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Case Study with ABAAD as part of the UK Government-funded 'Working effectively with faith leaders to challenge harmful traditional practices'

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Case study with ABAAD
as part of the UK Government-funded

**‘WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH FAITH LEADERS TO
CHALLENGE HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES’**

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& Mr. Wouter Levinga

September 2017



**JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE on
FAITH & LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

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List of abbreviations

CEM	Child and Early Marriage
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
FGM/C	Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HRV	Honour Related Violence
HTP	Harmful Traditional Practice
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
VAW	Violence Against Women
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls

1. Introduction

In 2016, the UK Department for International Development released a call for proposals for a study entitled “Working effectively with faith leaders to challenge harmful traditional practices”. A Consortium of the *Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities*, an international alliance examining the contribution of faith groups to community health and well-being, undertook this study to investigate best practices around engaging with faith leaders on harmful traditional practices (HTPs). This study is currently on-going and will continue until 2018.

The study itself follows a multi-case case study design, with each individual case study focusing on one of five organisations, four of whom are international faith-based organisations (FBOs), and their work on HTPs and with faith leaders. This document details the findings from the case study done with ABAAD.¹

2. Background

The case study on ABAAD is slightly different from the other case studies presented. This has to do with the fact that ABAAD is an organisation that is based in and primarily works within Lebanon. In addition, ABAAD is not a faith-based organisation (FBOs), although it does engage with faith leaders in various ways, including on challenging HTPs such as child and early marriage (CEM). It is highly relevant to explore how faith leaders challenge HTPs in the diverse context of Lebanon, in which various Muslim and Christian communities co-exist, as well as in the broader political context of Lebanon and the Middle East. The case study on ABAAD can therefore offer some important insights into engaging with faith leaders, and offers a comparative perspective to the other case studies on FBOs.

ABAAD was set up in 2011 as a non-profit, non-politically affiliated, non-religious civil association. The organisation gained special consultative status within the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) in 2016.² The organisation’s aim is the promotion of sustainable social and economic development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, through the promotion of equality, protection and the empowerment of marginalised groups, especially women.³ The organisation combines the skills of human rights activists, lawyers, experts in the field, social workers, and researchers that want to address gender-based violence (GBV) in an alternative way by using a holistic approach. ABAAD is also, since 2012, the co-chair of the Task Force on Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Lebanon, working together with the Ministry of Social Affairs.⁴

This case study will outline how and why ABAAD’s programmes focus on creating awareness of gender equality, often only implicitly including HTPs. Since HTPs are important in the problem analysis of some of these programmes, the case study will focus on ABAAD programming that link to HTPs, in particular CEM as well as honour-related violence. For this case study five interviews (with four women and one man) have been conducted and analysed. In addition, public documentation of the organisation has been consulted and analysed, for which references are provided. The positions of the interviewed experts at ABAAD were as follows:

- one director of projects and programmes
- one project coordinator

¹ ABAAD is the full name of the organisation.

² <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/documents/2016/dec.2016.215.pdf>, Accessed 3 August 2017.

³ <http://www.abaadmena.org/about>, Accessed 30th August 2017.

⁴ *The Programs and Services for Women*, 2012, Ministry of Social Affairs, Republic of Lebanon. <http://www.emigrants.gov.lb/en-mosa6.pdf>, Accessed 30th August 2017.

- one policy specialist on sexual and reproductive health (SRH)
- one gender equality programme officer
- one masculinities advisor

These participants were selected in consultation with the ABAAD representative assigned to represent ABAAD in conducting this case study. All of the participants were working on policy and advocacy, or involved in programmes and projects that deal with HTPs, engage with faith leaders, or both.

ABAAD applies a multi-level strategic approach in its programming. First, it does research and disseminates information relevant to HTPs (or, as ABAAD frames it, on GBV or violence against women), for example an assessment on gender equality in refugee communities in Lebanon. Second, it develops policy and does advocacy, usually focussed on policy and legal change at a national level (for example, through roundtables with faith leaders). Third, it runs community-based interventions that collaborate with community and faith leaders (such as setting up shelters for GBV survivors).

