

LEARNING BRIEF

Action Learning from application of the ENGAGE Programme's

RELIGIOUS LEADERS WORKSHOPS TOOL



The **'Religious Leaders Workshops' Tool** is part of Norwegian Church Aid's (NCA) holistic programme, called **ENGAGE** – *Enhancing Girl's Agency and Gender Equality*, that aims for preventing, mitigating, and responding to child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

The **'Religious Leaders Workshops' Tool** was piloted in Somalia and Iraq, targeted 86 male Islamic and Yazidi leaders. Evaluations were conducted with both facilitators and beneficiaries after each of the 7 sessions. Additionally Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were facilitated with the staff and participants at the end of the programme.

Significant findings on how well the tool was working, include:

WHAT WORKED?



- Participating religious leaders stated that it was important to get additional (factual) information concerning child marriage, particularly information on health related risks and emotional impacts of CEFM on adolescents, as it equipped them further to engage more with their communities. They were convinced that by discussing such topics and providing information to the community, such practices will change and will become less common.
- Religious leaders emphasised that it was critical for them to get practical tips and messages to share with their communities about the harmful impacts of CEFM. This further emphasised the role they can actively play in addressing the issue of CEFM.
- The session “Child marriage in our community” was highlighted by most of the participants, as it generated intense discussions and interesting conversations.
- The participants agreed that the workshop format and the content of the sessions were culturally appropriate. The participants also suggested that the number of sessions could be raised to at least ten (Somalia).

The facilitators shared that:

- The Introduction to the workshop set the right tone, bringing interest and excitement for the religious leaders to engage in the rest of the sessions.
- The sessions related to Religious Leaders' role in preventing CEFM motivated participants to do even more outreach services in their communities. They recognised that people listen to them and realised the full responsibility for sharing the accurate information and promoting protective actions in the community.



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- The initial training and intense preparation to facilitate the sessions paid off. The topics and materials of the workshop are very sensitive, so the staff ensured that they prepared well before each session.
- The session “Child marriage in our community” gave a lot of new practical information to the participants.



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WHAT CAN BE IMPROVED?



RELIGIOUS LEADERS

- The participants shared that the language and the activities in session 5 - Honour and sexuality in our society, required further adjustments. It needed to be clear that there was no issue of promoting uncontrolled freedom for adolescents, but rather clearer emphasis on setting healthy boundaries and expectations both for adolescent boys and girls.
- The participants also said that the length of the sessions should not exceed two hours per day, for the religious leaders to participate fully, managing with their other responsibilities and commitments, and engage effectively.
- The participants shared that some verses from the scripture were used out of context, which sparked a heated dispute and confrontation among religious leaders, wasting a lot of time that could have been more productively used otherwise (Iraq).

- The facilitators emphasised the importance of local adaptations, particularly related to the use of terminology, referring to local definitions for various terms, such as “honour”.
- The use of energisers and physical activities during the sessions was not usually welcomed by the Religious Leaders, who found such activities inappropriate for the audience.
- The facilitators suggested that the refreshments need to be available during the sessions to show more respect towards the participants.
- In both pilot countries the session “Gender, power and restrictions on adolescent girls” requires sufficient amount of time and strong facilitation, as the participants mainly deny existence of any gender inequalities and refuse to engage in constructive dialogue.
- The facilitators stressed that religious leaders should be provided with some resources (for example, printed materials with key messages, etc.), so that they could roll out the outreach activities effectively.



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⚠ NOTE: *As the tool was finalised, the participants’ and facilitators’ observations were considered, and further adjustments were done to various sessions, as well as to the activities used in the curriculum, to better serve the participants’ needs.*

IMPACT

- After participation in the workshops, the religious leaders expressed readiness with updated information and greater commitment to raise public awareness on the harmful impacts of CEFM among their community members.
- The Religious Leaders from Somalia committed to mobilise their communities to address the issue of CEFM by preaching and sharing the critical lessons, educating people about gender equality during congregational prayers in mosques.
- The participating religious leaders' groups put together concrete action plans to address the issue of CEFM in their communities. They agreed to have regular follow-up meetings to share the progress on their action plans' implementation.

“The courts in Iraq do not allow adolescents to marry, at least they do not issue out marriage certificates. Thus, adolescents go to religious leaders to conduct the marriage ceremony and then wait until they are at the right age to be able to get the official marriage certificate. We will not allow such practice to happen anymore, and we will not support it.” – Religious Leader from Iraq.

“The ENGAGE programme has tremendously helped us in understanding the negative implications of the CEFM, as well as allowed to see more alternatives to CEFM. These knowledge and skills are valuable lessons for us. We will continue reflecting on our way of living and will be helping others with better ways for supporting our adolescents.” – Religious Leader from Somalia.

“The religious leaders more than any other group can prevent CEFM and can stop it from happening. One of the Religious Leaders in our group had his daughter to drop out of school, as he did not want to leave his wife alone at home. After attending couple of workshop sessions, he realised the importance of education for girls and enrolled his daughter back to school.” – NCA Facilitator from Iraq.

ACTION PLAN DEVELOPED BY THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS AT THE END OF THE WORKSHOP (IRAQ EXAMPLE)

Our goal: Raise the awareness of the community members on the negative effects of CEFM, reaching out to as many people as possible.

What are they key steps we need to take to get there?

Activity	Type of activity	Timeframe	Target group	Location	Key message	Resources required	Person(s) in charge
Sharing CEFM related information with other highly influential people and religious leaders in the area.	Discussion	Monthly	Influential people	Sardashti	CEFM negative effects	Own knowledge and notes	All religious leaders
Not allowing parents to marry their children out of court. Providing sessions to parents intending to marry their children.	Discussion	Monthly	Care givers	Sardashti	CEFM negative effects	Printouts (if available)	All religious leaders
Organise meetings with heads of tribes in the communities to discuss the issue of CEFM and steps to address it.	Discussion	Monthly	Heads of tribes	Sardashti	CEFM negative effects	Own knowledge and notes	All religious leaders
Identifying and outreaching for girls who were dropped out of school and raising the awareness of their parents on CEFM so they do not plan to marry their daughters even if they are out of school. Supporting girls to return back to school.	One-on-one discussion	Once per week	Girls and their families	Sardashti	Preventing early marriage, importance of education	Own knowledge and notes	All religious leaders
Including the CEFM related messaging in Religious Leaders' speeches during community gatherings.	Public events/ community gatherings	Once per week	Government employees	Sardashti and Sinjar	Preventing early marriage	Reliable sources of information; booklets to distribute to people	All religious leaders