

EMBRACING HOPE:

Resilience in the Face of Gender-Based Violence



NORWEGIAN CHURCH AID
actalliance



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Cover photo: Håvard Hovdhaugen. Mother of four and mine-worker, Temwa Gondwe, worked in the mines of Malawi infamous for inhumane conditions including GBV, until she decided to raise her voice. It has paid off for the entire village.

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Håvard Hovdhaugen, Håvard Bjelland, Anette Torjusen, Stephen Mallon (CPD photo, chapter 6). 2023

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Introductory Remarks by NCA Secretary General

Change is possible

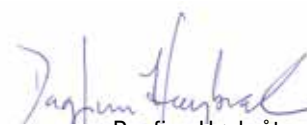
The struggle against gender-based violence (GBV) is the fight we wish was no longer necessary, but which remains one of the main areas of work for Norwegian Church Aid (NCA). The effort is needed even more than before.

This report tells you that gender-based violence is on the rise. It tells you that women's and girls' rights are under increasing pressure. A gender backlash is going on. In 2024, grandparents fear their granddaughters will have fewer rights than them. But this is also a report that speaks of hope, resistance, empowerment, self-esteem and realizing rights.

In times of increased injustice, inequality and lack of equality, the prevalence of gender-based violence increases. It knows no social, economic or national boundaries, and increases drastically during conflict and other humanitarian crises. The most marginalized are hit hardest by gender injustices.

The goal of NCA's gender-based violence (GBV) program is for women and girls to live empowered lives free from GBV. This report tells you about the efforts NCA and our partners make to prevent, alleviate, change. Transforming harmful norms and engaging religious actors. Combating child, early and forced marriage. Offering tools and services for prevention and recovery.

Change is possible



Dagfinn Høybråten
Secretary General
Norwegian Church Aid



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1. A LIFE FREE FROM GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

After decades of working against gendered injustices, NCA is deeply concerned about the recent **rise in gender-based violence**. We currently witness an international backlash against women's human rights¹, especially their Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), coupled with increased socio-economic inequalities² and the continued use of sexual violence as a weapon³ of war.

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most widespread, persistent, and grave human rights violations. There is a strong indication that COVID-19 lockdowns increased its prevalence, to such an extent that ACT Alliance and UN leaders called GBV the shadow pandemic.⁴ Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) also affect many women and girls, with alarming prevalence rates. Every year, 3 million girl children are at risk of female genital mutilation.⁵ Twenty per cent of women are married before 18, often through forced marriage, exposing them to physical and emotional abuse, and early pregnancy.⁶

With emergencies caused by war, conflict or natural disasters on the increase, the risk of gender-based violence increases as vulnerable girls are often left behind in humanitarian response, whilst norms and social systems are weakened or broken.

The risk that a girl will experience violence just because she is a girl is substantial. UN Women has estimated that one in three girls will experience gender-based violence in her lifetime.⁷

Gender-based violence can take many forms. It can be **physical, psychological, sexual, or emotional**. It includes threats and coercion. In situations of war or conflict when people are forced to be on the move and norms break down, the risk of gender-based violence increases.⁸

Such violence can have short-term and long-term effects on the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of the person. In this report, those who have experienced gender-based violence will be described as "survivors" rather than "victims". This is a deliberate choice. The term "survivor" emphasizes that most people who survive gender-based violence have found their way out of violence by using their own resources, strength and will, created their own support network, and used their own agency.

While the digital era brings potential for economic empowerment and access to information, the internet has also become a breeding ground for violence against women and girls. Those experiencing cyber-bullying or violence can suffer physical, sexual, psychological or economic consequences, and it poses a severe threat to women's participation in the public sphere.

Norwegian Church Aid works with gender-based violence in close to 20 countries. Our goal is for women and girls to live empowered lives free from gender-based violence. The work of NCA reflects our obligation to promote and protect the rights of women and girls in all their diversity to live their lives free from violence and discrimination, with psychosocial well-being, and control over their sexual and reproductive health. To achieve this, NCA works with relevant actors, including governments and religious actors to advocate for enactment and implementation of legislation that ensures women's and girls' rights and protects them from all forms of violence. Our sister organizations in ACT Alliance and other national and regional partners are important allies in this work.

NCA also works towards the **economic empowerment** of women and girls, supporting them to strengthen their individual and collective resources and capacities, and promoting their

1 OHCHR (2020) *Gender equality and gender backlash*. Accessed from: [Gender equality and gender backlash | OHCHR](#)

2 United Nations. *Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries*. Accessed from: [Reduce inequality within and among countries - United Nations Sustainable Development](#)

3 Office of the special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict (2023) *Conflict-related sexual violence*. Accessed from: [SG-REPORT-2023SPREAD-1.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

4 UN Women. *The shadow pandemic: Violence against women during Covid-19*. Accessed from: [The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19 | UN Women – Headquarters](#)

5 World Health Organization, *Female genital mutilation*. Accessed from: [Female genital mutilation \(who.int\)](#)

6 Unicef (2023) *Sustaining the Gains in the Polycrisis Era. Annual report 2022*. Accessed from: [2022 Annual Report.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#)

7 UNWomen. *Facts and figures: Ending violence against women*. Accessed from: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures#83920>

8 Office of the special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict (2023) *Conflict-related sexual violence*. Accessed from: [SG-REPORT-2023SPREAD-1.pdf \(un.org\)](#)



Subeta Moors is a police officer in Zambia, working closely with victims of GBV. Here she is talking to a father, whose daughter has been raped.

participation and decision-making opportunities. When the economic empowerment of women is integrated in a GBV prevention program, it is possible to handle the complexities between GBV and women's economic empowerment in a way that contributes to a reduced vulnerability to GBV. A focus on changing harmful norms is central to a do-no-harm approach to the economic empowerment of women and girls in all their diversity.

NCA works with women, girls, boys and men to transform dominant norms that allow violence to continue. Transforming norms is a challenging task and we work to mobilize faith actors, local politicians, community leaders, and other influential people in the community. Women groups in the community, rights activists, are key in reaching community leaders and promote awareness of the detrimental effects of gender-based violence on communities, families, children, and women alike.

We work to provide survivors of violence with life-saving assistance and services that can enable them to heal and build back their resilience and strength to go on with their lives and live a life free of violence. Survivors of violence are supported to build their self-esteem and realise their rights.

Women are particularly vulnerable during pregnancy and birth. In many communities in which we work, adolescent girls are at risk of child, early or forced marriage (CEFM). Such early marriages come with the risk of giving birth at young age, and enduring multiple pregnancies in adolescence when their bodies are not fully developed.

