

# The Role of Religious Leaders in Expanding Gender Empowerment

## FINDINGS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME STUDY ON CRS' JUSTICE AND PEACEBUILDING PROGRAM IMPACTS<sup>1</sup>

In 2018, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) commissioned the University of Notre Dame (UND) to study the impact of CRS' justice and peacebuilding (JPB) investments in six countries.<sup>2</sup> Among these were JPB projects in Egypt and Kenya. The projects, Building Opportunities for Knowledge and Religious Acceptance (BOKRA) in Egypt, and Dialogue and Action (DAP II) in Kenya, relied in part on engagement of faith leaders across religious lines around gender empowerment and societal norms, efforts which enhanced prospects for equity and peace in conflict-volatile contexts. BOKRA's focus - religious tolerance - was to work within established gender roles and norms; the level of gender empowerment was a spillover benefit. In contrast, DAP II focused on changing norms around child marriage but not necessarily through women's empowerment. The abstract of this study highlights the key impacts of

these JPB projects and the role of increased gender sensitivity in all programming.



A CICC staff member speaks with primary school leaders in Msabaha, coastal Kenya, as part of the DAP II multistakeholder effort to promote child rights. [Philip Laubner for CRS]

UND assessed 1) the extent to which gender dynamics had been incorporated into the project designs, and integrated in implementation; and 2) the extent to which gender played a role achieving in the projects' JPB outcomes. Because traditional social mores strongly shape gender roles and behavior in Egyptian and coastal Kenyan society and culture, the project staff in both countries systematically involved faith leaders across religious lines to design and implement the activities.

UND concluded that in both cases women and men involved reported more balanced thinking on gender roles and power dynamics within households, while furthering peace and social justice in their targeted communities. UND found that much of the observed change in attitudes and behavior could be attributed to religious leaders, who were enabled and equipped by the projects to become advocates with clear consistent messages. In Egypt for example, religious leaders exercised their influence to shape messages of tolerance and relations between all people and, thereby, influence gender norms. Further, by advocating husbands to allow women to participate in the program, allow home visits, and attend peace circles, women had the opportunity to set aside stereotypes about religious identity and became more flexible with regard to cultural norms.

<sup>1</sup> **What are we Fighting For? Reflections on CRS' Justice and Peacebuilding Programs:** Task Order #1 Final Report, Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development, submitted by the Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development, reports on findings in a study, commissioned by CRS on its youth, gender and peacebuilding projects. Susan St. Ville, Director of International Peace Studies at the Kroc Institute, was the lead on the gender component. Field research was conducted during the summer of 2018

<sup>2</sup> The countries were Bosnia Herzegovina, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Philippines, and Rwanda.

## BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR KNOWLEDGE AND RELIGIOUS ACCEPTANCE (BOKRA) – LUXOR AND SOHAG, EGYPT

The BOKRA study illustrated how interreligious action can build a foundation for peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and implicitly gender empowerment. Luxor and Sohag were targeted because they were historic sites of inter-faith tensions and violence. Despite the presence of Muslims and Christians living in the same towns, household members led segregated lives. For example, male youth could not frequent cafés patronized by their counterparts across religious lines.

The UND research demonstrated that BOKRA's success hinged on targeting key stakeholders. This included religious leaders as keepers of tradition. In Egypt's highly deferential society, religious authorities are highly regarded and influence communities via their sermons and public pronouncements. Mothers were also targeted because assessments revealed their role in promoting segregation of their children from children of other faiths and inciting their sons to violence as retaliation for perceived slights. Male youth, who most often were the direct perpetrators of violence and children, who self-segregated, were also targeted.

The UND researchers asserted that religious leaders were critical to the success of the project. They noted that the project wisely enlisted religious leaders to identify issues of public concern, and then to design and disseminate inclusive interfaith messages to diverse audiences in public gatherings. The investigators also found that consistent messages of non-violence and tolerance were based on Quranic and Biblical teachings, thereby establishing the ethos of the leaders and the legitimacy of their approach. Moreover, the research showed that the messages were most effective when they were part of interreligious dialog and engagement. When religious leaders modelled the behavior espoused through their preaching, public statements and actions, people were far more receptive to their messages. Further, when religious leaders advised that mothers as influential members of society should be permitted to participate in project activities, husbands accepted and followed this advice.

