

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF FAITH LEADERS
AROUND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND THEIR
PERCEIVED ROLE IN ACHIEVING CHILD SENSITIVE
SOCIAL PROTECTION

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Glossary of Terms

BML	Beirut and Mount Lebanon
CP	Child Protection
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
FBO	Faith Based Organization
FL	Faith Leader
MVS	Maximum Variation Sampling
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VAC	Violence Against Children
VAW	Violence Against Women
VCD	Violent Child Discipline
WHO	World Health Organization
WVL	World Vision in Lebanon

Abstract

Childhood is tenably the most vulnerable period due to children's inability to exercise full autonomy and dependence on adults which dictated the tailoring of specific rights to protect them. In spite of the numerous international and regional treaties that protect children's rights, violence against children remains ubiquitous. However, preventing and responding to violence against children requires systematically addressing risk and protective factors at all four interrelated levels of risk (individual, relationship, community, society) and the socio-ecological model. Evidence shows faith leaders play a very influential role in changing beliefs, attitudes, and practices that undermine child protection but they can also be used for perpetuating, justifying, or hiding harmful traditional practices. Given the faith leader's cogent and weighty role at the community level and at the juridical level in Lebanon, this role can be leveraged on as a catalyst of change in their societies. Leveraging on this role should be conditioned by understanding faith leaders' knowledge, stances and views on child protection to ensure they serve as effective advocates.

The study aimed at understanding the perceptions and attitudes of faith leaders around Violence against children and their perceived role in achieving Child Sensitive Social Protection. Moreover, the study sought to explore perceptions around violent child discipline (VCD) specifically and to examine the role of faith leaders and FBOs in preventing violence against children including violent child discipline and sex-based discrimination in violence both inside and outside the home.

To address the research questions, the study team used a qualitative cross-sectional, deductive directed content analysis design with a latent approach to assess the perceptions of faith leaders. The study team used in-depth interviews for the data collection. The target population of the research were faith leaders and Faith Based Organization (FBO) members from both religions; Muslim and Christian, residing in North Lebanon and Beirut and Mount Lebanon (BML). The study team adopted a blend of non-probability purposive maximum variation sampling (MVS) and convenience sampling for the recruitment of study participants. Participants have been identified through World Vision Lebanon's (WVL) faith and development sector. Data were collected using in-depth interviews with 18 faith leaders out of an originally planned 20.

Faith leaders from the different religions in Lebanon were aware of and defined VAC similarly mentioning that it can take many forms including physical, emotional, verbal, psychological and sexual. The majority affirmed that sex-based discrimination in general exists in the society and they linked it to examples of different violations of child rights based on the child's sex including child marriage, child labour, begging and education. The variation in disciplining methods among parents and the adoption of some parents of unhealthy ways comprising violence was affirmed by the faith leaders. Unhealthy disciplining practices were attributed to the inter-generational nature of violence and social and cultural acceptance of these practices. Around one third of the faith leaders interviewed mentioned that violence in some cases is needed reflecting a misconception about the faith leader's understanding of fundamental child rights and VAC. Faith leaders agreed on the presence of VAC in the society with the exception of one who mentioned that there is no violence in the diocese which he serves in where he had not noticed or heard about any case though evidence and figures around VAC in Lebanon strongly suggest a surge in VAC cases. A gap in gatekeeping and child protection case management was

highlighted as referring cases to specialized services or being connected to any formal or informal Child protection (CP) systems used to coordinate referrals was not mentioned by any of the faith leaders. The study highlighted gaps in the laws which are meant for the protection of children and juveniles; these laws do not explicitly prohibit all corporal or degrading forms of punishment for children. A lion's share of the interviewed faith leaders agreed that the religious courts' decisions are usually against the best interest of the child and women due to several causes of which patriarchy entrenched in the society and nepotism, emotional blackmailing/extortion between the separating couple and bribery.

Background and Literature Review

Literature Review

Examining a human's lifetime, childhood is tenably the most vulnerable period. Given the developmental capacity at childhood, children are highly dependent on others to satisfy their basic needs, including protection, and hence are unable to exercise full autonomy which makes them particularly and inherently vulnerable (Bagattini, 2019; Brown, 2011; Insan Association, 2014; Jopling & Vincent, 2016; OECD, 2019; Schweiger, 2019). This is, of course, true for other stages of life such as late adulthood. The only distinction is that elderly people, though not able to care for themselves, are however in principle entitled to choose the persons that care for them and therefore are not dependent in the same way as children are (Bagattini, 2019). This being said, children are more vulnerable than other people because of their young age and dependence on adults and this dictated the tailoring of specific rights to protect them (Child Rights International Network, n.d.; OECD, 2019). Further, some children are especially more vulnerable due to violations of their rights that can take many forms of which one of the most common is being subjected to violence.

Albeit there is no international consensus on the definition of violence against children (VAC), it has been described as having many faces and forms including but not restricted to physical violence or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse (UNICEF Lebanon, n.d.). Violence against children can happen everywhere. It can occur in community spaces and even in places that should be havens for children and the so-called "circle of trust" such as the school, the family or in residential institutions. Children's first interactions mostly occur at home, and therefore it's important for homes to be positive, nurturing and loving environments. Violence against children occurs in places that should be havens for children, such as the school, the family or in residential institutions thus, the so-called "circle of trust". Although some forms of violence pointed up through extensive media coverage, often violence is shrouded in secrecy where many forms of it are more insidious and less easily identifiable like maternal or paternal sexual abuse of children below 3 (UNICEF Lebanon, n.d.; WHO, 2020).

Violence against children has many adverse consequences which vary according to its nature and severity. A number of studies have focused on the intergenerational nature of violence; the likelihood of becoming future victims and of acting themselves violently as adults increases when children experience violence (Pinhero, 2006; UNICEF Lebanon, n.d.). Exposure to violence at an early age is associated with brain development impairment and a range of mental health problems (UNICEF Lebanon, n.d.). Violence is detrimental leading to acute and long-term problems for children's physical, sexual and reproductive health as well as their psychological well-being (Pinhero, 2006; UNICEF Lebanon, n.d.; WHO, 2020).

Regardless of an agreed upon definition, violence against children is a human rights violation according to the 19th Article of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that outlines the fundamental rights of children. (UN, 2020). Preventing violence against children emerged as a priority concern and throughout the years there was a fortification of effort in this direction of which a big share were legislative on many levels including global. In spite of the numerous international and regional treaties that protect children's rights, violence against children remains ubiquitous. However,

preventing and responding to violence against children requires systematically addressing risk and protective factors at all four interrelated levels of risk (individual, relationship, community, society) and the socio-ecological model. This being said, a part of addressing violence against children includes a significant shift at the societal level in norms regarding what can be considered as acceptable practices (UNICEF Lebanon, n.d.) which is also highlighted as one of the seven strategies of the evidence-based technical package called *"INSPIRE: Seven strategies for ending violence against children"* developed by the WHO in collaboration with 10 international agencies (WHO, 2016). Evidence shows that faith leaders and communities play a critical role in shaping community norms and catalysing shifts in behaviours and attitudes that can ensure child safeguarding (Arigatou International, 2019; Faith and Positive Change for Children Families and Communities (FPCC), n.d.; Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, 2019; Queen Margaret University & World Vision, n.d.; UN, 2021b). There has been a growing consensus in developmental field on the involvement of faith communities in addressing violence against children given their moral authority in many communities and their trusted relationships with the community members. The aforementioned factors highlight the very influential role of faith communities in changing beliefs, attitudes, and practices that undermine child protection (Jailobaeva et al., 2021; Palm & Eyber, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Conversely, faith leaders can also be used for perpetuating, justifying, or hiding harmful traditional practices, gender inequity and violence against children (Jailobaeva et al., 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Therefore, leveraging on the engagement of faith leaders and communities in child protection must be framed by effective communication between these actors and other stakeholders (Jailobaeva et al., 2021).

Globally, it is estimated that up to 1 billion children experience some form of violence every year (UN, 2021a). Worldwide, more than 25% admit to believing physical punishment as a form of discipline (UNICEF Lebanon, n.d.). These figures were worsened by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, where figures of violence against children were exacerbated (UN, 2021a). Lebanon is no exception when it comes to the challenges faced by children worldwide. According to a 2018 Knowledge, Attitude and Practice Study, published by UNICEF and the Government of Lebanon; 27% of the participants found verbal violence to be a useful discipline method for children, while 15% of physical abuse to be a useful discipline method (UNICEF Lebanon, 2017). Additionally, a study conducted by World Vision in Lebanon Results showed that 15.2% of parents reported being undecided about the belief that the only way to discipline a child is to beat them and 17.3% agreed that their parents used to beat them and they are currently very well. Furthermore, the study also highlighted the previously discussed inter-generational nature of violence where the results revealed that parents exposed to violence during their childhood were 111% more likely to resort to violence with their children (World Vision, 2019). Evidence from the literature suggests that some parents who practice violent child discipline (VCD) justify it based on their misinterpretation of religious texts.