After reductions in **maternal mortality** from 2005 to 2015 gave us hope for the future, we have not seen a similar reduction during the subsequent five years. On the contrary, at the current trajectory, an additional one million maternal deaths will occur before 2030. Most of these deaths are preventable and happen in low or middle-income countries.⁹

NCA aims to reduce maternal mortality and empower women through comprehensive sexuality education and family planning, and through working with nurses and traditional birth attendants on safer births. We also work to hold governments accountable to the SDG targets and to improve national health systems so maternal mortality can be reduced.

On our own we will not succeed in our struggle against gendered injustices and gender-based violence. It is time to stand together for the rights of girls and women worldwide.

⁹ World Health Organization (2023) *Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2020*. Accessed from: [Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2020: estimates by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UNDESA/Population Division](https://www.who.int/data/stories/maternal-mortality-2000-2020)

2. TRANSFORMING HARMFUL NORMS AND ENGAGING RELIGIOUS ACTORS

Harmful practices are persistent practices and forms of behavior that are grounded in discrimination on the basis of, among other things, sex, gender and age, in addition to multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering¹⁰.

Harmful practices are a violation of human rights according to the UN Office of Human Rights.¹¹

Harmful practices endanger women's and adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and rights, often interferes with their education and put women and girls at risk of violence. For example, **female genital mutilation (FGM)** is a leading cause of death in many countries. A new study published by the National Library of Medicine estimated that over 44,000 additional women and young girls dying each year in countries where it is practiced.¹²

FGM legislation remains inadequate or ambiguous in five of the 29 countries where it is most practiced.¹³ The challenge is tremendous. Over 200 million women and girls have been subjected to FGM in the world and live with its consequences for the health and well-being.¹⁴

29 Countries where FGM is most practiced:

Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote D'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Togo and Yemen.

Source: UNICEF¹⁵

Work is underway to make FGM illegal in Mali, Malawi, Chad, Sierra Leone and Liberia. In communities where FGM has broad support, this important legislative reform work must be supported by attempts to make a cultural change. To achieve the critical mass needed for communities to alter deep-seated practices, community-based organizations and religious actors with their local and global alliances are needed to press for the necessary change. Norwegian Church Aid works to contribute to such changes by facilitating community dialogues.



Sinke Gorfe did not want her daughter to be subjected to FGM after talking to NCA's partner and priest in Ethiopia.

Other dominant norms that are harmful to women and girls include norms promoting child, early and forced marriages, and norms stigmatizing GBV survivors. Norms negative to sexual and reproductive education in schools deny girls and boys knowledge of their own bodies and deprive them of the empowerment to establish their own boundaries and recognize abusers or to make healthy choices when they are in their adolescence. NCA works with communities, duty bearers and community leaders to challenge and transform such harmful norms.

10 General Comment 31, CEDAW Committee, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/TBSearch.aspx?Lang=en&TreatyID=3&DocTypeID=11

11 OHCHR (2020) *Harmful practices*. Accessed from: [INFO Harm Pract WEB.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](https://www.ohchr.org/en/information-page/press-releases/2020/09/092020-harmful-practices)

12 National Library of Medicine (2023) *Estimating excess mortality due to female genital mutilation*. Accessed from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10432559/>

13 Unicef (2024) *Female genital mutilation*. Accessed from: [Female Genital Mutilation \(FGM\) Statistics - UNICEF Data](https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/)

14 Ibid

15 Unicef (2024) *Female genital mutilation*. Accessed from: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>



NCA employee Nizar Seleman Utanga in Tanzania talks on radio about the global campaign Period with Dignity.

A collaborative advantage

Religion plays a part in most societies – it shapes, and is shaped by, political, social, cultural and economic processes. Thus, **religious actors** of all denominations often have a great influence on their communities – for better and for worse.

In the context of gender-based violence religious actors can perpetuate damaging ideas and practices, such as the ostracism of victims of rape or promotion of female genital mutilation.

On the other hand, religious actors across the world also play a crucial role in the response to and prevention of gender-based violence. They have the potential to foster change by transforming harmful norms and bring other perspectives to bear on traditional practices that are harmful to women and children. Religious actors can promote reconciliation and peace and be allies as communities seek to re-integrate survivors of gender-based violence, especially after war or conflict.

As a faith-based organization, Norwegian Church Aid is uniquely positioned to engage religious leaders and women and men of faith in efforts to assist survivors as well as build resilience against future abuse.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a leading cause of death in many countries.

It often takes lobbying on many levels to achieve results. It is not just a question of engaging the most liberal of religious actors. Often it is also about challenging the position of religious actors who are against changing norms. Even a small concession to change a harmful

practice, tradition or cultural inclination can be of great importance.

Working with faith actors to transform harmful norms in Malawi

Despite the outlawing of child marriages in Malawi's Parliament in 2015, the prevalence of under-age marriages remains a pressing issue. According to the Malawi Demographic Health Survey 2016, nearly half of all girls in the country are married by the age of 18, with a third of those aged 15–19



As religious leaders in Malawi's Nsanje District, representing both Islam and Christianity, were known to contribute to illegal under-age marriages, NCA worked with them using our new methodology.

already experiencing childbearing, contributing to a significant number of pregnancies. Malawi, being a predominantly religious country, relies heavily on the teachings and sentiments of faith leaders, who hold significant authority in their communities.

Faith Actors Motivating Empowerment (FAME). NCA organized a joint reflection with religious leaders in Malawi to jointly reflect on holy texts and religious traditions in the light of child marriage and its negative consequences, and to encourage the religious leaders to become agents of change in the fight against child marriages. Up until then, some religious leaders had been known to contribute to the harmful practice of child marriage by marrying children under 18 years.

The results of this joint reflection and training, was highlighted during an inter-faith leaders' dialogue meeting held in Mlolo in 2023, where faith leaders gathered to share best practices for eliminating early child marriages and gender-based violence (GBV) by drawing on scriptures from the holy Qur'an and Bible. "The two are inseparable as the Qur'an advocates for respect for the law, protection of girls, and women from sexual abuse, including early child marriages," the sheikh from the geographically isolated Makhanga Mosque emphasized.

Since acquiring knowledge in child protection and GBV, the sheikh added, "Islamic leaders have been keen on mainstreaming anti-early child marriage messages in their teachings across various groups such as madrassah and dawah." The major leading the Salvation Army in the East Bank also stressed the significance of religious teachings in the fight against child marriages. "Since I attended training on ending child marriages and GBV organized by NCA/DCA, I have taken advantage of every religious and social gathering to denounce the growing tendency of marrying off under-age girls, which is against Christian values," she said. The major's efforts have had a multiplier effect among faith communities in the district.

Norm change – also in humanitarian programming While **norm change** programming is a long-term process, mainly focused on development initiatives, norms come under pressure during conflicts and when people are forcibly displaced. In humanitarian settings, we know that GBV increases, and NCA therefore also focuses on norms and their impact when we design our humanitarian interventions and programmes. In chapter 4 we delve further into Norwegian Church Aid's work on gender-based violence in situations of conflict and disasters.



