



Mali

Pilot Project: Empowered Faith Communities on Child Protection (CP) and Reduction of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), especially FGM

Mali has one of the highest rates of gender inequality in the world. Violence against women, including gender-based violence (GBV) and female genital mutilation (FGM), is deeply rooted in the society. Studies have revealed that 91% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 are impacted by FGM and 70% of households support a continuation of this practice. This damaging tradition is firmly anchored in cultural and religious beliefs, which makes it a tremendous challenge to work against.

Two pilot projects were launched with the aim of changing minds through interreligious cooperation and dialogue: “Inclusive Protection through Channels of Hope Pathways: Region of Koulikoro”, implemented by Islamic Relief Deutschland and another implemented by World Vision Deutschland called, “Empowered faith communities on Child Protection (CP) and reduction of Gender-based Violence (GBV), especially FGM.” Religious and traditional actors were brought into both projects to serve as key figures, question cultural norms, and promote long-term changes in behaviour. A dialogue-based approach was used to introduce both medical and theological arguments against FGM into the awareness-raising work. From December 2019 to December 2020, measures were carried out in 20 villages across the Koulikoro region, which lies on the banks of the Niger river, downstream about 60 kilometres northeast of Bamako, the Mali capital.

Results

The project saw success in sensitising the population and in preventing unhealthy practices. Religious and traditional leaders, a third of whom were women, were trained in the Channels of Hope (CoH) Gender & Child Protection Curriculum. The CoH approach equips religious leaders to

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apply religious texts to social questions. In the training, medical facts about the negative consequences of FGM are combined with religious arguments in order to create room for conversations in which social grievances are discussed and cultural norms can be questioned. The actors who received this training took the messages into their communities and encouraged members to rethink cultural norms.

The Channels-of-Hope-Action-Teams (CHATs), consisting of trained multipliers, organised educational events, and incorporated the topic in over 100 sermons. They reached families directly and informed them about the negative impacts of FGM and GBV. Thanks to these measures, at least 249 child marriages could be prevented, and more than 370 girls were protected from FGM. At the same time, FGM practitioners were encouraged to find alternative sources of income in order to reduce their financial dependency on the practice.

One highlight was the success in securing safe spaces for dialogue that made intergenerational conversations possible. Faith members openly discussed the consequences of GBV and the need to change cultural practices. The Head of the Safo congregation described the impact as such: “After the sensitization activities of the project, the people are more open to debate about FGM.

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The Problem

FGM and GBV represent a deep violation of human rights and can produce lifelong physical and psychological damage for the surviving women and girls. In spite of this, these damaging practices are well-established in many societies.

The Role of Religious Actors

FGM is carried out for a variety of complex cultural, religious, and social reasons. As a result, prevention efforts must take tradition and religion into account as important resources. In order to inform people about the negative consequences of FGM, it's especially effective to draw key figures like religious leaders, local bureaucrats, and teachers into the fold. These people have access to an influential network and as role models play an important part in shaping opinion in their communities.

They are ready to be informed about the consequences of GBV and to change.”

Political advancements were also accomplished, as mayors from the participating communities signed a convention to end FGM. Within the framework of this initiative, 56 FGM practitioners agreed to lay down their knives and give up the harmful practice. Over 60 mothers were also provided with a training; afterward, they passed their knowledge on to more than 800 women. This peer-learning approach strengthened the community and improved the sustainability of the acts.

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Challenges and Learnings

The COVID-19 pandemic required an adjustment to the planned activities. Large events had to be cancelled and radio broadcasts and audio messaging was planned in their place to reach many people. This flexibility allowed the messages to be communicated despite the limitations of the pandemic.

A further area of learning came with respect to the meaning of interreligious cooperation. Bringing both Christian and Muslim actors on board revealed that shared values, like the protection of women and children, can find a strong basis from which to build cooperations.

The project created a foundation for long-term changes. The positive results, including a reduction in FGM practices in the project region showed how effective the approach is. By training multipliers, acquiring secure spaces for dialogue, and gaining political support, the foundation for a scalable implementation of the model has been laid.

A planned mapping of local religious and traditional actors will help locate potential new partners to integrate into prevention measures for GBV and FGM. This shows that interreligious dialogue and the cooperation with religious actors can be crucial for social transformation and the advancement of gender equality.

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