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Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention



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## Mobilizing and capacitating the Faith Sector as a credible and effective stakeholder in addressing gender-based violence in South Africa

### Background

South Africa is ranked amongst the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the world and is known as the global 'rape capital'. This is a whole-society crisis that demands unwavering action from every sector in society.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has identified GBV as 'the second pandemic' in South Africa and launched a National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide (NSP-GBVF) in April 2020. To confront the scourge of GBV in the country, it is vital to challenge and change the many underlying social gender norms and behaviours that are root causes to and normalise GBV. As a traditional custodian of social norms and attitudes, the faith sector becomes a particularly relevant stakeholder in primary prevention interventions.

Against this backdrop, the NGO, We Will Speak Out South Africa (WWSOSA), and the interfaith Faith Action to End GBV Collective (launched 2020) are mobilizing the faith sector to be active participants in addressing GBV. The faith sector has been identified by state and non-state actors as a key stakeholders in achieving the objectives and realizing the NSP-GBVF. WWSOSA and the Faith Action Collective together have more than 400 members - including faith leaders, scholars, activists and survivors of GBV - who work together (and individually) to eliminate GBV in the faith sector and wider society, counter stigma against survivors and bring healing and justice.

### Why the faith sector?

In the diverse and vibrant country of South Africa, faith is a cornerstone for more than 84% of South Africans. The influence of religion extends deeply into people's lives, shaping values, beliefs, and attitudes. Religious institutions have many assets, such as their widespread social support networks, and ubiquitous infrastructure. Religious leaders continue to enjoy widespread public trust and respect and they exert a great influence over people's attitudes and behaviours. While this influence has historically not always been used to the full potential for societal good, it also holds the opportunity to transform social norms and bring an end to the scourge of GBV. Perhaps the most important reason for faith sector involvement is the moral obligation rooted in its core values, to transform and to become part of the solution to any burden of society.

### Faith Sector GBV Mobilisation Campaign

It is against this backdrop that the Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention (VCP) programme partnered with the Faith Action Collective to mobilising and capacitating the faith sector as a credible and effective stakeholder in addressing GBV in South Africa. The aim is to strengthen the movement-building objective of the Faith Action Collective and run a high-impact Faith Sector GBV Mobilisation Campaign involving multiple faiths. The objective is an increasing number of gender and GBV-competent faith leaders to make a public commitment to contribute significantly to multi-stakeholder initiatives as well as locally-rooted actions, as part of the prevention and response efforts called for in the National Strategic Plan to End GBV and Femicide.



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## **Historic faith mobilisation campaign and public pledge through Statement**

In a historic move, the Collective with support of the VCP programme has embarked on a campaign that transcends religious boundaries. This has never been done before in South Africa as the campaign unites scholars, faith leaders, activists and ordinary members from the Baha'i faith, Brahma Kumaris, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and African Traditional Religions.

As a core principle of the process of the development and implementation of the campaign is the interfaith and consultative nature of the Collective. In more detail, the process involved the following:

1. Intentional Learning from diverse faith traditions:
  - Introduced the project to key figures in the Faith Action to End GBV Collective, inviting interfaith scholars and activists.
  - Internal faith sector consultations explored GBV manifestations in communities and identified ideals, shortcomings, and positive initiatives.
  - The August 2023 Interfaith Consultation involved courageous conversations, leading to the identification of key themes and a framework for a Joint Statement of Commitment.
2. Creation of a Joint Statement of Commitment:
  - Faith representative team produced an initial draft, workshopped by the Interfaith Consultation Team.
  - A 6-week Validation process, acknowledging the Statement as a living document, resulted in a final draft which was launched and signed at an Interfaith Summit on GBV.
3. Interfaith Summit and Statement Launch:
  - The November 2023 Interfaith Summit marked the official launch of the Joint Statement of Commitment, accompanied by pledges and discussions on localized action.
4. Well-publicized Signature Campaign:
  - A Signature Campaign, continuing into 2024, aims to gather endorsements from faith leaders, activists, and individuals committed to addressing GBV.
5. Towards Localized Implementation (2024 ff):
  - The initiative progresses to localized implementation, taking the Statement to faith institutions and communities for survivor-centered action plans.
6. Supportive Systematic Communications Campaign (ongoing):
  - A Communications Campaign raises awareness, disrupts patriarchal discourses, and promotes mutual respect, gender equality, and zero tolerance for GBV.