Sherily Maria in Guatemala, experienced GBV, but got psycho-social help from NCA. She also learned how to sew and has made the blouse herself. Here she is with her one year old daughter.

3. ENDING CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) spans across countries, religions, and cultures. It disproportionately affects girls and women in both numbers and consequences such as early pregnancy, death during childbirth and interrupted education. Worldwide, more than 650 million women alive today were married as children, compared to 115 million men. Currently, 12 million girls under the age of 18 are married worldwide each year, according to UNICEF.¹⁶

Child, early and forced marriage is a harmful practice, linked to several norms, many of them rooted in gender inequality, and often accelerated during times of conflict.¹⁷

Increases in the prevalence of child, early and forced marriage is in fact often a by-product of conflict. An exasperated situation too often leads to negative coping mechanisms. Faced with a breakdown of the rule of law and the social fabric of communities, displacement and insecurity, parents can resort to marrying off a young daughter to be able to fend for the rest of the family or as a means of protecting girls from the increased risk of sexual violence.

9 of the 10 countries with the highest child marriage rates are either fragile or extremely fragile states.

Child, early and forced marriage can also be integral to warfare itself. In Iraq, for instance, ISIS forced many of the Yazidi girls and women they abducted to marry their fighters, as part of the strategy to destroy the religious minority. In countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Sudan and Syria, armed

¹⁶ Unicef (2024) *Child marriage*. Accessed from: [Child marriage - UNICEF DATA](#)

¹⁷ ICRC (2019) *Child marriage in armed conflict*. Accessed from: [Child marriage in armed conflict | International Review of the Red Cross \(icrc.org\)](#)



This Yezidi woman participated in a program in the Lalish temple where religious leaders contributed to a community reintegration process for women who have survived and managed to flee from IS enslavement.

groups and militias have also systematically used forced marriage as a weapon of war.

Despite its link with war and conflict, child, early and forced marriage is a less-studied form of gender-based violence during or as a result of armed conflict and is still rarely considered a priority in humanitarian settings.¹⁸

The Harmful Impacts

Child marriage deprives children of exercising their rights enshrined under international law. This includes education, as child marriage often means the end of education for girls, denying their opportunity for personal development, preparation for adulthood, and their ability to contribute to the family and community. It also increases the risk of being subjected to violence, including marital rape. Health consequences include complications when girls are pressurized to become pregnant soon after marriage when their bodies are too young for safe pregnancy and birth. Unwanted separation from family and friends can also result in social isolation.¹⁹

Delaying marriage until after the age of 18 has significant positive effects, for the girl, her family and community²⁰. This includes economic benefits, increased physical and emotional wellbeing, greater opportunity to fulfil aspirations, opportunity to develop managerial and leadership capacities and ability to contribute to the wellbeing of the family and society.

18 Ibid

19 UNFPA. *Child marriage*. Accessed from: [Child marriage \(unfpa.org\)](https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage)

20 Girls not brides (2017) *The case for a minimum age of marriage of 18*. Accessed from: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/709/Why-a-minimum-age-of-marriage-of-18.pdf>



She had just become a teenager when she was forcibly married to a man her parents had found. Then the war in South Sudan came. Mary Abui (18) has had a rougher start to adolescence than most. "I was only 13 when I had to get married. My parents couldn't afford to keep me at home, so marriage was the solution."

Male allies against child, early and forced marriage – an example from South Sudan

"I would be unhappily married to a 42-year-old if not for the positive and effective intervention of one of the male role models in Eastern Bank. I don't know what would have become of me!"

At 16, Mary was heavily pressurized by her father to marry a 42-year-old man. She was beaten by her family and nearly gave up resisting the marriage. Mary had a great desire to complete her secondary-level education and further her studies to support her vulnerable family and the entire community at large. Therefore, hearing that her father had arranged a marriage to a much older man was devastating to her as she knew that it would end her well-desired dreams. Mary pleaded with her father countless times so that he could change his mind, but all to no avail.

Mary's father even went to the extent of stopping her from going to school, saying that it was just a waste of time and money since she would soon go to her husband's home. At this point in time Mark, one of the male role models trained by NCA, passed by their house and found her cousins beating her brutally. When he understood this was about a planned child marriage, Mark spoke to Mary's father and told him it was wrong to force a young girl who was not yet 18 to marry. He advised Mary's father about the negative impacts of early/ forced marriage, told him that forced/ early marriage is legally punishable and that whereas the dowry would get finished, the misery he would have put Mary in would last for a lifetime.

In the end Mary's father understood that girls are not just a source of wealth/dowry but can be of great support and impact in the future if allowed to finish their studies and agreed to call off the forced marriage.

Vulnerability increases in conflict

In June 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a **resolution** properly recognizing the need to address child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian contexts for the first time. It was high time, as crises such as war and conflict increase the risk for CEFM and vulnerable girls are often overlooked in humanitarian response. In fact, the Human Rights Council stated that 9 of the 10 countries with the highest child marriage rates are either fragile or extremely fragile states.²¹ As child marriage rates increase during emergencies, FGM rates also tend to rise in geographic locations where FGM is widely practiced.

While child, early and forced marriage is a complex issue caused by many different factors, the root cause across all cultures and contexts is **gender inequality**.²²

Additional drivers of child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian crises and fragile settings include social and cultural norms, lack of awareness, weak government systems, economic hardship and limited access to education. Drivers that exist in societies prior to war and conflict but are exacerbated by the crisis.²³

It is important to address these drivers in times of peace, as well as responding to consequences during times of conflict.

NCA's approach to child, early and forced marriage

The 2017 resolution from the Human Rights Council urges states to ensure access to protection, health and education services for girls who have been forced to flee, or who are unaccompanied or separated – including protection from and response to the practice of child, early and forced marriage.²⁴

In our approach to child, early and forced marriage, Norwegian Church Aid focuses on several of these elements: **protection, response, and tailored case management** for those who are already in an early or forced marriage or union.

Our holistic tool ENGAGE²⁵ includes community

outreach activities where the goal is to prevent child marriage from happening in the future. The activities seek to achieve this goal by changing the social norms that enable child marriage to occur. The community outreach activities target male and female caregivers, teachers, religious leaders and community members. Social norms have been shown to be a powerful predictor of people's choices and actions. CEFM is not always a social norm itself, however it is enabled by social norms that uphold gender inequality and narrow ideas about how men and women should behave and what role they play in society. Community outreach activities that seek to change social norms must work with those who are most influential in dictating social norms, such as community and religious leaders, and include deliberate strategies to diffuse norm change from participants to the broader community.