In advocacy-oriented as well as community-focused interventions, ABAAD works with faith leaders to challenge HTP related issues (such as GBV) and broader gender inequalities. Faith leaders are engaged in various programmes and projects that often include several of the above-mentioned methods. The most relevant ABAAD programming is outlined below:

- ABAADs advocacy work has been focused on *the abolition of Article 522* of the Lebanese Penal Code. This article (which was repealed on the 16th of August 2017, as this case study was being conducted) stated that, if a legal marriage is concluded between a rape perpetrator and his victim, then prosecution shall cease. In the case of a sentence having already been pronounced, it is then suspended.⁵ While the article was specific to rape, it is seen as part of the broader understanding of women as symbols of the honour of the family. ABAAD described Article 522 as ‘blatant discrimination’ against girls and women and a violation of their most fundamental, basic human rights.⁶ ABAAD’s advocacy campaign also aims to raise public awareness of the difference between rape and what society considers as the honour of women. One of the ABAAD interviewees described the situation as follows:

Because rape as such is still taboo in society and many women who survive such a crime feel rejected by their families or by the community. And of course, the idea was also to say that basically by forcing the woman to marry her rapist we’re sending her to jail forever, with authority.⁷

Article 522 arguably served as a legitimisation of harmful practices affecting women, including CEM and honour-related violence. While only addressed implicitly, advocacy campaigns challenging Article 522 served to challenge these HTPs.

- ABAAD’s Masculinities Programme is a cross-cutting programme across all of its activities. One of the projects under the Masculinities Programme is of particular relevance to this study. This is a series of roundtable dialogues under the title ‘*ABAAD dialogues with Religious leaders to end GBV in the MENA Region*’, organised between 2012 and 2015. During the roundtable discussions with and amongst faith leaders, different forms of GBV and violence against women (VAW) were highlighted and assessed by faith leaders, with specific reference to their communities. The main forms of VAW in these Lebanese communities have been identified by the faith leaders as including domestic violence, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C),

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/16/lebanon-axes-law-allowing-rapists-escape-justice-by-marrying-victim>. Accessed August 30, 2017.

⁶ Soraya, June 19, 2017.

⁷ Soraya, June 19, 2017.

misapplication of personal status laws (family law), CEM, socialisation and gender discrimination against girls, honour killings and sexual harassment.⁸

- This project also led to a *media campaign* involving the video ‘We Believe,’ in which prominent faith leaders, such as Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi (the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch), Abdul Amir Qabalan (deputy head of the Shiite Islamic Council), Mohammed Rashid Qabbani (Grand Mufti of Lebanon), and Gregoire III Laham (former Patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church) explicitly distance themselves from violence against women and denounce various HTPs.⁹
- Another relevant initiative within the Masculinities programme is the *Men Engagement Network* that was launched by ABAAD, but is now building its own independent body and governance structure. In partnership with the MenEngage Global Network, Sonke Gender Justice Network, and the International Medical Corps, ABAAD launched the MenEngage Lebanon Country Network in 2014.¹⁰ It conducted three cycles of trainings over the course of three months, on gender, masculinities and engaging men to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) and GBV.¹¹ The training resulted in a pool of Lebanese organisations with an increased capacity and ability to engage men within their context, as well as increased sharing and learning among these organisations as a network.

ABAAD works mainly in Lebanon and does not have any religious affiliation. Therefore, this case study is slightly different than the others. ABAAD is, however, an interesting and relevant organisation to study. This does not only pertain to its leadership in terms of its approaches on masculinities in the Middle East and in broader international coalitions (such as ECOSOC), but also to how the specific religious situation in Lebanon has influenced the way ABAAD works. Because of this we offer a brief background on the context.

The Mecelle (the Ottoman civil code) was suspended in 1932, but its dictates form the foundation of the Personal Status Laws. The Lebanese constitution does not provide for a civil code that regulates marriages, divorce or other family matters. Instead, it is guaranteed in the constitution that the Personal Status Laws, regulated by the 18 different religious sects and their courts, govern over the matters of family. These Personal Status Laws have a great impact on gender equality in the country, because matters such as succession, marriage, and divorce all fall under the jurisdiction of these religious courts.¹² There are reasons for maintaining these laws, due to the sectarian situation in the country. Due to a turbulent political history with long periods of civil war in recent memory, ensuring the current power balance between politics and religion in the country seems to be the first priority. Changing the laws could have implications for the delicate (power) balance. Outlining the relations between religion and the state, ABAAD’s project coordinator described the Lebanese context as follows:

*... if you want to understand the Lebanese context as such, you can see it like a triangle. Where one point is patriarchy, another one we call it politics, and the third one is religion. And it’s the interaction of these three points that is at the core in gender inequalities dynamics in the country.*¹³

⁸ *Faith leaders Opposed to Violence Against Women. 2012. External policy report.* Women’s UN Report Network, <http://wunrn.com/2012/11/middle-east-religious-leaders-ngos-discuss-gender-based-violence/> and Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue, <http://www.fdc.org/events-details.php?id=9>. Accessed 17 July, 2017

⁹ *We Believe*, 8 January, 2017, ABAAD Mena, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Lv32De0UjA>. Accessed 30 August 2017.