The reason I support the Interfaith Campaign is to amplify our voice for NO TO GBV. Doing advocacy and lobbying alone is limited, but doing it together gives the campaign a great impactful boost.  
**Saydoon Nisa Sayed, Muslim**



We want to encourage people to be part of the fight against GBV regardless of which faith they come from. It touches everyone and we need to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. If we love one another, we won't be harming each other. The role of faith is to bring healing to the nation.  
**Siki Dlanga, Christian, The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa**



## **Challenges**

Uniting a diverse group of faith traditions, ages, genders, and racial classifications in a country scarred by apartheid and colonial history presented formidable challenges. Tensions surfaced during the process, including initial disagreements on seeking permission from hierarchical faiths' titular heads. The approach pivoted to involve progressive feminist and liberation scholars and activists, working within their traditions

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to identify key leaders. Addressing missionary influences required careful preparation, fostering open conversations and highlighting common values across sacred texts. Feedback during the Statement Validation process necessitated nuanced discussions to ensure inclusivity without compromising progressive intentions.

### Achievements

The inclusive nature of the campaign was a historic achievement – never have almost all religions active in South Africa agreed to commit to act jointly on a key social justice issue - including participants from 8 above mentioned diverse faith traditions.

The holistic Interfaith Summit included contributions by religious leaders, scholars, activists, musicians, a theatre group, psychological support in case of triggers and a meditation space, and opening prayers reflecting each unique faith tradition – widely heralded as the first of its kind.

At the summit, attended by 103 people in person, and 72 online, delegates adopted the Statement, which is in full and shortened form, as well as in a super-summarised version:

The reason I joined the campaign is because I am tired of hearing a little child cry, I am tired of hearing the boy child cry, I am tired of hearing women cry, I am tired of seeing people abuse each other. People are not taking the pandemic of gender-based violence seriously. As a healer, I stand up and support.  
**Ntsikelelo Colossa, Traditional healer**



Namaste. As a woman it is important for me to support survivors from GBV. I believe in dismantling patriarchy from religious teachings and practices and that strong people don't put each other down – they lift each other up.  
**Reena Bhoora, Pundit, Hindu: Arya Samaj SA**



Gender-based violence is unacceptable, inexcusable, and intolerable in all its manifestations.

Yet, we confess that we have sometimes chosen not to see, or tolerated gender-based violence. We have been collaborators and co-conspirators against the very essence of our creation.

From our platform within local communities, people of faith potentially play a vital role in raising awareness, advocating for survivors' rights and against impunity, holding perpetrators accountable, and challenging harmful gender norms and gender injustices - without fear or favour.

Yet, we confess that we have sometimes been complicit by our silence, our inaction, our misuse of sacred texts and our rigid structures that silence or exclude diversity. Thus, we have undermined God's image in all people.

**Therefore, we commit to standing up, speaking out and taking decisive action, and to being accountable to survivors, to each other, and to God.**

The Statement is on change.org and since the launch, already 571 signatures were achieved within only two weeks! Many participants at the summit expressed commitment to the campaign and beyond and the high-impact communications campaign has led and amplified the overall campaign with 17,232,296 people reached during the launch of the statement through the attention of national media. Furthermore, from September to November 2023 social media engagement on 187 posts was 101, 741 on WWSOSA Facebook and an additional 6, 350 on Faith Action. The communications are continuing with further print, radio and TV spots reserved and ongoing social media posts on Facebook and Instagram into 2024.