Second, we aim to respond by providing adolescent girls who are at imminent risk, already married, widowed, and divorced life skills training in order to build assets, create awareness and promote positive coping mechanisms. Life skills for adolescent boys are also facilitated, seeking to shift attitudes and behavior while encouraging gender equality. Following this, adolescent girls that are identified to need further psychosocial support are referred to focused care sessions. Case management services and referrals to specialized services for girls who are seeking additional support are available throughout this process.

21 Girls Not Brides (2017) *Human Rights Council adopts 2017 resolution to end child marriage in humanitarian settings*. Accessed from: [Human Rights Council adopts 2017 resolution to end child marriage in humanitarian settings - Girls Not Brides](#)

22 Unicef (2024) *Child marriage*. Accessed from: [Child marriage - UNICEF DATA](#)

23 Unicef (2021) *Addressing child marriage in humanitarian settings*. Accessed from: [Child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-technical-guide-2021.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#)

24 Girls Not Brides (2017) *Human Rights Council adopts 2017 resolution to end child marriage in humanitarian settings*. Accessed from: [Human Rights Council adopts 2017 resolution to end child marriage in humanitarian settings - Girls Not Brides](#)

25 Enhancing Girls' Agency and Gender Equality, NCA. <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/en/how-we-work/gender-based-violence/gender-based-violence/?id=1646657104391#stop9>

Engaging care-givers against child marriage – an example from Somalia

Leila is a passionate caregiver whose life took an unexpected turn during a time of conflict. Forced to leave her home, Leila sought refuge in Luuq, Taleh IDP camp in Somalia, with her family.

As part of ENGAGE's prevention strategy, Leila was invited to participate in the community outreach activities and attend the female caregiver sessions held by NCA, whilst her adolescent daughter participated in adolescent girls' life skills sessions as part of the response/service delivery activities.



The female caregiver sessions include 22 sessions which aim to raise awareness of the harmful impacts of CEFM and encourage caregivers to value and support alternatives to CEFM, promote gender equality and challenge harmful gender norms. One of the sessions which Leila was most interested in was on Household Decision Making whereby she gained insights into how healthy relationships involve joint decision-making. During this session, caregivers explored the benefits of long-term planning and decision-making, with a specific focus on financial choices linked to child marriage prevention. Equipped with this knowledge, Leila not only learned to make informed decisions within her family but also actively contributed to fostering healthier decision-making patterns within her community.

The ENGAGE Toolkit transformed Leila's perspective, empowering her to fight against child, early, and forced marriage. She became a key advocate within her community, emphasizing the importance of thoughtful decision-making in preventing harmful practices.

Expressing her gratitude, Leila says, "NCA's ENGAGE Toolkit opened my eyes to the significance of making decisions together. The topic of household decision-making, in particular, taught me the benefits of long-term planning, especially in preventing child marriage. I'm proud to contribute to a community that values informed decision-making, ensuring a safer and brighter future for our daughters."

Leila's story illustrates the life-changing impact of education, demonstrating how caregivers equipped with knowledge from the ENGAGE Toolkit can play an important role in creating communities free of harmful practices.



Don't be fooled by the name "Girl Shine" in Burkina Faso. It's not about girls shining with beauty, but about confronting everything that is silenced. Like menstruation, child marriage, early pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. Leading it all is the tough Yaro Assima Bintou.

4. TOOLS AND SERVICES FOR PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

Empowered women and girls take control over their lives: set their own agendas, gain skills, solve problems, claim rights, and develop self-reliance. Norwegian Church Aid aims to contribute to empowerment by helping women and girls build self-esteem, learn about healthy relationships and human rights, and develop skills for communication and long-term planning. We do this to contribute to resilience in the face of harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation (FGM). Empowerment also strengthens girls' and women's ability to pursue their goals in life, and their abilities to protect themselves against sexual exploitation and abuse.

Norwegian Church Aid uses a number of methods and toolkits to work with individuals, communities and faith actors to facilitate empowerment, resilience and the prevention of gender-based violence and recovery for survivors of GBV and their communities. The toolkits include the already mentioned ENGAGE and also SASA, EMAP and EASE. Another important tool is comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) for both boys and girls. NCA also works with **men and boys** to promote positive masculinities and advance gender



Young woman with painted mask, Iraq 2018. Through art, women express what they find too hard to put into words.



The family of eight lives in a run-down basement for the ninth year since fleeing the war in Syria to Lebanon. Eight-month-old Mohamad faces all odds. As we enter the run-down building, we start climbing the stairs, but are quickly asked to turn around and go downstairs instead. Down and down. Past garbage rooms, storage rooms, and closer and closer to the smell of the basement.

equality. In addition, NCA engages young men and boys as agents of change, to adopt roles – for example as supportive husbands, fathers-to-be, brothers – that are supportive of women and girls, working with them to understand girls’ rights, their own role, and alternative non-violent and supportive pathways.

We involve girls in designing interventions, engage the most vulnerable girls, and empower girls to guide their own lives.

Life-saving and specialized services

Survivors of gender-based violence may also need assistance. NCA supports women and girls to build and strengthen their social networks and capacities through life skills training and psycho-social support at safe spaces. We use a multi-sectoral approach for services to survivors of gender-based violence, particularly focusing on health, psycho-social support and case management.

All services adhere to the **survivor-centred approach** that ensures confidentiality, safety, non-discrimination, and respect for GBV survivors, and those at risk of violence.

NCA also works with men and boys to promote positive masculinities and advance gender equality.

To deliver services on health, psycho-social support and case management, Norwegian Church Aid uses two main approaches – the development of **Safe Spaces and One-Stop Centres**.

Safe spaces

By creating safe, community-based centres where women and girls can assemble and seek fellowship and assistance, services can safely reach survivors. Women and Girls Safe Spaces are critical spaces where women and girls can be free from harm and harassment, access services and reduce isolation, and where opportunities are created for women and girls to exercise their rights and promote their own safety.

Psycho-social support at a safe centre in Idlib – an example from Syria

In rural Idlib, between Damascus and Aleppo, in a village ruined by war and the subsequent looting we meet 22 women gathered in a community centre. They discuss children and communication, dialogue and conflict resolution within the family. *"I am stressed, and when I am under too much stress, I hit my son"*, admits one woman. They discuss children's feelings and self-confidence and how to break the cycle of violence.



MHPSS session på GOPA sitt Family-support center i Tabbaleh i Damaskus Syria

The group is having a psycho-social session with a social worker named Marah from one of the national partners of Norwegian Church Aid. Like the women in the group, Marah has recently returned to live in Khan Sheykhun, and been trained by NCA and our partner to facilitate psycho-social sessions.

The psycho-social sessions are open to any woman in the village, and it is the first entry point to the centre that seek to also offer case management and services to the most vulnerable, such as women, girls or boys who are survivors of violence or still live with domestic violence and abuse. Meeting and building relations in the community is a strategy for strengthening people's resilience.