¹⁰ MenEngage, *What do 20 Men and Women in a Beirut Hotel Conference Room Have in Common? The MenEngage Lebanon Network Kicks Off in Beirut.* <http://menengage.org/20-men-women-beirut-hotel-conference-room-common-menengage-lebanon-network-kicks-beirut/>, Accessed 30 August, 2017.

¹¹ <http://www.abaadmena.org/programmes/masculinities>. Accessed 30 August, 2017.

¹² Mallat C. 1997. “The Lebanese legal system”. *The Lebanon Report*, 2, 29-45.

¹³ Yasmine, June 20, 2017.

Reflecting further on the role religion plays in the public and political domains in Lebanon, the project coordinator explained that “... you cannot say Lebanon is a theocracy, that’s not true because we have civil laws. But for everything that is related to family it’s religious laws”.¹⁴ Outlining the complex meanings of religion in the public domain as well as the private lives of people, the project coordinator continued:

*We have to distinguish two ideas: the concept of religion on one hand, and the concept of religiosity on the other. Lebanon is a religious country per se. You have very different dynamics taking place in the country and everywhere. It’s super diverse. So in terms of spirituality, yes a majority of people would declare themselves believers, but it’s not ... the point is it’s a country where you can be a semi-atheist or pure atheist or a Christian atheist.*¹⁵

Therefore, while in the Lebanese context there is freedom of religion and people have diverse religious and spiritual orientations, the major religions continue to have a lot of influence on the organisation of social and family life, due to their religio-legal positioning in the Lebanese state.

3. The existing evidence base

As the preceding background discussion explained, the case study on ABAAD is different from the other case studies. As a young organisation engaging with faith leaders as part of a broader holistic approach to GBV, ABAAD has no specific research available that contribute to a broader evidence base for working with faith leaders in challenging HTPs.

However, review of the documentation on ABAAD’s website indicates that ABAAD includes monitoring and evaluation in its programmes. One example is the external evaluation of the Bel Salameh project, which addressed the multiple psychological dimensions of the conflicts and subsequent refugee crisis in Syria. The project enabled individuals and communities to improve their capacity to transform their negative experiences in Syria.¹⁶ Together with partners Queens University, the United Nations Population Fund and the International Red Crescent, ABAAD is in the process of developing a tool for Sexual and Gender Based Violence programming.¹⁷

The ABAAD Resource Center on Gender Equality regularly engages in research projects as a research partner to other organisations. One example is a field study conducted for World Vision Lebanon, entitled “Varying Perceptions, One Outcome: Field study monitoring the attitudes and perceptions of women and men towards Women’s Rights in Lebanon.”¹⁸ For this research 125 people engaged in focus group discussions, in which religion was occasionally mentioned by male participants as a legitimization for disciplining their wives.¹⁹

¹⁴ Yasmine, June 20, 2017.

¹⁵ Yasmine, June 20, 2017

¹⁶ *Bel Salameh. Final Evaluation*, 2017, External project report, Middle East Consulting Solutions <http://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1498822074.pdf>. Accessed 28 August, 2017.

¹⁷ *Sensemaker® for monitoring and evaluation of SGBV programs*, External Report <https://www.elrha.org/map-location/sensemaker-monitoring-evaluation-sgbv-programs/>. Accessed 28 August, 2017.

¹⁸ *Varying Perceptions, One Outcome: Field study monitoring the attitudes and perceptions of women and men towards Women’s Rights in Lebanon*, 2014, <http://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1490948774.pdf>. Accessed 30 August 2017.

¹⁹ Another example is *Masculinity and violence against women among Lebanese and Iraqi’s in Lebanon*, 2014, External study, ABAAD, <http://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1494511073.pdf>. Accessed 28 August, 2017.