In conclusion, UND observed that BOKRA's astute recognition of and appreciation for local culture and traditional institutions, accelerated change, and dismantled strongly held stereotypes about religious identity. This change significantly impacted female rural pioneers (FRP)<sup>3</sup> and male youth, both of whom underwent a transformation in their self-understanding of gender. According to UND,

“Uniformly, the FRP felt that BOKRA helped them to become more flexible with regard to cultural norms...Male youth who participated in BOKRA ... also articulated a changed understanding of gender and a tendency to link tolerance with basic humanity rather than with being a man or a woman, thus suggesting a positive movement towards increased gender equity.”

## DIALOGUE AND ACTION II (DAP II) MALINDI, KENYA

The Dialogue and Action (DAP) project, funded by GHR Foundation, was implemented in 3 phases extending from 2010 to 2019 in the Coastal region of Kenya. The second phase, DAP II, ran from June 2013 through September 2016 and sought to reduce the incidence of child marriage among vulnerable communities in the Malinda area of coastal Kenya.

UND commended DAP II as a model for its approach to changing gender-related attitudes and behaviors through multi-stakeholder involvement and interreligious action. UND observed that the project's success derived from its multi-level approach involving Peace Clubs, schools, policy and legal systems, SILC<sup>4</sup>, faith leaders, and the CICC<sup>5</sup>. The project not only created awareness of the problem,

<sup>3</sup> FRP are community-based workers who historically have conducted home visits to promote health awareness among women and families. BOKRA trained FRPs to introduce concepts of nonviolent parenting and religious tolerance; they also identified mothers of different faiths to participate in “peace circle” dialogues.

<sup>4</sup> SILC (Savings and Internal Lending Communities) groups helped mothers to develop their own income producing projects.

<sup>5</sup> CICC (the Coastal Interfaith Council of Clerics) assembled religious leaders of the major faith traditions in the region and later included traditional leaders.

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*“Given the strong hold of patriarchy in the region as well as the presence of violent conflict, it is not likely that a project focused on gender empowerment could have preceded the building of religious tolerance and the cultivation of non-violent attitudes and behaviors”.*

---UND Study



Religious leaders affiliated with CICC came together to explore and unite around faith values related to confronting child abuse and championing child protection. [Philip Laubner for CRS]

but also provided girls and boys a safe outlet to report sexual abuse and high-risk behavior, and then pursued systemic change through institutional behavior. DAP II promoted gender equity through equal access to education

UND found that DAP II gave religious leaders the latitude to explore gender equity at the household level, in communities and in social organizations, and to identify culturally acceptable methods that would contribute to right relations and strengthen social cohesion. The researchers found support for this approach among teachers, members of the local advisory council, and mothers, who were members of SILC groups. Ultimately, the CICC proved a strategic partner for DAP II because clerics not only enjoyed credibility, but they knew how to move “between religion and culture and how to maximize their influence in the cultural sphere.”

Despite these successes, UND researchers observed a gap between the evolution of social and cultural forces, and normative religious values which were perceived as “unchanging.” They also detected a difference in attitude about gender empowerment between religious leaders at the top, and those at the grassroots. This gap might be explained as a cascading issue because as the UND report noted, “the more progressive understanding of gender the group originally forged often became diluted as the network of leaders extended to the grassroots.”

## UND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. BOKRA – Deepen the training of religious leaders and FRPs to help them more fully understand and appreciate the “intersection of faith, culture, and gender roles.” Religious leaders also need more time to discuss and embrace the notion of what constitutes “right relations between men and women within the household and within the broader social order.”
2. DAP II - Continue and increase the capacity strengthening of religious leaders through interreligious dialog at multiple levels to ensure that messaging reaches all stakeholder groups in the network; strengthen problem analysis to unearth underlying issues; utilize counselors and trusted technical advisors to assist in this process.

*It [DAP II] is notable also for its multi-pronged approach, intervening at different levels of society and with different target groups to bring about systemic change”.*

---UND Study