"We need places to meet, like this one", says Noha. *"This centre is the only place to go to meet other women, to talk to others, I am alone most of the time with my children"*, she adds. The women explain that the village is in ruins, the streets are dark in the nights, and many households are female-led.

The women talk about chronic diseases and lack of medicine, one puts forward her leg – she has a war injury. And she is not the only one. Many have children with war injuries which need medical attention.

The conversation changes and the women start sharing their dreams for the future. The injured woman, Kafan, shares her dream of taking up her old livelihood: *"I dream of having my sewing machine back. Everything in my house is broken from the war. I used to sew for people."*

Another woman has recently returned with her children from Lebanon, and enthusiastically shares her dreams for the village with the group: *"We don't have a village hall for celebrations, it is too far and too expensive to travel to Hama to arrange a wedding. And we need to renovate the wells, its dry and our trees need water to start growing again"*, she says eagerly with the other women nodding. *"My dream would be to make a business and establish a wedding hall for rental"*, and she smiles at her own ambition.

Her dream might seem impossible, with the acute lack of cash, lack of health services, lack of transport to health centres and rising prices. But the women also talk of neighbours helping each other, sharing food, giving someone a lift in a car when they need to travel to a city. And with each meeting in the centre new bonds between the women are formed, stronger networks, for the women in the village to rebuild their lives and create a supportive community.

One-Stop Centres

One-Stop Centres for healing and learning have become central to NCA's response to gender-based violence in many countries. A One-Stop Centre gives access to holistic services (health, psychosocial support, legal and police services, as well as income-generating activities) to survivors under one roof and free of charge. It is often

connected to an existing health facility. Where services cannot be provided under one roof, there has been a coordinated multi-sectoral approach with identified partners providing specific services in a coordinated manner.

Accessing comprehensive services, improving lives – an example from Zambia

In Zambia, NCA chose the One-Stop Centre approach as this methodology is well-grounded within the Zambian Ministry of Health. Staff were seconded from the Zambian public health sector and there was close cooperation throughout the implementation of the programme. Knowing NCA's contribution would be time-bound, this was a sustainable model that would ensure continuity after the programme ended.

"In my interaction with the adolescents and children from the school safe clubs, I couldn't tell if they're pupils or social workers. These young people are so knowledgeable on issues of SGBV, Natwampane has done a great job teaching them." Marta Palmarola Adrados, Attaché – Manager SGBV, Health, Nutrition and Social Protection Sectors, delegation of the EU to Zambia.

The 12 One-Stop Centres NCA has supported in Luapula province have assisted more than 29 000 survivors to access comprehensive services and improve their lives. The centres have contributed to the launch of customized women-friendly by-laws in 39 chiefdoms in Luapula province. Over 300 000 in-school children and youths have been engaged on GBV and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) through the school Student Alliance for Equity (SAfE) Clubs. More than 800 000 citizens have been reached through our various outreach programmes with traditional leaders, faith leaders and the Community Action Groups, and the centres have engaged and worked with 349 faith leaders and 312 traditional leaders. The One-Stop Centres are transitioning to the government of Zambia and will continue operating.



"When we started at this center, everything was so emotional and difficult. I couldn't stop crying, but that has changed. Now I see how people can have a good life after being with us," says Ruth Nayamg, coordinator of the crisis center in Samfya in Zambia.



Heavily pregnant and terrified, mother of two, Bridget, was threatened on her life by her husband in Zambia. A message on the radio became her salvation.

Dismantling stigma, addressing taboos – Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Children and young people are at an increased risk of abuse, violence, and exploitation if they are not aware of their own bodies and rights. Additionally, it can be frightening and challenging when their bodies are undergoing changes. Therefore, it is important for trustworthy adults to discuss sexuality with children and young people. We observe that when children acquire a vocabulary that allows them to talk about sexuality and boundaries, it can serve as a preventive measure against abuse.

We need effective tools when discussing sexuality with children and adolescents. NCA's **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)** toolkit is designed for the age group of 9-18 years, and the goals for teaching and tasks are divided into three age segments (9-12, 12-15, and 15-18). Facilitators are encouraged to become familiar with their own national and local context and values so that they can be aware of the legal frameworks in their country and clarify their own thoughts, understanding the values they want to convey.



As a faith-based organization, it is important for us to have a tool that focuses on rights, equality, and facts, as well as on values, relationships, and attitudes. Children and young people are invited to reflect together with trusted adults in their lives, adults whom they can rely on for good advice when making important life decisions. Norwegian Church Aid aims to equip CSE facilitators from our partner organizations to be thoughtful, responsible adults when interacting with children and young people.

We emphasize that discussions should be tailored to the age and maturity of children and adolescents, contributing to protecting them from violence, exploitation, unwanted pregnancies, and risky relationships. Youth are trained to make good decisions, encouraged to pause, assess the situation, consider alternatives, and then make a conscious choice before acting.

International experiences and research, along with our own experiences in Norway, indicate that Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is effective. Children and young people who have received CSE appear to engage in sexual activity later and practice safer sexual relationships. CSE

increases knowledge and improves attitudes toward sexual and reproductive health and behavior.²⁶

Focusing solely on abstinence from sex without complementing it with discussions about the importance of completing education, avoiding child marriages, and attempting to secure income for youth does not achieve the desired results. CSE programs that combine a focus on delaying sexual activity with attitudes, values, and other approaches (education, income, family discussions) have proven to be more effective in terms of changing attitudes and practices among youth.²⁷

To ensure access to CSE becomes a reality for all, innovative methodologies and collaborations are paramount. Faith actors are critical stakeholders, who have a normative and real-life influence on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Faith actors can both positively and negatively influence the uptake, acceptability, and accessibility of preventive measures, education, and services. Education and health care systems around the world are sustained and delivered by faith communities in many parts of the world. In many communities, engaging faith actors is paramount for access and acceptability.

Adolescents learning and growing - an example from Nigeria

In Pulka and Monguno of Borno state, we used the NCA CSE Curriculum with adolescents and their parents. The adolescent groups were age-segregated, with one group from 10-14 years, and another from 15-19 years.

The sessions are for both boys and girls. 6 week cycles were provided, with sessions held twice a week. 40 adolescent boys and 40 adolescent girls attended each cycle. We engaged out-of-school adolescents, whom are many in these locations as most residents are IDP's.

Before commencing the sessions with the adolescent participants, we engaged in sessions with their parents and caregivers to build trust and understanding. These strategies helped to implement the sessions successfully.

In 2023 we reached 861 adolescents through the program.