Since 2019, Lebanon is staggering from the impact of a spiralling economic crisis, political turmoil, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the aftermath of the August 2020 Beirut Port explosions. This has caused abuse against children to soar and is putting one in every two children at risk of violence. The number of child abuse and exploitation cases handled by UNICEF and partners surged by almost half 44 per cent between October 2020 and October 2021. Families are increasingly resorting to dangerous coping measures including child labour or child marriage to help make ends meet. An increment in the cases of

domestic violence against women and girls was also reported (Dib, n.d.; UN, 2021c; UNFPA & UN Women, 2020; UNICEF Lebanon, 2021).

Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and later in 2004 became party to the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (Insan Association, 2014; OHCHR, n.d.) however safeguarding was characterized with a weak legal framework that does not guarantee comprehensive child protection due to the presence of many gaps. Also from a juridical lens, a distinctive feature of Lebanon's social structure is its varied religious composition. Laws vary by different religions where there is different personal status legislation for each religion and sect (Gale, 2021; Henley, 2018). Hence religious courts may influence the functioning of child protection mechanisms may be influenced by religious courts and the legal system in Lebanon allows religious communities judicial autonomy on custody and maintenance issues. Concerns were raised in terms of custody settlements and the decision granting custody of the child to the father based on the child's age rather than on a best interest determination. Also, these concerns included decisions of deprivation of mothers, who remarry, from their child's custody under the claims of not showing 'true dedication to the moral dictates of their religion' as per some religious courts (Gale, 2021). In Lebanon, religion plays a significant role in people's lives making it a potential catalyst of transformation for the entire society. Through multiple declarations and meetings, faith leaders have affirmed and endorsed their role in the prevention of violence against children (Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence, n.d.). Therefore, given the faith leader's cogent and weighty role at the community level and at the juridical level in Lebanon, this role can be leveraged on as a catalyst of change in their societies. Evidence from partnering with local religious leaders to empower them to effectively respond to key social issues, work to alleviate the conditions that impede the safety and protection of children has shown positive personal transformations in faith leaders related to the protection of children and its relationship with the religious ministry (Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence, n.d.; Jailobaeva et al., 2021). Religious leaders can help communities see the common ground between rights and religion by deepening their understanding of children's rights (Arigatou International, 2019). Therefore, leveraging on the role of faith communities should be conditioned by understanding their knowledge, stances and views on child protection and by effective communication between them and child protection actors to ensure they serve as effective advocates (Jailobaeva et al., 2021).

Research Aim and Objectives

The study aimed at understanding the perceptions and attitudes of faith leaders around Violence against children and their perceived role in achieving Child Sensitive Social Protection (as per World Vision Lebanon's FY21-FY24 strategy). Moreover, the study sought to explore perceptions around violent child discipline (VCD) specifically and to examine the role of faith leaders and FBOs in preventing violence against children including violent child discipline and sex-based discrimination in violence both inside and outside the home. This will help WV gain an understanding of these perceptions and potential influencing actions, which will shape future project activities and decisions on leveraging Faith Leaders'

(FL) and Faith Based Organizations' (FBO) behaviours in preventing violence against children and pertinent sex-based discrimination.

Specific Objectives

1. Examine the perception of faith leaders on the prevalence of sex-based discrimination in violence against children (inside and outside the house)
2. Explore the perceptions and attitudes of faith leaders around sex-based discrimination in violence against children (inside and outside the house)
3. Explore the perceived role of faith leaders in preventing sex-based discrimination in violence against children (inside and outside the house)
4. Understand better how to incorporate the role of faith leaders in CP programming in the context of Lebanon, with a focus on Violence Against Children
5. Understand how to design program supporting religious leaders making child and women centred decisions in religious courts

Methodology

Study design

To address the research questions, the study team used a qualitative cross-sectional, deductive directed content analysis design with a latent approach to assess the perceptions of faith leaders. A qualitative approach was employed to allow for the exploration of complex ideologies and permitting for detailed depiction of perceptions and attitudes of faith leaders. By deductive directed design, the study team used predetermined categories that outlines themes informed by prior knowledge and research codes to guide the analysis of the data. The qualitative research method helped recognize experiences and views of all the participants. The study team used in-depth interviews for the data collection.

Study population

The target population of the research were faith leaders and Faith Based Organization (FBO) members from both religions; Muslim and Christian, residing in North Lebanon and Beirut and Mount Lebanon (BML). Representatives from both religions and pertinent branching sects were recruited to ensure representativeness of different faiths. To encourage variability in responses and sex representativeness, participants of different sexes have been interviewed through the application of a female quota for the sample ensuring the inclusion female faith leaders. Although the study team planned for an initial number of 20 interviews, only 18 were conducted due to logistical constraints in the country during the time of data collection that included the spread of COVID-19, social instability and unavailability of fuel and electricity rooted in the economic crisis the country is subject to. The final study population is described in the table below.

	Sect/ Denomination	Area	Sex
1	Maronite	BML	Male

2	Catholic	BML	Female
3	Christian FBO	BML	Female
4	Maronite	BML	Male
5	Protestant	BML	Female
6	Shiti	BML	Male
7	Armenian Orthodox	BML	Male
8	Maronite	BML	Female
9	Sunni	BML	Female
10	Christian FBO*	BML	Male
11	Alawite	North	Male
12	Roman Orthodox	North	Male
13	Roman Catholic	North	Male
14	Sunni	North	Male
15	Protestant	North	Female
16	Maronite	North	Male
17	Armenian Orthodox	North	Male
18	Armenian Catholic	North	Male

Recruitment of the Participants

The study team adopted a blend of non-probability purposive maximum variation sampling (MVS) and convenience sampling for the recruitment of study participants. Participants have been identified through World Vision Lebanon's (WVL) faith and development sector. The study team approached faith leaders in BML and North Lebanon to arrange the in-depth interviews.

Study Instrument

The study team developed an interviewer facilitated semi-structured in-depth interview guide with open-ended questions for the interviews with the faith leaders. The semi structured guides ensure the expression of broader insights during the dialogue (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The overall structure of the interview guide was designed to cover all relevant topics of interest under the study (Appendix 1). The final version comprised a series of non-leading questions along with prompts and it targeted the following areas of interest:

- Part 1: Perception of faith leaders on the prevalence VAC and sex-based discrimination in violence against children.
- Part 2: Decoding perceptions: perceptions and attitudes of faith leaders around VAC and sex-based discrimination in violence against children.
- Part 3: Role of Faith and Faith Leaders in preventing VAC including sex-based discrimination in violence against children.
- Part 4: Religious leaders making child and women centred decisions in religious courts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations of privacy, confidentiality and informed consent were taken into account while conducting the study; the respondents' confidentiality of shared information were ensured. The purpose

of the research was explained to every participant. In addition, confidentiality was assured and each participant was informed that s/he was able to choose freely whether to participate or not in the study. Participants also understood that they had the right to skip any of the questions and withdraw from the study at any time. All participants provided informed oral consent and were included in the study only if they voluntarily agreed to participate.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using in-depth interviews with 18 faith leaders out of an originally planned 20. The participants were presented with the study purpose and only after obtaining their consent, the trained interviewer from the study team interviewed them accompanied by written note taking.

Data collection started in October 2021 and lasted for a month and a half.

The notes of individual interviews were gathered and codebook deductive thematic analysis with a latent approach was utilized. Textual data have been analysed manually and the interview text was divided into meaning units that were condensed into codes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The units or segments reflected specific thoughts, attitudes and experiences. The analysis involved a back and forth movement between the whole and parts of the text and codes were abstracted into broader subthemes and themes based on pre-identified recurrent and unifying concepts according to the aim of the study. The rigor and trustworthiness of the study had been ensured through: 1) frequent debriefing sessions with technical team 2) appropriate background, qualifications and experience of the research team, as well as the technical team. In order to address dependability or reliability, the study included precise description of the research design and data collection process. Although only 18 interviews out of a planned 20 were conducted due to logistical constraints, the thematic saturation of data analysis was achieved after coding the 18 interview's textual data.

Findings

Theme 1: Decoding perceptions: perceptions and attitudes of faith leaders around VAC, sex-based discrimination in VAC, VAC in child disciplining and cultural norms in VAC

Sub-theme 1.1: Definition of VAC and its variation by children's sex (sex-based discrimination in VAC)

When defining VAC, the definition across the different faith leaders was analogous with its core relying predominantly on violence as maltreatment and harm to the child that can take many forms including physical, emotional, verbal, psychological and sexual. Some also stated that VAC can be portrayed in the form of neglect and curtailment of children's freedom including that of expression.

