; they appear across traditions in different clothing. Suzie invited members to resist two easy conclusions: that this is about a few bad apples, or that it is someone else's religious problem.

Conditions that let it repeat

- Authority without accountability, whether from rigid hierarchy or from no oversight at all; information that flows back to one person; belonging that depends on conformity; and leaders who are unsupported and untrained in responding to disclosure.
- A quieter barrier: those with the power to respond are often those least likely to have experienced the harm. Who in our communities gets to name the problem?

Towards solutions

- In every tradition studied, resistance is growing from within: Jewish women and rabbis using rabbinic law to confront sexual harm; Christian communities accompanying survivors and building interpretive resilience; Muslim scholars and practitioners naming spiritual abuse in the home; Hindu and Sikh voices reclaiming healing and justice in their own teachings.
- Our traditions are not only where harm happens; they may also be where healing begins.

8. Recognising spiritual abuse: Poll 2

Which forms of spiritual abuse do you see in your own context? (choose all that apply)	% of voters
Pressure to forgive, be patient or stay silent to protect family honour or the faith's reputation	89%
Religious leaders treated as beyond question or accountability	83%
Spiritual threats or rituals used to control or silence (for example curses, ancestors, impurity)	83%
Sacred texts used to demand obedience or justify control	78%
Women, young people or survivors excluded from interpreting texts or from leadership	67%
I am not sure	0%

- Every form was recognised by at least two thirds of voters, and no one was unsure. The most widely recognised, pressure to stay silent to protect honour or reputation, sits at the heart of our chosen issue.

9. Faith voices

Each speaker had equal time and spoke from within their own tradition to one question: *how does spiritual abuse show up in your tradition, and what within your tradition resists it?*

Dr Scholastica (Scholar) Kaaria, Faith to Action Network, Catholic, Kenya

- **How it shows up:** scripture is quoted to tell a woman that a good wife keeps quiet and builds her home; marriage is taught as permanent, whatever happens within it; respected perpetrators are protected; and survivors are asked whether they have forgiven, prayed and fasted, and told to give a second chance.
- **The spiritualisation of suffering:** enduring violence is presented as heavenly, even as the path to salvation.
- **Shame belongs to the perpetrator, not the survivor.** It is not the survivor's duty to carry the burden of shame while the perpetrator goes free.
- **What resists it:** the Church's justice and peace commissions, and the example of Jesus, who welcomed women rejected by their communities.

Reverend Father Limbani Jeromy Juttah, Anglican priest and lecturer, University of Malawi

- **Misuse of virtues, with misread scripture:** love is a two-edged sword. It can liberate the vulnerable, but it can also be used to silence those facing injustice, for example when a family conceals abuse by a respected elder "in the name of love".
- **Reconciliation and forgiveness replacing justice:** pressure to reconcile quickly, before asking what went wrong and holding the offender responsible.
- **Leadership worship:** in a context where religious leaders are the most trusted public figures, that trust can become a source of silence.
- **Failing to draw a line between culture and the Gospel:** culture and faith become blended, leading to misinterpretation of scripture and to shaming survivors while perpetrators go free.
- He described a case where a young survivor waited over two months for justice until it was referred to the authorities, showing systemic gaps that still need to be addressed.
- **What resists it:** love understood as incompatible with domination and violence, and justice and accountability before reconciliation.

Dr Ntsikelelo Colossa, ubuntu and African traditional spirituality, South Africa

- **Ubuntu:** *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, a person is a person through other people.
- **How it shows up:** the expectation of submission to elders, trainers and spiritual authorities is exploited. Young women and young men have been sexually abused in the name of the ancestors, with promises of power or of being "chosen". Survivors may be told to bathe, which destroys evidence. Self-styled prophets and leaders also exploit people financially, and communities sometimes defend accused leaders rather than survivors.
- **What resists it:** teaching within the tradition that submitting to authority never means submitting to abuse, and that no one needs to sleep with anyone to be gifted, called or anointed.

10. Breakout 2: testing the lens

Four new groups considered which forms of spiritual abuse they recognise in survivor shaming and silence, and tested one teaching with the compass. Time was short, so most groups focused on the first question.

Group 1

- "Leadership worship" and absolute submission to authority came up most.
- Tested with the compass: the fruit is not good; it harms mainly women and children; it benefits whoever holds the power, often a pastor.
- A pastor's wife is in a particularly difficult position: the man in charge of the church is also in charge of her life and her children's lives.

Group 2

- Spiritual abuse shows up in how sacred scripture is interpreted, and in how a faith leader's absolute authority is justified and enforced. Both are used to keep survivors quiet and to blame and shame them.