Participants expressed appreciation with regards to what they had learnt:

"We thank NCA for showing concern towards our adolescent boys and girls as we all know such an age range is a challenging period for them, we have seen a drastic change in our adolescent boys' and girls' behaviors in our homes and community. We appreciate NCA God bless thank you". Maryam, parent participant.

"The CSE program was helpful because now I have more knowledge about my body changes and development, I am now aware of sexual health risks and ways to prevent it. I want to be a doctor and I have learned how to set my goal, have a mentor to follow his steps, and have very effective communication with our parents. I am thankful to NCA for this great opportunity I appreciate". Victoria, adolescent participant.

26 UNESCO (2023) *Comprehensive sexuality education: For healthy, informed and empowered learners*. Accessed from: [Comprehensive sexuality education: For healthy, informed and empowered learners | UNESCO](#)

27 Ibid



Internally displaced women in Burkina Faso. Proper latrines can prevent gender-based violence.

A cross-cutting commitment to gender justice

Women's rights and gender equality is a cross-cutting commitment in Norwegian Church Aid's work. Elements of protecting people from gender-based violence are therefore **included in other NCA programs**, like water, sanitation and hygiene programs and in peacebuilding.

In peacebuilding, Norwegian Church Aid's approach to community-based social cohesion overlaps with community-based psychosocial support programming, through restoring trust, collaboration, and inclusion in divided communities. As psychosocial support is offered, experiences of gender-based violence may transpire and require referral and follow-up by specialized services.

Another important approach to addressing gender-based violence in Norwegian Church Aid's work for peacebuilding is to work for the implementation of Security Resolution 1325.²⁸ In chapter six NCA's approach to this is further described, and below is an example of integrated GBV prevention programming from our water, sanitation and hygiene program.

Protecting women on the move through access to safe sanitation

Norwegian Church Aid works to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, is also done by creating access to safe sanitation facilities (latrines and bathing shelters) in camps and informal settlements for internally displaced people (IDP's) and refugees.

There are more than 110 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world.²⁹ Practicing open defecation in the bush, bathing at the river or collecting wood for cooking away from home are common practices for women and girls in situations of displacement, and this exposes them to the risk of gender-based violence.

In Burkina Faso, IDPs fleeing the sectarian violence have ended up in Pouna village where facilities are scarce. Norwegian Church Aid has built nine female friendly latrines, with locks. Women now report that they feel safer using them. Since 2020, Norwegian Church Aid has assisted the displaced population of Burkina Faso with water, sanitation and hygiene services.

²⁸ UN Security Council (2000) *Resolution 1325 (2000)*. Accessed from: [Resolution 1325 \(unscr.com\)](https://www.un.org/press/en/2000/2000091325.shtml)
²⁹ UNHCR (2023) *Refugee data finder*. Accessed from: [unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/)



Anna Uypkan gives her three-week-old son Markus a loving kiss. "Markus was born on a bus in Moldova", she told NCA staff visiting her shelter.

5. LIFTING THE VEIL OF SILENCE -GBV IN TIMES OF CONFLICT AND DISASTERS

Peace is the very foundation for a life in dignity with safety and well-being. Without peace all other Sustainable Development Goals are hard to achieve, including freedom from gender-based violence. Already, at the beginning of 2023, the UN reported that the number of violent conflicts in the world was the highest since World War II³⁰, and that the world was marked by a pervasive sense of insecurity. The number of forcibly displaced people was record-high in 2023, and approximately one quarter of the world's population lives in areas affected by violent conflict³¹.

When natural disasters or war and conflict disrupt societies, norms and institutions break down. Families and networks break up and scatter in new locations. People lose their incomes and access to basic services. Health institutions lose staff and supplies. Law enforcement might disappear and be replaced by armed groups or criminal gangs.

The Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual

violence annual report featured statistics from 18 countries in 2023³². The report documents UN-verified cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence. Although the report does not attempt to provide a full picture of global prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence, it does document a rise in non-constitutional government takeovers that disproportionately affect civilians, and it also points to a more complex picture where non-state actors including "commercial actors" are involved in government take-overs and conflicts. This complicates working for accountability and an end to impunity for sexual violence.

When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine took place in February 2022, UNFPA estimated that 265 000 women were pregnant, and 80 000 women were expected to give birth within the next few months³³. According to the United Nations Population Fund, more than 500 women die in pregnancy or childbirth every day in humanitarian and fragile settings. UNFPA reports that preventable maternal deaths and newborn deaths in humanitarian

30 United Nations (2023) *Press release*, Accessed from: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm>

31 Ibid

32 Office of the special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict (2023) *Conflict-related sexual violence*. Accessed from: [SG-REPORT-2023SPREAD-1.pdf \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/press/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm)

33 UNFPA (2022) *Australia provides UNFPA AUD 8 million to protect Ukrainian women and girls from gender-based violence*, Accessed from: <https://www.unfpa.org/updates/australia-provides-unfpa-aud-8-million-protect-ukrainian-women-and-girls-gender-based>

settings are not decreasing but increasing. These needs are often overlooked, with potentially life-threatening consequences. They estimate that 2/3 of maternal mortality and 50% of newborn mortality is taking place in countries affected by conflict or natural disaster.³⁴

Neglect of women's rights during crisis put millions of women and girls at risk of gender-based violence, trauma, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and lack of access to services.

Women, Peace and Security

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted **resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security**³⁵, addressing the impact of war and conflict on women and girls and emphasizing the need for protection against sexual violence in war and conflict more firmly than ever before. It also addressed the importance of participation of women to build peace and end conflict and for relief and recovery to be tailored to include the needs of women and girls.

Between 2008 and 2019, a further series of resolutions have anchored the issue of prevention on the Security Council agenda – demanding zero tolerance and credible consequences for conflict-related sexual violence.

“Cumulatively, they represent a political commitment to lift the veil of silence,” Pramila Patten³⁶ states in the foreword to a recent initiative from her office: Framework for the prevention of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence³⁷, launched in September 2022 – which is basically a handbook on prevention.

Equally, when the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1820 in 2008, which states “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide³⁸,” the press reported that rape was finally being recognized as a war crime and a threat to peace and stability³⁹.

While there is increased visibility in media and voices of survivors telling their stories from war and conflicts around the world, not enough is done



Friendship and peace hand in hand in Malakal in South Sudan, bringing young people together to fight conflicts.

**RAPE as a weapon in war
and conflict must end!**



to end **impunity for sexual violence in war and conflict.**

For all the above reasons, humanitarian interventions must be tailored to the rights and needs of women and girls, and other persons vulnerable to gender-based violence.