4. ABAAD's approach to faith leaders and HTPs

While ABAAD programmes challenge HTPs, the organisation itself does not use either the term or the concept of HTPs. Even while working on preventing and challenging the practice of early marriage, the organisation usually refrains from referring to CEM. This is as, when ABAAD would use these terms directly and in particular when working with faith leaders, it would create barriers that would hamper constructive collaboration. ABAAD's director of programmes elaborated on this as follows:

... ABAAD addresses harmful, or traditional harmful practices without necessarily referring to this terminology in this course, but in action we definitely focus on issues relating to forced child marriages and on other issues that has to do with these practices.²⁰

As some faith leaders would interpret the use of the term HTP as criticising their faith or culture, ABAAD prefers the term 'GBV'. By rather addressing 'GBV', ABAAD in any case challenges early marriage by building awareness on the importance to protect (instead of harm) women and girls. HTPs are thus seen as part of GBV. The strategies ABAAD uses to challenge HTPs are part of their broader programming and projects that are focused on advocacy and community engagement related to GBV.

The holistic approach utilised by ABAAD means that, in challenging GBV, ABAAD works with all stakeholders in the communities. Their programmes are not only focused on women, but also on men and youth. According to the masculinities director, engaging with men is important, since men dominate religio-political discourse. In addition, local leaders such as faith leaders are important actors in building community awareness of GBV and getting support systems in place. For ABAAD it is important to engage with faith leaders who are open to constructive conversations.

Notwithstanding ABAAD's principle focus on GBV, the organisation's understanding of the background and legitimisation of certain practices does resonate with the understanding of HTPs followed in this study. The director of programmes gave an example with regard to the Personal Status Laws:

The philosophy of such a legal framework or such a law is coming from ... the traditional concepts of honour and how to preserve the honour of girls or women ... Giving priority for the family over women individuals ... in case there is pregnancy out of rape ... at the cost of women's dignity, women's rights and women's feelings and their wellbeing.²¹

Looking at the terminology for specific practices, one can see that while research participants agreed that the Personal Status Laws relate to honour-related violence (HRV) as described in this study, the term itself was not seen as constructive or useful in practical engagement with faith leaders in Lebanese society. The same ambiguity occurs with the term 'HRV' as happens with 'HTP'. The project coordinator explains that the problem is not honour, because "(i)t's good to have some honour but it's the way we're relating this concept in a way that may authorize violence and further even more gender inequalities".²² The masculinities director explains further: "The construct of honour itself is shaped by and based on an understanding within the hierarchical patriarchal system. Simply calling it 'domestic violence', or GBV or VAW will attract a [sic] broader attention from religious leaders."²³ While the notion of honour might have more relevance in the local communities, the project coordinator would not use the terminology in her work with ABAAD: "I think from the honour point you have to work on it, let's say at a community level, at a cultural level and by campaigning, by

²⁰ Sara, June 13, 2017.

²¹ Sara, June 13, 2017.

²² Yasmine, June 20, 2017.

²³ Ralph, July 27, 2017.

organising activities or awareness-raising activities through education.”²⁴ She emphasized that “the penal code *per se*, it can only change by advocacy and policy change, assessing the law, the legal aspect”.²⁵ In other words, these discussions have to be addressed on the level of the state and the legal system and operate within that discourse.

The focus on violence and gender inequality, rather than naming and shaming a particular practice, also seems to be more productive in terms of challenging the practice of CEM. ABAAD’s policy advisor on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) explains that “when we talk about forced marriage and early marriage we’re discussing it from a sexual violence perspective and how, for girls, it’s more seen as sexual violence”.²⁶ In other interviews this was also reported as a more productive way of engaging with faith leaders. This is appropriate given the political context, according to an ABAAD policy advisor:

A few months back a very prominent faith leader in Lebanon describe (sic) how NGOs who work against early marriage are seen as coming from the West and they’re bringing Western idea of religions. So, for instance, in Lebanon where this faith leader has many followers and whose party has a lot of control we are not able to talk about early marriage in of itself...²⁷

Therefore, while ABAAD is indirectly addressing specific HTPs (such as CEM and HRV) in its programming and projects, the organisation nevertheless tries to avoid using terms such as ‘CEM’ or ‘HRV’. These terms hinder, rather than help, their work.

