



SVRI FAITH & GBV COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Working Group 4: Religions and Theologies

Naming the Contested Ground

**WG4-1 · 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

Chair: Noor Ur Rehman · Co-chair: Dr Nontando Hadebe

This session is recorded



Let us become still together

Through prayer, silence, a breath, or simply being present, in whatever way your tradition or your heart guides you.

What we did last time

23

members met from Tanzania, Afghanistan, Canada, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Sri Lanka, India and Germany

5

breakout groups began building our ground rules and safeguarding together

Clergy, an imam, a traditional healer, theologians, a forensic physician, lawyers, practitioners and researchers. That diversity is our strength.

What we agreed to

- Be properly heard; listen without judging
- Be open to learn and to unlearn
- Expect disagreement; keep it robust yet respectful
- Come as human beings, not wearing a hat
- Respect every religion and culture
- Draw on sacred texts with care; no proof-texting
- Listen first; find ways forward together
- Protect dignity and confidentiality
- Manage time well for the small groups
- Keep your name visible; say your country

Safeguarding in place: an incident response process · an agreed definition of terms · a named person to turn to

THE QUESTIONS YOU RAISED

A shared compass for any interpretation

What fruit does it bear?

Who does it harm?

Who does it benefit?

Before we discuss further, we agree on shared values rooted in each of our faiths. The bigger questions will keep coming back; we expect the answers to unfold as we walk this path together.

TODAY · POLL 1 · TWO MINUTES

Which issue should we begin with?

Guardianship, bodily autonomy and consent

Who decides about a person's body, marriage and life choices, and how religious teaching is used in that decision

Survivor shaming and silence

How survivors are blamed, silenced or pressed to forgive, and how faith communities can break that silence

Interpretive authority

Who has the right to interpret sacred texts and teachings, and whose voices are left out

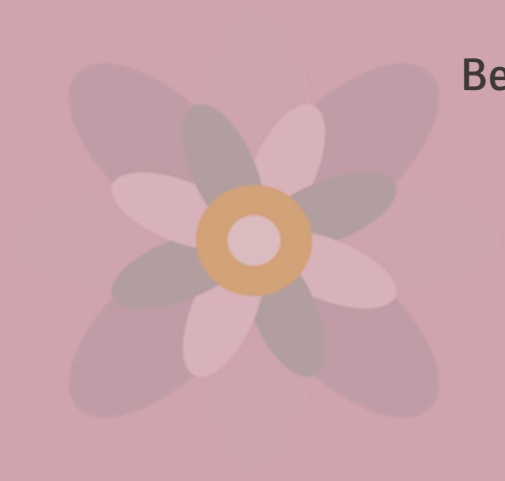
All three matter and all three are connected. The issue becomes our lens for Year One, not the only thing this group is about.

POLL 1 · RESULTS

Our shared starting point for Year One

Survivor shaming and silence

Before anyone tells you anything about it, we want to hear what it means to you.



BREAKOUT 1 · TEN MINUTES · GROUPS OF FOUR OR FIVE

Owning the issue

1 What does **survivor shaming and silence** look like in your community or tradition?

2 What makes it hard to speak about?

Choose one person to share the main thing your group noticed, in one minute.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US, IN ONE MINUTE

Three things stand out

THE GAP

69% · 1%

of 138 studies reviewed in 2015
focused on Christianity; only 1% on
Muslim communities

WHAT WE HEARD

10 voices

from six traditions and eight countries
drew the same line: what a tradition
teaches, and harmful practices carried
out in its name

THE NEWEST RESEARCH

2025

Abuse is about as common in religious
homes as in others; what differs is that
scripture and authority are used to
justify it

OUR PROPOSAL

At the root of survivor shaming and silence we keep finding the misuse of sacred texts, religious teaching and religious authority to control, to harm or to silence.

This is often called **spiritual abuse**.

Not the whole story: a lens we offer, for you to test with us.



INPUT · ELEVEN MINUTES

Understanding spiritual abuse

Suzie Greco, WG4 core group

A content warning: this input touches on painful experiences. Please look after yourself, and reach out to our support contact at any time.

Spiritual Abuse

**A Root of Gender-Based Violence? A
Lens for Us to Test**



The Question

Can something be abusive if the person doing it sincerely believes they are acting for God?



What we mean by Spiritual Abuse

2 Definition

1 - “Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional & psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systemic pattern of coercive & controlling behavior in a religious context.” *Oakley*

2 - “Spiritual abuse is the violation of a person’s spiritual self through the direct or indirect misuse of a religious or spiritual position & corresponding trust, sacred text or faith principle... Its impact reaches the core being of a person.” *Chowdhury & Hannon*



Why this Matters for GBV

- It makes an unequal order seem sacred
- It happens at home, & our definitions often miss it.
- It silences & it can block the way out



Patterns to Recognize

1. **Divine Mandate** - “This is not me speaking: it is God.”
2. **Enforced Obedience** - Disagreement is reframed as sin, disloyalty or rebellion against God.
3. **Weaponized Scripture** - Selected texts are used without context or challenge, while texts of justice may be left out.
4. **Isolation** - The community or household becomes the only world & leaving costs everything
5. **Censorship of Decision** - Making - A woman is often taught not to trust her own conscience, body or judgement.
6. **Silencing Disclosure** - The person who speaks up becomes the problem, rather than the person who did the harm.