34 UNFPA (2020) *Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for SRH in Crisis Situations*, Accessed from: <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/minimum-initial-service-package-misp-srh-crisis-situations>

35 UN Security Council (2000) *Resolution 1325 (2000)*. Accessed from: [Resolution 1325 \(unscr.com\)](https://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/0009/000903.html)

36 Pramila Patten is the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. Read her profile here: [Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict | United Nations Secretary-General](https://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/1409/140903.html)

37 United Nations (2022) *Framework for the prevention of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*, Accessed from: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/auto-draft/202209-CRSV-Prevention-Framework.pdf>

38 United Nations Security Council (2008) *UNSC Resolution 1820 (2008)*, Accessed from: <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/content/united-nations-security-council-resolution-1820-2008-sres18202008>

39 Women's media Center (2016) *When rape became a war crime (hint: It's not when you think)*, Accessed from: <https://womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/when-rape-became-a-war-crime-hint-its-not-when-you-think1>

Partnering with a specialized health care facility – an example from DRC

Gynecological surgeon Denis Mukwege is the world's leading specialist in the treatment of wartime sexual violence. In 2018, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize alongside ISIS survivor Nadia Murad.

For almost 30 years, Norwegian Church Aid has supported the Panzi hospital in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Mukwege treats the often horrific physical injuries inflicted on women, children and even toddlers by conflict-related sexual violence.

Panzi hospital offers holistic assistance that includes mental healthcare and assisting survivors in rebuilding their lives in dignity by helping them gain economic independence and obtain legal aid.

Mukwege is also an ardent human rights activist, who for two decades has lived and worked under constant death threats. He believes that challenging misogyny in peacetime is paramount, in order to fortify society in moments of conflict. The first things to confront are silence and shame used to keep women under control of men.



Dr Denis Mukwege and NCA general secretary Dagfinn Høybråten in DRC, 2019.

The tip of the iceberg

Women and girls who are raped as part of the warfare, not only need to deal with the trauma. Many also find themselves pregnant. Although the UN normative framework clearly states that it is a right, abortion is a highly politicized issue, currently being further restricted in many countries,

**The number of
forcibly displaced
people was record
high in 2023.**

and thus a contested part of the humanitarian response.

What can be documented by the United Nations probably represents the tip of the iceberg, as there is chronic under-reporting of sexual violence. Stigma and shame, fear of reprisals and rejection, isolation and ostracism, as well as lack of services and help, prevent



While we can see the weapons on the ground used to kill each other in Malakal in South Sudan, young people are fighting conflict and violence by talking together and breaking down barriers.

survivors from coming forward.⁴⁰

Also, male survivors of sexual violence will more often refer to it as torture, and it may not be named specifically. The Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict names detention as situations of special risk for sexual violence perpetuated against men.⁴¹

People with LGBTIQ identities and non-conforming gender identities are at special risk of sexual violence, and the under-reporting is assumed to be particularly bad for this diverse group of people, especially as help-services are often not designed to see and meet this group.⁴²

40 United Nations (2022) *Framework for the prevention of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*, Accessed from: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/auto-draft/202209-CRSV-Prevention-Framework.pdf>

41 Ibid

42 Ibid

Working to implement the pillars of UNSCR 1325 – an example from Eastern Africa

In Eastern Africa, NCA's peacebuilding and social cohesion projects are designed in line with the pillars of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). NCA has been working with women of faith to enhance their capacity on the UNSCR 1325 through trainings on peacebuilding and advocacy designed to equip them with skills for engagement in peace and decision-making processes.

The women of faith have applied the knowledge in their various contexts to advocate for both protection of women and inclusion of women in decision-making processes. In DRC for example, the women mediators have managed to gain recognition for their community peace work in and as a result actively participated in the delegation of religious leaders on the Congolese National Dialogue process in 2022.

Women of faith have also been supported to call on duty-bearers to address factors that are driving armed conflict in their contexts that further create more avenues for the exploitation of women and girls. In Rwanda, women of faith have used various platforms including radio to create awareness on issues of gender-based violence.

We have also created spaces of learning and exchange between the regional women of faith that act as a support-network and advocate in sensitive contexts on behalf of fellow women. In 2018 for example, the regional women of faith mediators raised issues of concern to women and children within the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) on behalf of the South Sudanese women of faith.



NCA colleagues painting a peace mural in one of Nairobi's informal settlements. Youth clubs in this area partnering with NCA are working for peace and wellbeing in the community, and including survivors of SGBV.

NCA's Regional Peace Program in Eastern Africa has also created spaces for engagement between women of faith and young women to engage with duty-bearers such as the African Union Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). In 2023, the women of faith engaged with the African Union Commissioner for Political Affairs Peace and Security as well as other key departments

within the African Union calling for meaningful inclusion of women and girls in ongoing processes. These engagements have seen the African Union include the women of faith in their election observation mission in DRC in 2023, and also in consultations on enhancing women's participation and leadership in peace and security processes in Africa.



Side event at the Commission for Population and Development in 2023, co-hosted by the Norwegian government, Argentina, ACT Alliance and NCA. The side event was titled “Between taboos and freedom, religion, rights and reproductive justice”. Speakers included ACT General Secretary Rudelmar Bueno de Faria, UNFPA Director Dr Natalia Kareem and Norway’s Deputy Minister of Development Björg Sandkjær.

6. RIGHTS UNDER PRESSURE

When tools for prevention of and recovery from gender-based violence in communities and with individuals is not enough, Norwegian Church Aid turns to the **international human rights mechanisms**. We have already discussed one of the important tools for this, namely Security Council Resolution 1325 and the ensuing resolutions.

Together with ACT Alliance and our global ecumenical partners⁴³, we work to **educate ourselves and our partners on the human rights of women and girls**, and to engage with the international human rights mechanisms like shadow-reporting on CEDAW⁴⁴ and civil society reports to the Universal Periodic Reviews. We also work to connect local activists to global arenas like the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Commission on Population and Development (CPD).

We know that broad alliances and efforts to secure human rights for all hold potential for positive

change, we have seen it before. We saw it when extreme poverty dropped as the world raced to meet the Millenium Development Goals, and we have seen it in the Jubilee movement against debt and in the movement to ban land-mines. Norwegian Church Aid therefore seeks to **build strong alliances** to fight for human rights, within the global ecumenical movement and with other key partners. The joint ACT Alliance delegations to the CSW and the CPD, and the preparatory work prior to the global meetings in national and regional settings, as well as the follow-up nationally after the meetings are examples of how we do this. NCA also works with ACT Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation in regional networks for gender justice.

Remembering what people of good will can achieve together is central to maintaining hope in our multi-crisis world, where women’s and girls’ rights are under threat internationally, particularly their sexual and reproductive rights.

⁴³ NCA is an international diaconal ecumenical organization. We are a founding member of ACT Alliance and a specialized ministry connected to the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. The broad ecumenical movement NCA belongs to is committed to working for human dignity and human rights, and we find important allies for our global advocacy work within this movement.