Following the influx of forced migrants from Syria over the past years, ABAAD faces new challenges in addressing harmful practices. In these Syrian communities, where one often finds people living in precarious circumstances in refugee camps, there is a high prevalence of CEM. ABAAD’s gender equality programme officer referred to a 2017 UNFPA study that mentions a CEM prevalence rate of 35%.²⁸ The SRH policy advisor went on to explain:

So, we started hearing more [of] the rhetoric from communities. That ‘we need to marry off our daughters because they’re in a new country now, they’re probably going to be more likely to be exposed to sexual harassment’. Or they might say that ‘well, we’re in Lebanon now, it’s a more “open-minded” society and we’re worried about our girls engaging in sexual activity before marriage and in so doing [sic] dishonour [to] the family’. So, one of the coping strategies that they use is... ‘let’s marry her off for protection’. The other that emerged was the economic factors. So many families were no longer able to provide economically for their families, men were less likely to find jobs after displacement, and so, and mothers as well. So, there were no economic means for the family. And so, for them maybe they saw an early child marriage like a means for... one less person to feed within the family. And so, we started to see that child marriages are increasing because of this.²⁹

While ABAAD has developed programmes focusing on education, coping and resilience for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, they have thus far not engaged with faith leaders in these particular communities. What is relevant to note from what has been shared, is that the practice of CEM needs to be understood within the context of the particular dynamics of the refugee community. One should

²⁴ Yasmine, June 20, 2017.

²⁵ Yasmine, June 20, 2017.

²⁶ Soraya, June 19, 2017.

²⁷ Soraya, June 19, 2017.

²⁸ *New Study Finds Child Marriage Rising Among Most Vulnerable Syrian Refugees*, External report, UNFPA.

<http://www.unfpa.org/news/new-study-finds-child-marriage-rising-among-most-vulnerable-syrian-refugees>, Accessed 8 July 2017.

²⁹ Soraya, June 19, 2017.

also be aware that, for refugees, the position of faith leaders in Lebanon may be much less influential than the economic and migratory reasons mentioned.

5. The role of faith, faith communities and faith leaders in relation to HTPs

ABAAD works intensively with faith leaders, in order to create spaces for conversations within communities. While all the research participants agreed on the necessity of working with faith leaders to challenge HTPs, they varied in terms of their views on the extent to which faith should be explicitly incorporated in ABAAD's intervention and advocacy activities. For example, regarding CEM the majority felt that factors other than religion were the key causal factors. CEM was seen as existing, in most cases, due to economic considerations. Thus, while "religion is important, ... at the end of the day you're talking about basic needs".³⁰ For example, even in the dialogues with and between faith leaders, the focus is on the early pregnancies that usually result from early marriage, and the health risks that result from early pregnancy, rather than on the religious tenets relevant to CEM.³¹

In addition, some of the research participants spoke of the challenges of working with faith leaders, and with religion specifically. Religious and sectarian differences, as well as diverging interpretations of religious texts, make it hard to engage faith leaders based on their religious and scriptural traditions, as such engagement too easily leads to theological disputes.

It is interesting to note that the research participants see faith leaders and faith communities' patriarchal views as resulting from broader, patriarchal societal structures. Referencing a study conducted by the American University in Beirut, they argue that religion is not a significant obstacle to gender equality.³² Rather, religious discourse is used to legitimise patriarchal cultural practices, while the most important obstacle to gender equality is actually the socialization of people, by society, into different gendered roles.

As discussed earlier, the *ABAAD dialogues with Religious Leaders to end GBV in the MENA Region* project included roundtable sessions with leaders from Muslim, Christian and Druze faith groups. These leaders came together because they shared a concern with the GBV affecting people in their communities. Faith leaders discussed causes of GBV, and developed strategies for partnership between civil society and faith leaders in challenging GBV. The roundtable concluded with identifying tangible roles that faith leaders can play in ending GBV, including preventive, supportive, therapeutic, and legislative roles.³³

In the discussions during the roundtables, the faith leaders themselves identified many contributing factors explaining the prevalence of GBV in their communities. This included a lack of education on rights for both women and men, as well as disparities in the academic capacities of faith leaders and the resultant inaccurate religious teachings. The participatory process led to the conclusion, formulated by the faith leaders, that societal systems impose traditional and patriarchal social norms in the name of religion.³⁴ Suggestions were developed for how civil society and faith leaders could work together to challenge these forms of GBV and violence against women. Suggestions included

³⁰ Farah, June 20, 2017.

³¹ Farah, June 20, 2017

³² El-Hage, S.S., "Between Fitna, Fawda, and Feminism: Implications of Religious Institutions on Lebanon's Women's Movement", Civil Society Knowledge Centre, Lebanon Support, 18 February, 2015

³³ <http://www.abaadmena.org/programmes/masculinities/project-59195bc640e9a8-31792171>, Accessed 20 June 2017.