Group 3

- Internalised beliefs: girls raised to be submissive as something God requires; a spirituality of suffering that tells survivors to suffer, forgive and pray rather than speak; young men in clergy formation groomed into a culture of abuse and silence; and women and girls groomed to please men by default.

Group 4

- Survivors stay silent under social, cultural and spiritual pressure. One example was the misreading of Qur'an 4:34 (*al-rijalu qawwamuna 'ala al-nisa*) to claim that men have control over women and that women may not speak about abuse.

11. From the chat

The chat was rich throughout. Contributions are summarised without names, in line with our ground rules.

- **Denial among perpetrators:** findings shared from a recent SVRI presentation in which 18 of 20 men convicted of rape did not see what they had done as rape.
- **Doctrine at home:** some men who champion women's rights in public still hold a dominant position at home because their tradition teaches that the man presides, often without recognising it.
- **Authority without accountability:** the rise of faith and spiritual "ministries" whose members are mostly women; leadership that is often gendered, with men as leaders and women as followers.
- **Respect that turns into worship:** respect for the position of a leader can turn into worship of the leader, which leaders can exploit.
- **Love and virtue:** love can be misused to keep people in abusive relationships and to push for forgiveness; justice needs to be integrated into all our virtues so they are not used to justify abuse.
- **Justice as a religious duty:** the call in Qur'an 4:135 to stand firmly for justice, even against oneself, and the duty to use understanding rather than follow belief blindly.
- **Shame belongs to the perpetrator:** spiritual abuse transfers shame from the person who caused harm to the person who experienced it.
- **What survivors want:** Judith Herman's *Truth and Repair* finds that survivors most often seek acknowledgement, genuine change, apology and repair.
- **Spiritual support should empower survivors,** never pressure them into silence, reconciliation or forgiveness.
- **A question to carry forward:** how can inculturation help us distinguish cultural practices from religious teaching, when both are used to justify GBV?
- Several members said this was the first time they had thought of spiritual abuse as a form of GBV, and that there is much to unpack.

12. Testing the lens and shaping WG4-2: Poll 3

Question and answer	% of voters
How helpful is spiritual abuse as a lens? Very helpful, let us explore it further	93%
Partly helpful, but other root causes matter too; not sure yet; not helpful	0% each

What would help you most next session? Reading sacred texts together, within and across traditions	33%
Expert input on the most contested texts and teachings	27%
Hearing more from survivors and survivor advocates	20%
Practical tools for faith leaders and communities	13%
How did today feel? I felt heard and want to go deeper	27%
Useful, though I would like more time in small groups	20%

13. Emerging themes

- **Power protects perpetrators:** respected elders, pastors and powerful community members are shielded, while survivors carry the consequences.
- **Leadership worship:** respect for leaders turns into worship, and leadership is often gendered.
- **Virtues turned against survivors:** love, forgiveness, patience and endurance are used to silence survivors and to replace justice.
- **Scripture used selectively:** texts on obedience and submission are quoted, while texts of justice are left out.
- **Shame that lasts a lifetime:** labels, gossip and rejection follow survivors across family, social and working life.
- **Survivors who are often forgotten:** male survivors, pastors' wives, and young people in religious formation or initiation.
- **Culture and faith entangled:** harmful practices are carried out in the name of faith or the ancestors.
- **Silence about sex and consent:** taboo on sex education, and perpetrators who do not see what they do as rape.
- **Faith leaders unprepared:** leaders who are untrained to respond to disclosure need trauma-informed formation.

These themes closely match WG4's desk review and key informant conversations, where survivor shaming and silence was the most consistent pattern across traditions.

14. Resources shared

- Stiebert, J. (ed.) (2025). *Abuse in World Religions*, Volumes 1 and 2. Routledge, open access.
- Maqasid al-shariah, the higher objectives of Islamic law that protect life, dignity and intellect: the work of Jasser Auda, and the KUPI women ulama congress in Indonesia.
- Musawah, on equality and justice in Muslim families; the Hurma Project, on spiritual abuse.
- Contextual Bible Study, Ujamaa Centre, including the study of the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13).
- Herman, J. L. (2023). *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*. Basic Books.
- The WG4 desk review, shared for reading in your own time.

15. What we heard about the session, and what we will change

- **More time in small groups:** breakout rooms will run for at least 12 minutes, with fewer, sharper questions.
- **Questions you can see:** breakout questions will be posted in the chat, sent to every room as a message, and kept on screen.
- **Clearer reporting back:** rooms will be numbered so each group knows when it is its turn.

About this report

This report draws on the session recording and transcript, the chat and the Zoom poll results. Members' contributions are summarised, not quoted, and chat contributions are shared without names, in line with our ground rules. Poll percentages are of those who voted in each poll. If you would like anything you said to be corrected or removed, please contact Noor Ur Rehman.