*“Violence can be psychological, physical and verbal affecting the child's character.
The child will always remember his past and will repeat the same in the future”.*

Armenian Apostolic male faith leader, BML

In terms of discrimination, the majority of the interviewed faith leaders agreed that sex-based discrimination in general exists in the society. Some of the Christian faith leaders elaborated that their religion calls for equity between both sexes while acknowledging differences between sexes on the basis of awareness, behavior and physical features. They defined discrimination in general as bigotry and inequality in treatment between the two sexes based on prejudices and a few mentioned that this sort of discrimination is violence in itself. One Muslim faith leader also highlighted that his religion calls for equity between both sexes explaining in terms of inheritance where religion calls for equal inheritance between male and female children. While only a few touched on sex- based discrimination in VAC specifically, they linked it to examples of different violations of child rights based on the child's sex including child marriage, child labour, begging and education. It is noteworthy to mention that some Christian faith leaders, when defining VAC, associated it with abortion explaining that abortion is a form of VAC since according to Christianity it's a violation of the right to live and exist.

“Types of violence against the child are verbal, physical and moral which lead to harming the child whether for a short or a long period. Violence may come as a response to the needs of the family. Violence is common for girls through early marriage, and for boys through forcing them to go to the street and beg, so they bear the responsibility that they must secure money for the family. This destroys the child's childhood.”

Protestant Female Faith Leader, BML

Sub-theme 1.2: VAC in child disciplining and its variation by children's sex (sex-based discrimination)

During the discussion on their understanding of parents' disciplining actions, all the faith leaders agreed that child disciplining is important but it must be in a conscious, positive, diplomatic and balanced manner in order to guide the child to be aware of and differentiate between right and wrong behaviors/actions. Some faith leaders, mentioned that parents should be educated on healthy child disciplining methods.

“Parents must understand that all methods of dealing and discipline are permissible, provided that they are in a diplomatic manner through speech, awareness and good treatment...”

Sunni male faith leader, BML

Awareness to differentiate between “the right and the wrong” laid at the core of the faith leaders' perception of child disciplining which, according to them, child discipline should be practiced by dialogue with the child and sometimes temporary deprivation from something he/she likes. When a child misbehaves, they should be talked to in order to exchange opinions, try to explain to the child why his/her behaviour was inappropriate or harmful and in return understand from the child their own reasoning.

All the faith leaders agreed that disciplining methods vary among parents where some tend to adopt negative parenting practices including violent threatening, severe deprivation and physical violence. Some faith leaders attributed these unhealthy and harmful disciplining practices to the way these parents have been disciplined in their own families; in other words, disciplining practices passed on from one generation to another. Other faith leaders attributed that to social and cultural acceptance and normalization of these unhealthy practices.

“Spanking is a method of education in society: The child must be beaten to learn. There is a unique case where a child told me that he was beaten and he is happy with that because that’s how he learned not to repeat the mistake. We find that beating is rooted even in the mentality of children as the means to learn or to distinguish right from wrong.”

Male Faith leader from Youth for Christ Christian FBO, BML

A lion’s share of the interviewed faith leaders believed that the utilization of violence is not a disciplining approach and is not acceptable with the exception of one faith leader who explained that disciplining methods vary by the age of the child providing the relevant method for each age range as follows:

*“From age 1-7 y.o.: Discipline by correct dialogue.
From age 7-14 y.o.: teaching and guiding the child. Disciplining should be proportional to the age of the child and beating is acceptable but not brutally.
From age 14-21 y.o.: Discussion between parent and child, I treat him like a friend.”*

Sunni male faith leader, North Lebanon

The faith leaders who stated that violence is not an acceptable disciplining approach backed up their stances with explaining the negative consequences of violent discipline and that these consequences beat the purpose of disciplining. Some highlighted again the presence of violent practices in child disciplining with supporting examples they are aware of. It’s noteworthy to mention that most of the examples on these violent disciplining methods were associated with fathers where the instances of violence described by the faith leaders were mainly those inflicted by fathers on their children.

As discussed above, all faith leaders reported that violence is not acceptable as a disciplining approach. However surprisingly, when probed on to what extent they think violent child disciplining is acceptable, there was a shift in some of the opinions where five out of the eighteen faith leaders interviewed mentioned that violence in some cases is needed. Moreover, three out of these five faith leaders mentioned that hitting children sometimes is essential but not brutally and conditioned that it does not cause harm. The remaining two mentioned respectively that violence is needed when other disciplinary methods do not work and that violence is needed conditioned that it is not physical.

“Beating is a necessity from time to time, but it should not lead to physical and psychological harm. The child must know why he is being punished so that he learns for the next time and knows the distinction between what is right and what is wrong...”

Roman Catholic male faith leader, North Lebanon

In terms of differences in child disciplining methods applied to boys versus girls, those faith leaders who touched on this topic believed that disciplining should involve both sexes and there should be no differences based on the child's sex. However, some mentioned that differentiation in disciplining methods between girls and boys exist in the society and there were contradicting opinions on this where some faith leaders thought that girls are subject to harsher disciplining protocols while others thought the opposite. Some of those who mentioned that girls are subject to more violence linked this violence to cultural beliefs related to the honour of the girl which mirrors the honour of the family.

“Violence is never acceptable. There is a distinction between a girl and a boy in the use of violence to discipline. In our society, they consider that the honour of the family is linked to the honour of the girl, and this saying opens the way for the girl to be abused more than the boy. In some societies we see that when the girl reaches the age of 14 they marry her off to preserve the family's honour, and this is the greatest form of violence. There is a law that allows a girl to marry after the age of 14 and I do not agree with it because it destroys the girl.”

Maronite male faith leader, BML

In essence, faith leaders defined VAC similarly describing it as maltreatment and harm to the child that can take many forms including physical, emotional, verbal, psychological and sexual. The majority of interviewed faith leaders acknowledged that sex-based discrimination in general exists in the society and that differentiation in disciplining methods between girls and boys exist. All the faith leaders agreed that disciplining methods vary among parents where some tend to adopt disciplining methods that include violence. Although almost all faith leaders reported that violence is not acceptable as a disciplining approach however, some's stances changed when probed on to what extent they think violent child disciplining is acceptable.

Theme 2: Perception of faith leaders on the prevalence VAC and sex-based discrimination in violence against children and identification of cases

Sub-theme 2.1: Perception of faith leaders on the prevalence VAC and sex-based discrimination in violence against children

Almost all the faith leaders agreed to the prevalence of VAC in the society and in their communities with the exception of one who mentioned that there is no violence in the diocese he serves in and where he had not noticed or heard about any VAC case. Some of the faith leaders highlighted that the prevalence of violence has increased after the outbreak of covid-19 where people were more bound to their homes and after the onset of the economic crisis that imposed financial burdens and pressures on the families. It is noteworthy to mention that 2 faith leaders highlighted that VAC is more prevalent in families with children with disabilities. Many gave examples of VAC in their societies and among them withdrawal of children from school, neglect, beating and physical abuse, sexual abuse, child marriage, child labour and oppression.

In terms of variation of this prevalence by the sex of the child, opinions differed as some faith leaders mentioned that there are no differences between boys and girls while other stated that VAC is more commonly practiced with girls and others mentioned among boys.

“...There is discrimination by sex in violence: they take into account the feelings of girls more than boys, for example, in school, it is possible that the teacher is more violent towards boys more than girls.”

Alawite male faith leader, North Lebanon

Sub-theme 2.2: Identification of cases of VAC

In terms of how faith leaders come to know about the VAC cases and how they identify them, there was a consensus that their role or social status within the community allows them to have access and closer insights into the families. As mentioned, faith leaders' role helped them establish dialogue with both the parents and the children and hence establish trust, based on which, access to personal matters was granted and this facilitated this awareness and identification of VAC cases. All the faith leaders reported that they come to know about VAC cases through reports from family members, communication with parents (either through home visits or parents consulting with them), or through the children (either when children disclose those practices to them or through the children's body language and signs).

The majority of the faith leaders shared that they or members of their faith community are experienced and can easily identify VAC cases through the child's behavior which tells a lot about the child. In some cases, the schools pertinent to the congregations have specialists who help them identify VAC cases and understand more about them.

“With time, we can notice the abused child through his actions, or one of the parents tells us. With experience in dealing with children, I can discover VAC by looking at them and their behavior with others, in addition to continuous visits to homes and observing how the parents deal with the child. For example, a child with a disability has a problem that he eats a lot, so the parents prevented him from eating on the assumption that they are protecting him.”

Maronite male faith leader, BML

In brief, the vast majority of faith leaders agreed to the prevalence of VAC in the society and in their communities. Some of the faith leaders highlighted that the prevalence of violence has increased after the outbreak of covid-19 and is more prevalent in families with children with disabilities. Some faith leaders acknowledged the variation of this prevalence by the sex of the child while other did not. Faith leaders mentioned that their role or social status within the community allows them to identify VAC cases.