³⁴ <http://www.abaadmena.org/programmes/masculinities/project-59195bc640e9a8-31792171>, Accessed 20 June 2017.

developing an initiative to establish a regional network of faith leaders, as well as a commitment by faith leaders to take up preventive, supportive, therapeutic, and legislative roles in this network.³⁵

6. Interlocutors

All the interviewees agreed that faith leaders are important interlocutors for an organisation challenging GBV in communities. In particular, by challenging certain understandings and practices that harm women and girls, faith leaders can play important leadership roles. This fits with ABAAD's holistic approach to challenging GBV.

Interlocutors that are willing to work with interlocutors from other sectors, are often very effective in addressing harmful practices. The roundtables (conducted as part of the *ABAAD dialogues with Religious Leaders to end GBV in the MENA Region* project) brought faith leaders together with stakeholders from all parts of civil society, such as the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue, the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women, independent researchers, lawyers, and delegates from other civil society and feminist organisations. As one faith leader commented:

I believe we should not stay trapped in a single [event]. We, this established work team, should go out and start a movement among youth, start a civil movement, with media coverage together, to guide and educate people. These meetings should continue: there should be more practical steps on the ground ... We should come out of our shells, meaning every sect should go to the other in order to be able to come up with something which serves our country; something which evolves our society.³⁶

Therefore, bringing faith leaders together with other civil society actors, especially if they usually do not work well together, can generate commitment from faith leaders and civil society actors to establish constructive dialogue and collaboration.

7. Safe spaces for discussing HTPs

Creating safe spaces is important to ABAAD's work and approach. However, it is a key priority in their community-based work in general, rather than in their work with faith leaders. Nevertheless, what they have learnt about creating safe spaces in the community has application more broadly.

In their community-based work they distinguish between two types of safe spaces. Shelters, also called Al-Dar safe houses, offer in-house resident services. In other words, a woman or a girl leaves her household to go to such a shelter for protection. At these shelters ABAAD offers many services. After a reception phase, which includes the familiarisation process with the safe house, it first offers immediate basic assistance. This includes the provision of basic material assistance, if needed. The shelters also offer listening and crisis counselling services, health services, follow-up services, psycho-social support, mental health services, legal support (including free legal counselling and assistance), education and child care programmes, and economic empowerment (by helping with job placements and longer-term housing).^{37,38}

³⁵ *Violence Against Women in Lebanon: A Dialogue between Religious Leaders and Civil Society*, 2017, Video, ABAAD Mena, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS5_bamajys, Accessed August 30, 2017.

³⁶ *Violence Against Women in Lebanon: A Dialogue between Religious Leaders and Civil Society*. 2017. ABAAD Mena, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS5_bamajys, Accessed April 25, 2017

³⁷ *بعيد عن المنزل... حديث ثمة منزل*, Website ABAAD, <http://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1474625433.pdf>, Accessed 20 June, 2017

Centres, on the other hand, are community venues that people can only go to during the day.³⁹ In Lebanon ABAAD has eight such centres for women and girls, as well as one centre for men. In the centres ABAAD organises activities that raise awareness of GBV and offers psychological support. The psychosocial workers that work at these centres work in rotation at the different centres. The centres are thus places where one can engage on sensitive and challenging topics (such as HTPs). For example:

We usually do these sessions in places where men already feel comfortable, whether it be within the municipality, they frequent the municipality a lot, or at the health centre. So, it depends on the community but we usually find a place where men already frequent and feel at ease there. And then after that, it's the topic that makes them feel comfortable enough to talk. As I said earlier, if we directly come and talk to them about violence against women they might feel like we're blaming them, even though that's definitely not our approach but they become defensive.⁴⁰

ABAAD's holistic approach to GBV means safe spaces also have to be created for various groups of people, and not only GBV survivors. In the community centres an age-sensitive approach is applied by organising separate activities for youth, adult and elderly people.

For ABAAD safe spaces are thus first and foremost physical places in which survivors of GBV as well as community members that engage in sensitive conversations about GBV can feel safe and secure. Secondly, the use of language that is sensitive to local sensibilities is important to create safe spaces for such conversation. Thirdly, safe spaces are ensured through paying attention to power (im)balance in group meetings, in which age and gender appear to be determining factors.

8. Approaches

ABAAD has various strategies for challenging current gender roles in Lebanese society, as well as the GBV that results from it. These strategies also involve faith leaders and are outlined below.