For more information on the campaign as well as the actual statement of commitment please follow this link: <https://www.wwsosa.org.za/interfaith-action-to-end-gbv-statement-and-campaign/>

### Faith Leaders Gender Transformation Programme (FLGTP)

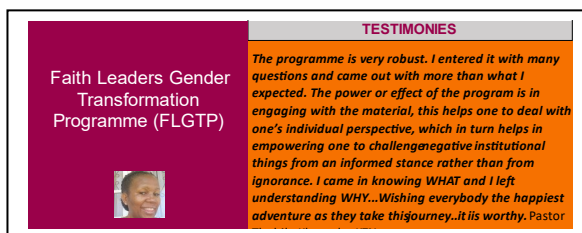
Given the incredibly positive response and the commitment of diverse faith groupings to take the statement into their own faith community and begin to plan implementing concrete commitments, the Faith Action Collective partners with support from WWSOSA and the VCP programme, developed several additional mechanisms and strategies to populate the statement and to "Walk-the-Talk". For instance, the partners

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plan to establish a small but strong resource team for local action on the statement as well as an online learning platform, initially to be linked to the VCP supported SaferSpaces online.

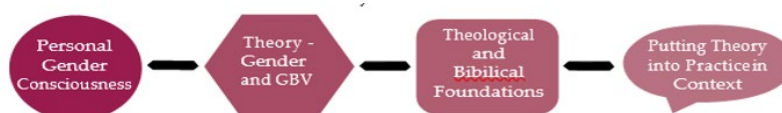
However, most practically and currently in its 3<sup>rd</sup> intake of faith leaders, the VCP programme together with the Faith Action Collective and WWSOSA is supporting the Faith Leaders Gender Transformative Programme (FLGTP). The 10-month programme aims to capacitate faith leaders to contribute to GBV prevention, promote gender justice and equality, and support survivors of GBV in their communities. With that, the FLGTP moves beyond individual transformation amongst participants but equips and accompanies them to become agents of change contributing to institutional change in their organization and community.



The FLGTP promotes individual and institutional transformation by:

- opening **safe spaces** where **courageous conversations** can lead to individual and institutional **transformation** over time;
- being rooted in **contextual approaches** to sacred texts influenced by liberation and feminist theologies;
- **disrupting negative or harmful** normalised attitudes and behaviours that open the way for GBV;
- **promoting mutual respect**, dignity and gender rights as human rights;
- endorsing emerging views among progressive faith structures that **reject all forms of GBV as sin** and patriarchal teachings as unacceptable;
- supporting the **creation of safe and inclusive communities where all can thrive.**

Thereby, the FLGTP uses a collaborative learning approach that builds on and is responsive to the expertise and experience brought by all participants. It moves well beyond theory to practice to accompanying participants as they integrate their learnings into their practice and ministries; the focus is on holistic learning with 4 interlinked streams to achieve transformational and individual and institutional levels:



The project has completed two pilots reaching 30 participants and a third with 25 participants is in progress with support of the VCP programme, due to be completed in May 2024.

## Conclusion

The intervention stands as a pioneering effort to address gender-based violence in South Africa. By engaging the faith sector, the initiative actively dismantles structural causes of inequality and exclusion, embodying core principles of the German feminist development policy. Through a historic interfaith campaign, diverse faith leaders commit to challenging harmful gender norms, fostering an environment of inclusivity and mutual respect. The creation of a joint statement, developed collaboratively through interfaith consultations, serves as a living document that reflects ongoing dialogue and commitment to transformative action within faith communities. The initiative's success lies in its ability to unite stakeholders, including scholars, activists, and survivors, in a cooperative effort to raise awareness and actively contribute to the prevention of GBV. Transparently navigating challenges, the project emphasizes the collective power of diverse voices and approaches to drive lasting change in societal norms and attitudes.