Theme 3: Role of Faith and Faith Leaders in preventing VAC including sex-based discrimination in violence against children

Sub-theme 3.1: Perception of religion's role in addressing VAC and the applicability of this role.

Almost all the faith leaders agreed that their religion calls for love and humanity and especially when it comes to children because they are gifts or assets given from God and affirmed that religion does not accept any form of violence. To explain how religion pays special attention to children, a lion's share of the Christian representatives referred to the bible quoting Matthew 19:14 with the verse *"Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'"* Only one faith leader referred to religious teachings that included VAC saying

"Quoting Imam Ali: 'Raise your children on three things: At the age of infancy [early childhood] warn them and do not hit them. At the age of early adolescence, strike them and do not warn them. At the age of youth, consult them in the way that is best.'

At a young age, we must deal with the child on the basis of guidance and pointing out the mistake. At early adolescence, we can hit the child, but not in a brutal way."

Alawite male faith leader, North Lebanon

It is noteworthy to mention that a remarkable number of the Christian faith leaders reported that the New Testament calls more explicitly for love, equity and acceptance while the Old Testament compared to the New, has implications on violence and sex-based discrimination in general not necessarily against or affecting children. (not related to VAC in children).

"In the Old Testament it was all about revenge. God was the God of law and it was all about how the people of God should have implemented these laws. Whereas in the New Testament, it was all about love and not law. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. God sends his only son to His people not to judge them, but to save them and the biggest proof of this love, Jesus died for us. Faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love!"

Armenian Apostolic faith leader, BML

In terms of the applicability of religious verses/sayings/scriptures within the current context and through this era, all the faith leaders insisted that they are applicable suitable for all ages. Around one third believed that these verses are applicable however need constant and continuous adaptations and interpretations to match this era of time while conserving the core values these teachings were built on. Others strictly believed that these verses/sayings/scriptures were applicable at all times while some of them believed that their application and commitment to them might be challenging these days. They all believed that their role is in spreading awareness and the teachings of religion to help people and guide them towards the correct actions including child rearing and lifestyle.

Sub-theme 3.2: Perception of faith leader's own role in preventing VAC.

Almost all the faith leaders stated that their main role in preventing VAC relies in preventive approaches through educating parents on how to deal with children, explaining the negative effects of violence on children and through offering support as representatives of the congregation. Faith leaders explained that educating is coupled with providing parents with alternative ways on how to control oneself, deal with and guide the child. The faith leaders mentioned different means for the exchange of knowledge including meetings, gatherings, preaching in the church and training sessions. Three faith leaders only mentioned secondary interventions where they report the identified cases or work on resolving in the family in collaboration with the parish members or specialists. One faith leader highlighted the importance of advocacy at a juridical level and at the level of religious courts to prevent VAC.

“The main role is to educate parents on how to deal with children and explain to them about how violence affects the children badly while giving them alternative ways of dealing, directing the child and controlling oneself because in most cases violence is a reaction by the parents...”

Male Faith leader from Youth for Christ Christian FBO, BML

In essence, there was a consensus among faith leaders that their religion calls for love and humanity and especially when it comes to children. All the faith leaders insisted that religious verses/sayings/scriptures are applicable and suitable for all ages with some highlighting the need for constant and continuous adaptations and interpretations to match contemporary life. Almost all the faith leaders stated that their main role in preventing VAC relies in preventive approaches through educating parents and through offering support as representatives of the congregation.

Theme 4: Cultural norms in VAC and their variation by children's sex (sex-based discrimination)

Sub-theme 4.1: Faith leader's perception on the existence of cultural norms promoting VAC

There was a consensus about the existence of cultural and social norms that fuel violence against children although some faith leaders believed that the effect of these norms in the societies is gradually diminishing thanks to civilization and development. They linked those norms to the parents' cultural upbringing and some said that these norms vary across societies, areas and sects and that they are more common in rural setting and in financially disadvantaged families. Some faith leaders also mentioned that the majority of the society abides by these cultural norms and follows them blindly even without questioning the reasoning behind. It was noteworthy to mention that, on this note, a Christian faith leader from Tripoli highlighted that harmful norms are common in the society and passed on from one child to another due to absence of care from adults. The faith leader added; “Tripoli is a violent city for children”. As for variations in these norms by the sex of the children, some faith leaders admitted that differences exist where they are linked to cultural perceptions on the upbringing of boys and girls to achieve their perceived roles in the society.

“Violence in general is present among the poor as a result of the psychological and material pressure experienced by the parents. Most of the society is subordinate to the cultural and social norms that exist in the society.”

Sunni male faith leader, North Lebanon

“Some parents consider the standards as set in stone and must be followed. A conscious person is the person who follows the standards appropriate to our culture and does not require violence (for example: generosity, hospitality). As for violence in discipline, it is one of the standards that some parents follow (‘the child must be beaten to learn’). Even in some societies, a woman must be beaten (‘a woman is like a carpet, the more you hit her, the more precious she becomes; like a gem’)”

Protestant female faith leader, North Lebanon

“For example: in some societies, a man must hit his children to impose himself as a father on them, and in some cases, violence against their children appears through betrayal or divorce, which affects the child more.”

Roman Catholic male faith leader, North Lebanon

When asked about changes to these norms and their role or contribution to the change, the majority of the faith leaders believed that fighting against these harmful social norms and achieving change requires shifting people's mind-set from following harmful social habits towards more positive and child-centered decision-making and practices. The aforementioned, according to the faith leaders, can be achieved through listening to people and through working on the mental, physical, spiritual and psychological nurturing to attain self-awareness among the members of the society. They highly perceived their role as mentors and educators and mentioned their contribution to this change can be done through training parents and guiding them on the correct ways on how to deal with children.

The opinion of the faith leaders varied around the level this change of social and cultural norms needs to be escalated to in order to be effective. All the faith leaders believed that the change is attainable however views varied on the methods; some were less hopeful and believed that change can only be attained through an utter change of the ruling political class, others believed that it's a complex-multifaceted process requiring targeting several levels of the socio-ecological model simultaneously and the rest shared a more simplified pathway tacking partially or completely one level of the socio-ecological model. In regard to the level this change should start at, the faith leaders were divided between those who believed that change should start at governmental/ministerial level, those who believed it should start at the juridical level those who believed that it should start at the person/community level and those who believed at the faith congregation/faith leaders' level.

- Those who believed that change should start at a national governmental/ministerial level highlighted the involvement of the government and ministries; some believed the ministry of education should be involved to educate children on their rights while others believed that consultations should be done at a political level to promote development and enforcement of laws against VAC.
- Faith leaders who believed that change should start at juridical level, stated that legislative efforts should be initiated to enact and revise laws on VAC. One faith leader mentioned that this is the most effective way given that people by nature fear breaching laws. It's noteworthy to mention that according to some female faith leaders, these legislative efforts should include

both child and women protection laws as both are interrelated. Another faith leader mentioned that the only solution would be the takeover of civil society laws instead of religious.

“We are a good sectarian country. When we talk about the rights of children or women, sects interfere. The only solution is to have a civil society for all people...”

Protestant female faith leader, North Lebanon

- Faith leaders who believed that change should start at the individual level perceived that, if successful, the change will automatically be reflected at a community level highlighting the gradual nature of change.
- Lastly, faith leaders who believed that change should start at a congregation/faith leaders' level stated that change should start with negotiations at each congregations' or sect's level. Such discussion within the religious sects and congregations would yield agreements on suggestions for legislative change which then, according to some faith leaders, can be escalated gradually to discussion with representatives of other religions and then at a national level with governmental representatives to develop, enact and enforce laws agreed upon by all.

Concisely, there was a consensus about the existence of cultural and social norms that fuel violence against children. Those norms were linked to the parents' cultural upbringing and were said to vary across societies, areas and sects. The majority of the faith leaders believed that fighting against these harmful social norms and achieving change requires shifting people's mind-set which can be achieved through listening to people and through training parents and guiding them on the correct ways on how to deal with children. The opinion of the faith leaders varied around the level this change of social and cultural norms needs to be escalated to in order to be effective.

Theme 5: Faith leaders' perception of religious courts and their decisions: Are the decisions child and women centered?

Sub-theme 5.1: Faith leader's perception of the decision making process in religious courts

When asked about their perception of the decision making process in the religious courts, most of the faith leaders expressed their opinions from the standpoint of divorce and child custody. The majority also described the religious courts as entities independent from them where they do not have an active and participatory role in. The faith leaders' opinions varied and were divided into three groups based on their perception of the religious courts' decisions:

- A lion's share agreed that the religious courts' decisions are usually against the best interest of the child though they claim to be established on such basis. This opinion was rooted in several causes; the first being that the mere idea of divorce is against the child's wellbeing as children need to grow in families comprised of both parents. The second cause was attributed to the patriarchy entrenched in the society and the third cause was nepotism, emotional blackmailing/extortion between the separating couple and bribery. Finally, the third cause was the absence of clear laws and regulations that guide the decision making within each sect. It was

noteworthy that one faith leader in this group mentioned that the personal status law should be subject to the Lebanese state instead of the various religious sects and their pertinent courts.