ABAAD engages with faith leaders with a concrete and practical goal. If faith leaders are positive about changing a societal aspect that supports GBV, ABAAD asks them to come together and think about concrete procedural mechanisms (such as legislation to improve women's situations). They hold joint meetings (like the roundtable sessions) to discuss existing laws and customs, what to change, and what the limits of their contribution are.⁴¹ In a YouTube video capturing faith leaders' and civil servants' discussion of the roundtable sessions, one of the participants from the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women, described the first step of the dialogues as being very practical and concrete: "The first session was about the dialogue specifically: How do we accept the other; how would the other accept us".⁴²

Important in ABAAD's approach to HTPs in its work with faith leaders, is that HTPs are never mentioned directly, because it would polarize rather than create constructive dialogue. Instead, conversations evolve around issues that are identified as shared concerns, which in the case of the roundtable dialogues was domestic violence.

³⁹ Soraya, June 19, 2017.

⁴⁰ Yasmine, June 20, 2017.

⁴¹ النساء ضد العنف على للقضاء الدين رجال مع العمل, Website ABAAD, <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1474626313.pdf>, Accessed 30 August, 2017

⁴² *Violence Against Women in Lebanon: A Dialogue between Religious Leaders and Civil Society*, Video, ABAAD Mena, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS5_bamajys, Accessed April 25, 2017.

ABAAD's work with faith leaders has not only brought insight into the challenges, but also into what is effective in engaging with faith leaders. Based on experience, ABAAD encourages the use of a public health approach. This prevents a discussion from being an argument about values, but rather one on medical facts. ABAAD therefore centralizes a public health approach in its work with faith leaders to challenge HTP-related issues. This is seen as effective: "There is a greater attention when it comes to medicine. It's usually taken to heart when you're talking medicine. And so it tends to be a bit more positive or a bit easier to discuss it from this approach".⁴³

Another approach ABAAD uses evolved around collaboration with faith leaders. ABAAD has chosen to engage with faith leaders that are willing to cooperate and be progressive on the issues ABAAD addresses. This is seen as an effective approach since "[i]t didn't make sense to get the most conservative faith leaders on the roundtable, because it would have defeated the purpose of... working together towards a change or having things a bit better for the status of women".⁴⁴ One of the roundtable faith leaders from the Sunni Personal Status Tribunal, is an example of the type of faith leaders that ABAAD chooses to engage with:

I feel I am among a table holding a group of educated people with an admirable social movement concerning women's affairs. I felt, all of us, that we reached a point where misinterpreting created this dilemma. I highly recommend that the efforts of both, clergy and civil society, combined as soon as possible in order to prevent it as much as we can [GBV].⁴⁵

The masculinities programme director also highlighted that ABAAD encourages an 'agree to disagree' approach when engaging with faith leaders. While ABAAD strives to facilitate the development of progressive attitudes and beliefs that counter GBV, they realise that everyone will not always feel exactly the same way. Therefore, they prioritise that differences in opinion should not halt conversation: "We are civil servants [we are serving society]; we want to negotiate. But even if we disagree, further communication is essential for the future."⁴⁶

9. Partnerships

The faith leaders who participated in the *ABAAD dialogues with Religious Leaders to end GBV in the MENA Region* project are important partners. Other partners mentioned are faith-based and secular NGOs. As an organisation operating country-wide in Lebanon, ABAAD has an important intermediary role between international development organisations, such as Oxfam and World Vision, and local community organisations. ABAAD therefore collaborates with quite diverse organisations, depending on their relevance to the particular project.

One international collaboration particularly relevant to this study is ABAAD's partnership with Oxfam, where they did an assessment on gender equality and gender roles amongst refugees in Lebanon. The roundtables with faith leaders (as part of the *ABAAD dialogues with Religious Leaders to end GBV in the MENA Region* project) were also organised in collaboration with both Oxfam as well as the Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue.⁴⁷ Transnational partnerships include the MenEngage Global Network, where collaborative work is done on challenging GBV.⁴⁸ ABAAD also

⁴³ Farah, June 20, 2017.

⁴⁴ Farah, June 20, 2017.

⁴⁵ *Violence Against Women in Lebanon: A Dialogue between Religious Leaders and Civil Society, Video, ABAAD*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS5_bamajys, Accessed April 25, 2017.

⁴⁶ Ralph, July 27, 2017.

⁴⁷ Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue, *Faith leaders Opposed to Violence Against Women*.