Not Only Individuals: The Structures Around Them

- Authority without Accountability
- Closed Information
- Conditional Belonging

Quieter Barrier:

Those with the **POWER** to **RESPOND** are often those least likely to have experienced harm



The Same Traditions Can Hold The Resources

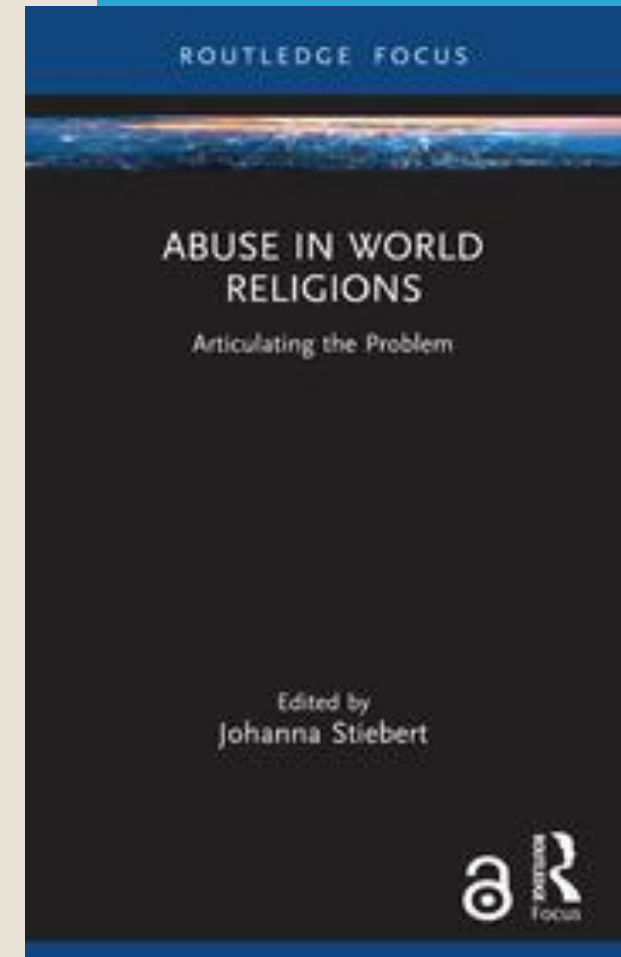
Abuse in World Religions: Articulating the Problem

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003324164/abuse-world-religions-johanna-stiebert?context=ubx&refId=e859ebbf-d91c-48d5-8184-e8fa7abe4d4f>

Abuse in World Religions: Toward Solutions

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003324171/abuse-world-religions-johanna-stiebert>

~ *Both books are freely accessible online*



POLL 2 · ONE MINUTE · CHOOSE ALL THAT APPLY

Which forms do you see in your own context?

Sacred texts used to demand obedience or justify control

Pressure to forgive, be patient or stay silent to protect honour or reputation

Religious leaders treated as beyond question or accountability

Spiritual threats or rituals used to control or silence

Women, young people or survivors excluded from interpreting texts or leading

I am not sure

FAITH VOICES · 1 OF 3

“Shame belongs to the perpetrator, not the survivor.”

Dr Scholastica (Scholar) Kaaria

Faith to Action Network · Catholic, Kenya

How does spiritual abuse show up in your tradition, and what within your tradition resists it?

FAITH VOICES · 2 OF 3

“Love is incompatible with domination and violence.”

Reverend Father Limbani Jeromy Juttah

Anglican priest and lecturer, University of Malawi · Anglican, Malawi

How does spiritual abuse show up in your tradition, and what within your tradition resists it?

FAITH VOICES · 3 OF 3

“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: a person is a person through other people.”

Dr Ntsikelelo Colossa

South Africa · ubuntu, interfaith action and positive masculinity

How does spiritual abuse show up in your tradition, and what within your tradition resists it?

Testing the lens

- 1 Looking at Poll 2, which forms of spiritual abuse do you recognise in **survivor shaming and silence**, and where?
- 2 Take one teaching or practice linked to this issue: **What fruit does it bear? Who does it harm? Who does it benefit?**
- 3 What resource from within your own tradition can help resist harm here?

JUST A GLIMPSE · ALL LINKS IN THE CHAT

For those who want to go further

Abuse in World Religions

Stiebert (ed.), Vols 1 and 2, Routledge 2025, open access

Maqasid al-shariah

The higher objectives of Islamic law: Jasser Auda; the KUPI women ulama congress, Indonesia

Musawah · Hurma Project

Equality and justice in Muslim families; research and support on spiritual abuse

Contextual Bible Study

Ujamaa Centre, including the Tamar study on 2 Samuel 13

Our WG4 desk review will also be shared with you to read in your own time and add to.

Then Poll 3: three quick questions about today and about what you need next time

SVRI Faith & GBV CoP · WG4

NEXT STEPS AND COMMUNITY NEWS

Where we go from here

WG4-2, November

We go deeper into **survivor shaming and silence**

Coming to you

The recording, a short session report
and the resources

Our community

Core group by transparent lottery;
survivor advocates warmly invited to
contact Noor; please join our
WhatsApp group

Thank you for your honesty and your care

One mind alone can do little; together we learn from each other, grow with each other and draw on each other's strengths.

If anything stays with you, please reach out to our support contact, Noor or Nontando.

See you at WG4-2 in November · SVRI Faith & GBV CoP