“According to my experience, the custody is for the mother up until a certain age, but there are exceptions. They [the court] study the appropriate environment for the child, according to the situation of the father or mother. This varies according to each case. But the solution is always unfair to the child, because the child needs a family consisting of a mother and a father to ensure his/her mental wellbeing.”

Maronite male faith leader, BML

“In the courts, there are judges who rule with conscience. They do justice to the truth, but as I am a social counselor and people who have problems turn to me, so I see these problems. I dealt with the spiritual court because I worked in a center for children threatened by the parents (parents are incompetent to raise the child), we must make a great renaissance within Courts to educate them to stay away from emotional blackmail between men and women, to stay away from using money to rule, and the lawyer has a big role too. In most cases, we are surprised by the rulings that are issued...”

Catholic female faith leader, BML

“Decisions are taken in courts according to the judge’s mood, and here the role of the judge is different from the role of the cleric. The judge does not live in the same environment (a judge from the Bekaa divorces a couple from Tripoli without being aware of the existing problems between the two parties or the society in which we live). Also, sometimes I see that the woman is more righteous than men, but the court is bound by existing legislative frameworks and laws.”

Alawite male faith leader, North Lebanon

“By law, the judge has great authority to take away the custody from the mother, if she is practicing violence against the child but there is no clear legal text that includes this. All decisions are up to the judge.”

Sunni male faith leader, North Lebanon

- The second group stated that the decision are based on the best interest of the child ensuring an appropriate environment for the child to develop. The faith leaders in this group highlighted that the decision are fair where there is no discrimination by the sex of the parents; mothers and fathers are looked at equally. One faith leader highlighted that though the rules in the religious courts are in the best interest of the child and there is no discrimination against women, yet these laws should be updated and revised to fit the contemporary life.

- The third minority group were neutral where they expressed the absence of a direct affiliation between faith leaders and the religious courts, where they do not interfere or are not aware of the dynamic of decision making.

When asked, to what extent the child and women are at the center of the decision making in the religious courts. All the faith leaders expressed their opinions in terms of the child but not all of them in terms of women. The majority of the faith leaders believed that the child's best interest lies at the core of the decisions to ensure and preserve the child's basic rights. Some Christian faith leaders opposed the mere idea of divorce as it contradicts the teachings of the church and affects the child negatively regardless of their opinion on whether the decision is child centered or not. Conversely, among those faith leaders who expressed their stance on whether decisions made are women-centered, the majority disagreed explaining that women do not lie at the core of these decisions. They explained the aforementioned by stating that some courts follow the laws as they are, without assessing the interest of the child and the woman while others explained that the reason women and children are not at the core of those decisions is attributed to nepotism and favoritism. It's noteworthy to mention that one female faith leader explained:

"At the present time, the decisions are not centered around the child and the woman because they consider that they are 'less' or 'deficient' and that the woman is emotional and cannot bear responsibility alone..."

Catholic female faith leader, BML

Whether the court decisions are fair or not, the majority of the faith leaders expressed that the decision are fair generally however some highlighted concerns around factors like nepotism, favoritism and bribery that interfere in the course of these decisions, especially given the high corruption in the Lebanese context. Only one faith leader could not comment on whether the decisions were fair, but explained adding that he thinks that they take into consideration the interest of the child and the woman.

All in all, the majority of faith leaders described the religious courts as entities independent from them where they do not have an active and participatory role in. A lion's share agreed that the religious courts' decisions are usually against the best interest of the child though they claim to be established on such basis. Another group stated that the decision are based on the best interest of the child ensuring an appropriate environment for the child to develop. Finally a third minority group were neutral in this regard. Not all faith leaders expressed their opinions on whether women are at the center of the decision making in the religious courts and among those who expressed their stance, the majority explained that women do not lie at the core of these decisions. Whether the court decisions are fair or not, the majority of the faith leaders expressed that the

Discussion

Faith leaders from the different religions in Lebanon were aware of and defined VAC similarly mentioning that it can take many forms including physical, emotional, verbal, psychological and sexual which is in line with the definition adopted by many organizations concerned with child rights. The majority affirmed that sex-based discrimination in general exists in the society and they linked it to examples of different violations of child rights based on the child's sex including child marriage, child labour, begging and education.

Awareness to differentiate between “the right and the wrong” laid at the core of the faith leaders' perception of child disciplining and all the faith leaders agreed that child disciplining is important but it must be in a conscious and positive manner. The variation in disciplining methods among parents and the adoption of some parents of unhealthy ways comprising violence was affirmed by the faith leaders. Some of these unhealthy and harmful disciplining practices were attributed to the inter-generational nature of violence which is in line with existing literature (Bagattini, 2019; WHO, 2016; World Vision, 2019) on how violent practices are passed on from one generation to another and how subjects regard them as mandatory customs to be inflicted on their children. Unhealthy disciplining practices were attributed to social and cultural acceptance and normalization of these practices supporting existing evidence on the presence of social and cultural norms that promote violence (World Vision, 2019). Most of the examples given by faith leaders on violent disciplining methods were associated with fathers and this supports findings from another study in Lebanon where the pervasive acceptance of physical punishment of children within the family and a patriarchal dominance. The aforementioned study highlighted that it was a common understanding that the child should accept the father's behaviour even if abusive as, ‘the child has a duty to preserve the family harmony and be loyal. It was also highlighted by the same study that respondents deemed spiritual, religious and social guidance as possible ways to deal with perpetrators of violence provided that these interventions are ‘voluntary and aimed to respectfully persuade the alleged perpetrator to amend his behaviour in accordance with accepted mores.’ (Gale, 2021).

Although there was a high level of agreement on the utilization of violence being an unacceptable disciplining approach among the faith leaders, surprisingly when probed on the extent of acceptability of violent child disciplining there was a shift in some of the opinions. Around one third of the faith leaders interviewed mentioned that violence in some cases is needed. The aforementioned reflects a misconception about the faith leader's understanding of fundamental child rights and VAC. This misconception is alarming given the role of the faith leaders in shaping community norms and conflict resolution in cases on violence and given that some faith leaders backed this acceptability of violence with verses and scriptures from holy books which they typically rely on in their teachings to the society and hence shaping the norms. In fact, a study done by WVL in 2019 revealed that some parents believed that “It is religiously justified to use violence to discipline children” and there are some verses in the Bible and Quran that in a way or another approve of some forms of violence. Even when convinced that Violent Child Discipline (VCD) is not the right approach some parents adopt it since the Bible or Quran don't clearly disagree with VCD's unacceptability (World Vision, 2019). Therefore, it is important to assess faith leaders understanding of child rights and VAC before leveraging on their role in the community to achieve nurturing environments and positive parenting practices by building on the scriptures and reflecting a positive theological understanding of the child (Arigatou International, 2019).

Faith leaders agreed on the presence of VAC in the society with the exception of one who mentioned that there is no violence in the diocese which he serves in where he had not noticed or heard about any case. This of concern since evidence and figures around VAC in Lebanon strongly suggest a surge in VAC cases albeit some faith leaders highlighted an increase in the prevalence of violence after the outbreak of covid-19 where people were more bound to their homes and after the onset of the economic crisis that imposed financial burdens and pressures on the families. Evidence in Lebanon around VAC figures after the onset of the pandemic and the socio-economic upheaval highlights an efflux of VAC cases and its different forms. A report by UNICEF revealed a surge by per-cent in the cases of child abuse and exploitation handled in the time-frame of one year between October 2020 and October 2021. The same report highlighted child labour as the top child protection concern with a recorded increase of 41 per-cent in its rates in October 2021 compared to six months prior. Child marriage being on the rise was reported as a major risk too, as financially desperate families seek dowries and security for their girls (UNICEF Lebanon, 2021). In addition, increased rates of domestic violence were highlighted putting both women and children at greater risk as the proportion of Lebanese girls and women seeking services for gender-based violence rose sharply by 14 per-cent within the past three years (UNICEF Lebanon, 2021). Online harassment was a highlighted risk in a study exploring issues of violence against women (VAW) conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (UN Women) and the United Nations Population fund (UNFPA) where its increasing rates are exposing more women than men to violence through social media and other internet forums (UNFPA & UN Women, 2020). Finally, increased rates of child sexual abuse were also evident in 2020 where the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) data in Beirut/Mount Lebanon indicated that in 2020 21 per-cent of child sexual abuse survivors are boys under the age of 18 (Gender-Based Violence Information Management System, 2021). Some faith leaders highlighted that VAC is more prevalent in families with children with disabilities.