<http://www.fdc.org/events-details.php?id=9>, Accessed 17 July, 2017

⁴⁸ MenEngage Website, About, <http://menengage.org/about-us/>, Accessed August 1st, 2017.

assists local organisations in developing international partnerships. For example, they assisted in partnering Oxfam with the Kurdistan NGO, Asuda, on a project on engaging faith leaders in Kurdistan.⁴⁹

Finally, it is worthwhile mentioning that ABAAD collaborated with UNICEF to produce an animation video entitled "Marriage is not a game", highlighting the risks associated with early marriage.⁵⁰ It also collaborated with National Security forces to develop new rules for how its members deal with domestic violence cases.⁵¹

10. Challenges and opportunities

Many of the opportunities and challenges of addressing HTPs with faith, faith communities and faith leaders have been identified in the preceding sections. This section will briefly highlight key opportunities and challenges.

Opportunities for ABAAD include:

- The use of media. Media campaigns showcasing faith leaders' support of women's rights and peace are an important tool to gradually engage them in ending GBV, in a context where other and also more conservative and fundamentalist interpretations of religions are well represented on social media. Using (social) media also opens up possibilities in reaching youth.⁵²
- Setting up a regional network of faith leaders and civil society. Since the refugee influx from Syria, the process of setting up a regional network consisting of both faith leaders as well as civil servants slowed down. Due to the refugee influx all that were involved in this process had other priorities. However, this remains an opportunity that could be followed up.

Challenges in working with faith leaders include:

- While ABAAD is reaching more and more people in Lebanon, the incidence of GBV, including CEM, is on the rise, especially in refugee communities. But the refugee situation in Lebanon has meant that much of ABAAD's work on faith leaders is left by the wayside due to focusing on this crisis. The need and desire for short term interventions, leaves little space or funding for long term processes such as continuing the roundtables.
- The politicisation of religion, in particular with regard to religious and political support for CEM in the context of Lebanon.
- Legitimation from the sacred scriptures makes it challenging to discuss CEM with Muslim leaders in particular, due to the ambiguity in Islam around marriageable age.
- Actual or perceived polarization between women's rights activism and faith makes it challenging to engage faith leaders on issues that have to do with women's rights.
- Guaranteeing the safety of progressive faith leaders, who often face threats to their personal safety when speaking out against GBV and HTPs.
- ABAAD is still a young organisation and is therefore still learning whether its application of strategies and initiatives are correct and effective.

⁴⁹ MenEngage Website, About, <http://menengage.org/about-us/>, Accessed August 1st, 2017.

⁵⁰ ABAAD, *Marriage is not a Game*. Video published on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUanQOyrOTw>, Accessed August 1st, 2017

⁵¹ <https://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/lebanon/peacebuilding-organisations/abaad/>. Accessed 30 August, 2017.

⁵² Women's Peacemakers Program, Policy Paper: *Gender, Religion, Peace*. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/berkeley-center/140311WPPGenderReligionPeacePolicyBrief.pdf>, Accessed 30 August, 2017

11. What works?

Based on participants' interviews, as well as a document review, a number of practices can be identified that are key to addressing HTPs and/or working with faith leaders. They include:

- Taking time when working with faith leaders, to develop long-term relationships. It is necessary to invest in regular meetings with faith leaders in order to build a mutual relationship of trust.⁵³
- Understanding and respecting faith leaders' ability to influence communities in societies in the Middle East, as clergy play important roles in legal processes.
- Using language that does not offend faith leaders, but is sensitive to their concerns as well as their sensitivities.
- Focusing attention on engaging with open, constructive and progressive faith leaders.
- Building networks of organisations working on various levels and throughout the country, which allows for a broad support base.
- Engaging men in a positive manner and not only blaming them.
- Applying a public health approach when engaging on HTPs.
- Refrain from using the term 'HTPs', nor the concept itself, but focusing on issues around which common ground is found.

12. Conclusions

Without being religiously affiliated, nor naming harmful practices as such, ABAAD nevertheless actively engages faith leaders in challenging harmful practices. This is done especially in their projects within the Masculinities Programme. This fits perfectly within ABAAD's holistic approach, in which the organisation argues that working with men is as important as working with women if one wants to change the status quo. ABAAD works with faith leaders in constructive ways, applying approaches in which the faith leaders and ABAAD can find each other, using common denominators to address, listen to each other, and engage in dialogues. In addition to its advocacy role in which ABAAD has demonstrated to be a significant actor in challenging GBV in Lebanese society, the organisation has also been able to strengthen networks and engagement between faith leaders and civil society in Lebanon by focussing on expanding common ground.

⁵³ النساء ضد العنف على للقضاء الدين رجال مع العمل (How to engage religious leaders in EAW) Website ABAAD, <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1474626313.pdf>, Accessed 30 August, 2017