In terms of the identification of VAC cases faith leaders agreed that their role or social status within the community allows them to have access and closer insights into the families through establishing dialogue with both the parents and the children and hence trust, based on which, access to personal matters is granted . Although the majority of the faith leaders shared that they or members of their faith community are experienced and can easily identify VAC cases however following up on these cases, referring them to specialized services or being connected to any formal or informal Child protection (CP) systems used to coordinate referrals of identified CP cases was not mentioned by any of the faith leaders. This highlights a gap in gatekeeping and child protection case management as proper case management mechanisms rely on referral mechanisms and processes and case monitoring and review as two fundamental components to respond effectively to VAC (Gale, 2021). Evidence also highlights that there is a limit to the extent of faith leader's intervention in addressing VAC and it is important that they can make referrals of cases to the appropriate support needed (Arigatou International, 2019).

Almost all the faith leaders deemed that children are gifts or assets given from God and that religion does not accept any form of violence. However, some faith leaders referred to religious verses that in a way or another agree on some forms of violence in disciplining children. This also aligns with the gaps in the laws which are meant for the protection of children and juveniles; particularly the amended article 186 of the penal code by law 286 and the same gap in law 422 that still permit corporal punishment in child discipline:

- Prohibition is still to be achieved in the home, alternative care settings, day care and schools; prohibition in penal institutions requires confirmation. Article 186 of the Penal Code has long provided a justification for the use of corporal punishment in childrearing as its text previously permitted discipline accepted by “general custom” from parents and teachers on children. Article 186 was cancelled through Law No 286 issued on 30-4-2014 and replaced with the following text: “The law permits non-violent discipline practiced by parents; fathers and mothers on their children on the condition that such discipline shouldn’t leave any marks on their children bodies or inflict any damages on their physical health or psychology”. The reform to this article in 2014 only led to the repeal of the use of discipline by parents and teachers and did not explicitly prohibit corporal punishment in any setting.
- Law 422 for the Protection of Juvenile Delinquents and Endangered Juveniles (2002) is the principle legislation containing some provision for children at risk. It establishes the judicial process for dealing with violence against children and outlines the responsibilities including that of social workers and judges in the provision of protection orders. However, it is fundamentally a juvenile justice law and not a comprehensive child protection law. Concerns around this law include article 1 of the law referring to “physical assault that surpasses the limits of what is deemed culturally accepted as harmless corporal punishment” when defining a child as “endangered”. This highlights limitations within the text of the law in terms of the reference that children need protection from physical violence only when it exceeds the limits permissible by custom. Yet again, this does not explicitly prohibit all corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment, in the home, schools and all other settings where adults have authority over children.

Regarding the applicability of religious verses/sayings/scriptures within the current context and through this era, all the faith leaders insisted that they are applicable suitable for all ages. Some believed that the application of these verses/sayings/scriptures and commitment to them might be challenging these days highlighting the need for continuous amendments in their interpretation to fit the contemporary life. This sheds the light on the constant need in faith communities for reflection on and interpretation of theological understandings of the child that uphold the human dignity of the child and non-violence in child upbringing to be able to challenge social norms condoning violence that are claimed to be justified by religion due to misinterpretations of verses.

The perception of faith leaders of their role in preventing VAC was described in term of preventive approaches through educating parents on how to deal with children and through offering support as representatives of the congregation. The aforementioned points that faith leaders consider their role to be restricted within the primary level of prevention against VAC albeit the literature suggests and underlines their crucial role in the remaining levels which comprise a wider range of interventions focused on intervening and responding to violence that has already occurred including referrals, shelter, counseling, safety planning, and protective orders (Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence, n.d.; The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV), n.d.).

There was a consensus about the existence of cultural and social norms that fuel violence against children although some faith leaders believed that the effect of these norms in the societies is gradually diminishing thanks to civilization and development. According to the faith leaders those norms were mainly linked to parents’ cultural upbringing and there are variations across societies, areas and sects. It

is noteworthy that some faith leaders stated that cultural and social norms that fuel VAC are more common in rural settings and in financially disadvantaged families. The aforementioned highlights stigma thrown at the more vulnerable financially with the absence of an understanding of the true problem and impetus behind violence, which is not the psychological and material pressure (Birrell, 2016; Brett Milano, 2016). The true rationale is believed to be the promotion of systematic poverty through devious methods such as denying people access to their basic rights, fueling clientelism and sectarianism and catastrophizing the fear from the “different other” to divide and conquer (Birrell, 2016; Brett Milano, 2016). Over decades of armed conflict and corrupt public policies people adopt harmful practices such as child labour, trafficking or exploitation and the lack of access to education leads to lower standards and values in civic engagement and ethics which is translated in harmful disciplining, neglect and other harmful cultural practices (Birrell, 2016; Brett Milano, 2016). Most vulnerable populations tend to always be stigmatized and portrayed as being the ultimate reason for their immoral conditions and actions without a proper understanding of the root causes and the contributing factors that fuel this complex chain leading to harmful practices including violence. Awareness on the relations between the root causes and the results helps remove stigma and support those perceived as perpetrators in changing their violent acts.

The majority of the faith leaders believed that fighting against harmful social norms and achieving change requires shifting people's mind-set from following harmful social habits towards more positive and child-centered decision-making and practices. The opinion of the faith leaders varied around the level this change of social and cultural norms needs to be escalated to in order to be effective. Though all the contributions of faith leaders focused on all the layers of the socio-ecological model separately; yet an important gap arose out of the understanding of how those elements interact together and what their roles entail in terms of the relation with the system to ensure the proper access to rights of the population they are serving. Every faith leader focused on one specific layer of the socio-ecological model. Some of them perceived their roles as teachers and guides on an individual level while others perceived themselves as advocates responsible of change at the organizational level and another group limited their role to monitoring and evaluating the scope of application on the ground. This reflects a lack of understanding of the layers of the socio-ecological model and how they overlap to ensure protection of children.

Concerning religious courts and their decision making mechanisms, most of the faith leaders expressed their opinions from the standpoint of divorce and child custody. Opinions varied but a lion's share agreed that the religious courts' decisions are usually against the best interest of the child due to several causes of which patriarchy entrenched in the society and nepotism, emotional blackmailing/extortion between the separating couple and bribery align well with existing evidence on the child protection system in Lebanon and the role of religious courts. The juridical system in Lebanon allows religious communities autonomy on custody and maintenance issues and a report conducted by SOS Children's Villages highlighted concerns in terms of custody settlements granting custody of the child to the father based on the age of the child, rather than the best interest of the child. The report also highlighted that State courts could be used as a vehicle to challenge custody decisions by claiming that the parent who has won custody is abusive or neglectful leading to removing the child from both parents and placement in care which of course is not in the best interest of the child (Gale, 2021).

Finally, in regard to whether decisions made are women-centered, the majority disagreed explaining that women do not lie at the core of these decisions since courts follow the laws as they are without assessing the interest of the child and the woman while some attributed that to patriarchy, nepotism and favoritism. This was also reflected in SOS Children's Villages report where of concern was how decisions in religious courts are made based on factors such as mothers lacking 'proper religious education' or having 'questionable moral behavior.' Examples illustrated how women who remarry are sometimes considered as not showing 'true dedication to the moral dictates of their religion' and may lose their child's custody.

Study Strengths

The study has a number of strengths. This study was the first attempt to evaluate through a qualitative assessment faith leaders' perceptions and attitudes around Violence against children and their perceived role in achieving Child Sensitive Social Protection. The qualitative design of this study helped to collect rich and detailed information and to describe yet unexplored experiences and perspectives on most of the study themes, which would have not been achieved had we chosen the quantitative methods to answer the research questions. Next, the sampling frame was purposeful including participants with diverse backgrounds in different settings to ensure advanced representativeness. The sample was diverse in several characteristics including sex and religious background. The study employed consistently the developed interview guide and utilized structured coding and data analysis to ensure rigor. Finally, albeit limited to only a small number of women faith leaders which might have limited our understanding and appreciation of their experiences compared to their men counterparts, their mere inclusion helped ensure their representativeness.

Study Limitations

Several study limitations merit attention. The first group is pertinent to the general disadvantages of the non-probability sampling strategy. The subjectivity and non-probability based nature of unit selection in purposive sampling restricts the representativeness of the sample but it helps shape an initial understanding of the perception of faith leaders and the study team tried to tackle this limitation by adopting Maximum Variation Sampling (MVS), also known as "Heterogeneous Sampling", approach which involves selecting candidates (faith leaders in this case) across a broad spectrum relating to the topic of study (religion in this case) to look at the research questions from all available religious angles and perspectives, thereby achieving a greater understanding.

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Appendix 1: English and Arabic Versions of the in-depth interview guide with faith leaders

Key Informant Interview Guide- Research with Faith Leaders



Purpose:

The interview will look into understanding the role that faith leaders could play in achieving Child Sensitive Social Protection¹ (as per WVL’s FY21-FY24 strategy).

Adding a gender-sensitive lens to the aforementioned, the focus of the study will more specifically be on the potential role of faith leaders and FBOs in preventing sex-based discrimination and its relation to violence against children both inside and outside the home and on their perceptions. This will help WVL gain an understanding of these perceptions and potential influencing actions, which will shape future project activities and decisions on leveraging FLs behaviors in preventing sex-based discrimination and violence against children.

Date:	
Area/ District:	
Name of Facilitator:	
Name of Participant: (Not to be asked to be filled from the list)	
Participants’ sex:	Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/>
Participant’s age:	
Participant’s Nationality:	
Participant’s Phone Number:	
Start time of KII:	End time of KII:

Introduction:

World Vision in Lebanon’s Programming aims to improve the wellbeing of children, especially the most vulnerable and is interested in building linkages with the communities; through its long term engagement with the Lebanese communities and local partners in several areas, WVL seeks to build relationships that enable the community to improve and sustain the well-being of children.

¹ WVL uses the following definition for Social Protection: “The set of all initiatives, both formal and informal, that provide: social assistance (often in the form of cash) to extremely poor and/or socially excluded individuals and households; social insurance to protect people against the risks and consequences of livelihood shocks; social services to groups who need special care or who need extra support to access basic services like health or education; and policies, legislation and regulations to protect people against discrimination or abuse. Social protection may support citizens of a country and/or refugees or other non-citizens.” - Devereux, S. & Sabates-Wheeler, R. (2004). Transformative Social Protection. Institute of Development Studies

Our discussion will tackle violence against children and we are seeking to understand the role that faith leaders and your role in particular to achieve Child Sensitive Social Protection. The discussion will focus on sex-based discrimination and its relation to violence against children both inside and outside the home (in the community; neighborhood, school...). Let's think about children as newborns up until they are 18 years old.

We assure you that the information shared during this meeting will remain confidential and you have the right to skip any question you would not like to answer or further discuss.

We appreciate your participation in this discussion which should not take more than one hour and to keep a record of your comments, we will be taking some notes.

If all the information that we shared is cleared and if you don't have further questions shall we start?

- "First, would each of you tell me your name and a little bit about you?"
 - [Probes if participants need examples] Personal background and information.

Part 1: Perception of faith leaders on the prevalence VAC and sex-based discrimination in violence against children

- Can you please define, in your own words, "violence against children"? What about "sex based discrimination in violence against children" how can you define it?
[Once they answer and we assess their understanding of VAC and sex-based VAC, define how WV sees VAC and sex based discrimination in VAC]
Violence against Children: Violence against children encompasses all acts that involve the intentional use of power or verbal or physical force, threatened or actual, against a child or against a group of children that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child or children's safety, wellbeing, dignity, and development. Possible forms of harm include injury; death; disability; decreased psychological, psychosocial, or mental health; or maldevelopment.²
- To what extent you witness/observe/hear/know about violence against children within your local community/ congregation? Can you please share examples? What about household level? Do you encounter such cases? Do these cases vary by the sex of the child (I.e are they more common for boys vs. girls or vice versa)
- How did you notice or become aware that such cases are occurring within the local community or at household level? Can you please explain how the cases were identified? Who identified or reported those cases? Can you share examples?

Part 2: Decoding perceptions: perceptions and attitudes of faith leaders around VAC and sex-based discrimination in violence against children

² The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Discussion Paper Review of Definitions and Explanations of Abuse Neglect Exploitation and Violence against Children, 2019

1. Referring to your local community and to the violence against children occurrences, can you describe the way you understand and interpret these occurrences/cases? How is that? Are there any variations by the sex of the child?
2. Can you share your understanding of parents' disciplining actions? Is it the same for girls and boys or are there differences?
3. In your opinion is violence against children considered as a disciplining approach? How is that? Is it the same for girls and boys or are there differences? Can you provide examples?
4. In your opinion to what extent violent child disciplining is acceptable? Is it the same (*the acceptance level*) for girls and boys or are there differences? Why is that? What's your personal opinion on this matter?
5. In regard to the cultural and social norms around VAC, can you share the norms that are common within your communities? Are they the same for boys and girls? In your opinion to what extent these norms are valid and serve the children? Why?

Part 3: Role of Faith and Faith Leaders in preventing VAC including sex-based discrimination in violence against children

6. How does your religion address or touch on the topic of VAC? Are there any specific verses/sayings/scriptures in relation to VAC? Anything mentioned about or any differences by the sex of the child? Do you apply what Holy Scriptures say?
7. In your opinion are these verses/sayings/scriptures applicable within the current context and through this era? How is that? How can you ensure that these verses are applied? What do you do at a congregation and community level to apply those verses/teachings? How is that? Why?
8. Can you describe your role as a faith leader in preventing violence against children in general? Can you share the role that you play at a congregation level/ local community level and at household level?
9. As a faith leader and as an influential person within your community do you think the social and cultural norms around VAC still apply? Why? What changes (if any) should occur to those norms? How can you contribute or play a role to implement those changes at a local community level? At a family / HH level? Can you provide examples?
[Be careful to link the chain of thought for this answer with what has been answered in Q8]
10. To what extent those changes should be escalated to ensure that they are applied at a national level? What would be your role? Why? How to interfere and make a change at a policy level? Do you feel empowered or equipped enough to be able to reach out to relevant entities and initiate policy-level change? Why?

Part 4: Religious leaders making child and women centered decisions in religious courts

11. How are decisions taken in the religious courts? (of the religion you belong to)
12. In your opinion, to what extent are the child and the women at the center (explain what we mean by child/woman centered) of the decision making? Why? Can you please share examples?
13. In your opinion, are the decisions taken by the religious courts fair? Do they take into consideration the best interest of the child and the woman? Any other considerations these decisions are based on? (Personal interests, cultural norms...)

Conclusion

14. Is there anything I have not asked you that you think is important for people to know about everything we spoke?

[thank and close]

بحث فيسر مع القادة الدينية

اهداف من المقابلة:

ستبحث المقابلة في فهم الدور الذي يمكن أن يلعبه القادة الدينيين في تحقيق الحماية الاجتماعية المراعية للأطفال³ (وفقًا لإستراتيجية WVU للسنوات 2021 و 2024). و إضافة إلى ذلك سوف يتم مناقشة المنظور الذي يراعي الفوارق بين الجنسين ، إن تركيز الدراسة سيكون بشكل محدد على الدور المحتمل للقادة الدينيين والمنظمات الدينية في منع التمييز القائم على الجنس وعلاقته بالعنف ضد الأطفال داخل المنزل وخارجه على حد سواء. هذا سيساعد الرؤية العالمية في لبنان على اكتساب فهم لهذه التصورات والإجراءات ذو التأثير المحتمل والتي ستشكل أنشطة المشروع المستقبلية والقرارات المتعلقة بالاستفادة من سلوكيات القادة الدينية في منع التمييز القائم على الجنس والعنف ضد الأطفال.

تاريخ:	
المنطقة / الحي :	
اسم الميسر:	
اسم المشترك:	
(لا يطلب ملؤها من القائمة)	
جنس المشاركين: ذكر <input type="checkbox"/> انثى <input type="checkbox"/>	
عمر المشارك:	
جنسية المشارك:	
رقم هاتف المشارك:	
وقت بدء المقابلة:	وقت إنتهاء المقابلة:

³ تستخدم WVU التعريف التالي للحماية الاجتماعية: "مجموعة جميع المبادرات، الرسمية وغير الرسمية، التي توفر: المساعدة الاجتماعية (غالبًا في شكل نقدي) للأفراد والأسر الذين يعانون من الفقر المدقع و/ أو المستبعدين اجتماعياً؛ التأمين الاجتماعي لحماية الناس من مخاطر ونتائج الصدمات المعيشية؛ الخدمات الاجتماعية للمجموعات التي تحتاج إلى رعاية خاصة أو التي تحتاج إلى دعم إضافي للوصول إلى الخدمات الأساسية مثل الصحة أو التعليم؛ والسياسات والتشريعات واللوائح لحماية الناس من التمييز أو الإساءة. قد تدعم الحماية الاجتماعية مواطني الدولة و/ أو اللاجئين أو غيرهم من غير المواطنين". - Devereux، Sabates-Wheeler، S. & R. (2004). الحماية الاجتماعية التحويلية. معهد دراسات التنمية.

المقدمة:

تهدف منظمة الرؤية العالمية في لبنان إلى تحسين رفاهية الأطفال؛ وخاصة الأكثر ضعفاً؛ وتهتم ببناء روابط مع المجتمعات المحلية من خلال مشاركتها الطويلة الأمد مع المجتمعات اللبنانية والشركاء المحليين في العديد من المجالات. تسعى WVWL إلى بناء علاقات تمكن المجتمع من تحسين رفاهية الأطفال والحفاظ عليها.

سنتناول مناقشتنا العنف ضد الأطفال، ونحن نسعى لفهم الدور الذي يقوم به القادة الدينيين ودورهم بالتحديد في تحقيق الحماية الاجتماعية المراعية للأطفال. سنركز المناقشة على التمييز على أساس الجنس وعلاقته بالعنف ضد الأطفال داخل المنزل وخارجه (في المجتمع، الحي، المدرسة...). دعونا نفكر في الأطفال على أنهم حديثو الولادة حتى سن 18 عامًا.

نؤكد لك أن المعلومات التي تمت مشاركتها خلال هذا الاجتماع ستبقى سرية ولديك الحق في تخطي أي سؤال لا ترغب في الإجابة عليه أو مواصلة مناقشته.

نحن نقدر مشاركتك في هذه المناقشة التي لا ينبغي أن تستغرق أكثر من ساعة واحدة وللاحتفاظ بسجل لتعليقاتك، سنقوم بتدوين بعض الملاحظات.

إذا كانت جميع المعلومات التي شاركناها واضحة وإذا لم يكن لديك المزيد من الأسئلة، فهل نبدأ؟

• "أولاً ، من فضلك قل لي اسمك والقليل عنك؟"

○ [تحقيقات إذا احتاج المشاركون إلى أمثلة] الخلفية الشخصية والمعلومات.

الجزء الأول: تصوّر القادة الدينيين لانتشار العنف ضد الأطفال والتمييز على أساس الجنس في العنف ضد الأطفال

1. هل يمكنك أن تحدد بكلماتك الخاصة "العنف ضد الأطفال"؟ ماذا عن "التمييز على أساس الجنس في العنف ضد الأطفال" كيف يمكنك تعريفه؟

[بمجرد أن يجيبوا وتقيم فهمهم لـ VAC و VAC القائم على الجنس ، حدد كيف يرى WV VAC والتمييز القائم على الجنس في VAC]

العنف ضد الأطفال: يشمل العنف ضد الأطفال جميع الأفعال التي تنطوي على الاستخدام المتعمد للقوة ان كانت القوة اللفظية أو الجسدية ، سواء كانت مهددة أو فعلية ، ضد طفل أو ضد مجموعة من الأطفال والتي تؤدي أو يكون من المحتمل أن تؤدي إلى نتائج فعلية أو محتملة. ضرر محتمل على سلامة الطفل أو الأطفال ورفاههم وكرامتهم ونموهم. تشمل أشكال الضرر المحتملة الإصابة ؛ الموت؛ عجز؛ تراجع الصحة النفسية أو النفسية الاجتماعية أو العقلية ؛ أو سوء النمو لدى الاطفال.⁴

⁴ التحالف من أجل حماية الطفل في العمل الإنساني، ورقة مناقشة مراجعة للتعريفات والتفسيرات لإساءة المعاملة والإهمال والاستغلال والعنف ضد الأطفال، 2019.

2. إلى أي مدى تشاهد/ تراقب/ تسمع/ تعرف عن العنف ضد الأطفال داخل مجتمعك/رعيتك المحلية؟ هل يمكنك مشاركة أمثلة؟ ماذا عن العنف ضد الأطفال على مستوى الأسرة؟ هل تواجه مثل هذه الحالات؟ هل تختلف هذه الحالات حسب جنس الطفل (أي هل هي أكثر شيوعاً بين الأولاد/الفتيان مقابل الفتيات أو العكس)
3. كيف لاحظت أو علمت أن مثل هذه الحالات تحدث داخل مجتمعك المحلي أو على مستوى الأسرة؟ هل يمكنك شرح كيف تم تحديد الحالات؟ من الذي حدد أو أبلغ عن تلك الحالات؟ هل يمكنك مشاركة أمثلة؟

الجزء الثاني: فك رموز التصورات: تصورات ومواقف القادة الدينيين حول VAC والتمييز على أساس الجنس في العنف ضد الأطفال

4. بالإشارة إلى مجتمعك المحلي وإلى أحداث العنف ضد الأطفال، هل يمكنك وصف الطريقة التي تفهم بها وتفسر هذه الأحداث / الحالات؟ كيف هذا؟ هل هناك اختلاف حسب جنس الطفل؟
5. هل يمكنك مشاركة طريقة فهمك لإجراءات تأديب الوالدين؟ هل هو نفسه بالنسبة للفتيات والفتيان أم أن هناك اختلافات؟
6. برأيك ، هل يعتبر العنف ضد الأطفال أسلوباً تأديبياً؟ كيف هذا؟ هل هو نفسه بالنسبة للفتيات والفتيان أم أن هناك اختلافات؟ هل يمكنك تقديم أمثلة؟
7. برأيك إلى أي مدى يكون تأديب الطفل بأسلوب عنيف مقبولاً؟ هل هو نفسه بالنسبة للفتيات والفتيان أم أن هناك اختلافات؟ لماذا هذا؟ ما هو رأيك الشخصي في هذا الأمر؟
8. فيما يتعلق بالمعايير الثقافية والاجتماعية حول العنف ضد الطفل، هل يمكنك مشاركة المعايير الشائعة داخل مجتمعاتك؟ هل هذه المعايير هي نفسها بالنسبة للفتيان والفتيات؟ برأيك إلى أي مدى تصلح هذه المعايير وتخدم الأطفال؟ لماذا؟

الجزء الثالث: دور الإيمان/العقيدة والقادة الدينيين في منع العنف ضد الأطفال بما في ذلك التمييز على أساس الجنس في العنف ضد الأطفال

9. كيف يعالج دينك أو يتطرق إلى موضوع العنف ضد الطفل؟ هل توجد آيات/ أقوال/ كتب مقدسة معينة تتطرق أو ذو صلة لهذا الموضوع؟ أي شيء يذكر عن أي اختلافات حسب جنس الطفل؟ هل تطبقون ما يقوله الكتب المقدس؟
10. برأيك هل هذه الآيات/ الأقوال/ الكتب المقدسة قابلة للتطبيق في السياق الحالي وخلال هذا العصر؟ كيف هذا؟ كيف يمكنك التأكد من تطبيق هذه الآيات؟ ماذا تفعل على مستوى المصلين والمجتمع لتطبيق تلك الآيات/التعاليم؟ كيف هذا؟ لماذا؟
11. كقائد ديني، هل يمكنك وصف دورك في منع العنف ضد الأطفال بشكل عام؟ هل يمكنك مشاركة الدور الذي تلعبه على مستوى المصلين/ مستوى المجتمع المحلي وعلى مستوى الأسرة؟
12. كقائد ديني وكشخص مؤثر في مجتمعك، هل تعتقد أن الأعراف الاجتماعية والثقافية حول العنف ضد الطفل لا تزال سارية؟ لماذا؟ ما هي التغييرات (إن وجدت) التي يجب أن تحدث لتلك المعايير؟ كيف يمكنك المساهمة أو لعب دور لتنفيذ هذه التغييرات على مستوى المجتمع المحلي؟ على مستوى العائلة/ الأسرة؟ هل يمكنك تقديم أمثلة؟

[إحرص على ربط سلسلة الأفكار الخاصة بهذه الإجابة بما تمت الإجابة عليه في س 8]

13. إلى أي مدى ينبغي تصعيد هذه التغييرات لضمان تطبيقها على المستوى الوطني؟ ماذا سيكون دورك؟ لماذا؟ كيف تتدخل وتغير على مستوى السياسات؟ هل تشعر بالتمكين أو التجهيز الكافي لتكون قادرًا على الوصول إلى الكيانات ذات الصلة والبدء في تغيير مستوى السياسة؟ لماذا؟

الجزء الرابع: اتخاذ القادة الدينيين قرارات تتمحور حول الطفل والمرأة في المحاكم الدينية

14. كيف يتم اتخاذ القرارات في المحاكم الشرعية؟ (حسب الدين الذي تنتمي إليه)
15. برأيك، إلى أي مدى يتمركز الطفل والمرأة في قلب (اشرح ما نعنيه بالتركيز على الطفل/ المرأة) عملية صنع القرار واتخاذ القرار؟ لماذا؟ هل يمكنك مشاركة الأمثلة؟
16. برأيك هل قرارات المحاكم الشرعية عادلة؟ هل يأخذون بعين الاعتبار مصلحة الطفل والمرأة؟ أي اعتبارات أخرى تستند إليها هذه القرارات؟ (الاهتمامات الشخصية، الأعراف الثقافية ...)

استنتاج:

17. هل هناك أي شيء لم أطرحه عليك وتعتقد أنه من المهم أن يعرفه الناس عن كل ما تحدثنا عنه؟

[شكر وإنهاء]