⁴⁴ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Young women-led advocacy - a global ecumenical example

Fellow ACT member, and NCA partner, the World YWCA movement, is a platform for women and young women to advocate their voices and share evidence through powerful storytelling and evidence-sharing.

When women and young women lead, new programmatic approaches appear. During the last years, our partnerships have allowed for global campaigns where young women have been at the center of the fight against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and peace and justice, and the intersectionality between these themes. The recent World YWCA Advocacy Roadmap facilitates connections between advocacy at global level, with the national platforms for young women and women.

This includes between important arenas like CSW and CPD, and International Day of Solidarity with Palestinian People, with locally-based young women activists.



A faith-based defense for SRHR

For NCA it remains central to stand up for human rights and human dignity. We are committed to holding duty bearers accountable, including on the broad agenda of sexual and reproductive health and rights, as we see the results of lacking access to these rights in our work. Too many girls are deprived of their adolescence through early and forced marriages and motherhood. **For girls aged 15-19, pregnancy-related complications are the leading cause of death**⁴⁵. Too many adolescents and women are not able to manage their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health without discrimination, coercion, and violence.⁴⁶

There is growing resistance to sexual and reproductive health and rights internationally⁴⁷. This is often based on claims that SRHR threatens traditions, culture and moral norms. Those who oppose such rights tend to focus on comprehensive

sexuality education, access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for adolescents, access to safe abortion and LGBTIQ rights⁴⁸.

There is growing resistance to sexual and reproductive health and rights internationally.

The opposition is supported by repressive national laws and brought to international negotiations by socially conservative actors – both states, organizations and religious groups⁴⁹. The anti-rights movement has gained strength the past few years and their targets include women's human rights defenders, especially those who speak up for SRHR.

Unfortunately, some faith actors are amongst those who oppose sexual and reproductive health rights. As a faith-based actor ourselves, NCA challenges this opposition, and we work with our international alliance for SRHR based on our values, especially the inherent dignity of all people and our obligation to promote a life with dignity for all⁵⁰.

45 World Health Organization (2017) *More than 1.2 million adolescents die every year, nearly all preventable*. Accessed from: <https://www.who.int/news/item/16-05-2017-more-than-1-2-million-adolescents-die-every-year-nearly-all-preventable>

46 Ibid

47 Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022) *Norwegian guidelines for sexual and reproductive health and rights*, Accessed from: https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/daaf87fe8aab47f18636e7dcb98c9511/srhr_veileder.pdf

48 Ipas (2023) *False pretenses: The anti-comprehensive sexuality education agenda weaponizing human rights*, Accessed from: <https://www.ipas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/False-Pretenses-The-Anti-Comprehensive-Sexuality-Education-Agenda-Weaponizing-Human-Rights-OPPCSEE23b.pdf>

49 Ibid

50 ActAlliance, *Keeping Faith in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights*, Accessed from: <https://actalliance.org/act-news/keeping-faith-in-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights/>



NCA speaking at the Women's Human Rights' Training in Geneva.

We promote SRHR to protect children, women and others vulnerable in gendered hierarchies from exploitation and abuse, harmful practices and to promote healthy relationships and reflective, thoughtful decision-making.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education is a fundamental step towards achieving sexual and reproductive justice. Comprehensive Sexuality Education contributes to dismantling the stigma and addressing taboos that serve as significant contributors to harmful practices, including violence and discrimination based on age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and gender identity.⁵¹

Securing women's sexual and reproductive health and rights contributes to enabling girls' and women's education and their opportunities for securing their own livelihoods. It also prevents unnecessary maternal deaths. To secure SRHR, dialogue and cooperation with faith actors is essential as they can both enable and block access to SRHR. For NCA, this dialogue is a priority.

51 UNESCO (2021) *The journey towards comprehensive sexuality education, global status report*. Accessed from: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/The%20journey%20towards%20comprehensive%20sexuality%20education%20-%20Global%20status%20report.pdf>



Community members in Malawi in Karonga meeting the mine owners. Thanks to NCAs FI-program, workers and mine owners are now talking together to improve the conditions in the mines. Like water, toilets, security equipments and working hours.

7. INEQUALITY: THE REAL ENEMY?

As we work to end gender-based violence and secure the rights of girls and women in all their diversity, we must face the fact that a **reduction of poverty and inequality** is essential.

A central part of today's economic system is economic inequality and in particular the disadvantageous position of women compared to men. Women in developing countries overwhelmingly work in the informal sector (92%)⁵². They also provide an estimated 76% of unpaid care and domestic work worldwide⁵³. It is therefore no surprise that tax systems in their structure also favor men over women and reinforce existing inequality.

The example of tax justice

People living in poverty, especially women and girls, are impacted most due to tax injustices, which contribute to loss of revenue, reduced investment in social protection systems (tax-funded social protection), and deepening inequalities in societies, including the unpaid care burden.

A reform of global
tax rules is crucial
to ensure that
women's rights can
be fulfilled.

Tax systems can have an explicit or implicit bias disfavoring women. For example only allowing men to own assets, joint assessment of personal income tax disfavoring the secondary earner or through deductions. The IMF has found that countries with low shares of female capital income and shares also tax property and inheritance lightly. It is important that such biases

52 ILO (2023) *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical update*. Accessed from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_869188.pdf

53 Ibid

are challenged and changed.⁵⁴

Global tax cooperation can contribute to reducing poverty, advancing human rights, and achieving economic justice. This requires a whole of society approach, where women and girls are not left behind.

Oxfam's 2020 report, *Time to Care*, reveals that the 22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa. The report shows an income inequality out of control and points to internal, national policy solutions to this crisis.⁵⁵

As the UN Secretary General Report "[Promoting inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the UN](#)" pointed out: "The OECD has introduced several initiatives to engage and associate non-OECD members with its work, but many of those countries find that there are significant barriers to meaningful engagement in agenda-setting and decision making. As a result, the substantive rules developed through these OECD initiatives often do not adequately address the needs and priorities of developing countries and/or are beyond their capacities to implement.»⁵⁶

A reform of global tax rules is crucial to ensure that women's rights can be fulfilled. This is why it is so important that the UN has started the process toward a **UN tax convention**.

On 22 November 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution called *Promotion of inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the United Nations*.⁵⁷ This historical resolution kickstarts the work for a UN Tax Convention. A clear majority of the states supported the resolution that was put forward by the African group. 125 countries voted in favor, 48 against and nine abstained.⁵⁸

NCA is a part of a global civil society network that has worked for this process to move forward and will continue campaigning until we have a UN Tax Convention. Together with our partners and allies we will keep up the effort to ensure that this convention becomes an effective tool to stop tax abuse.

National Resource Mobilization

If global corporations and international financial actors are made to pay taxes where they make their earnings, nation-states are more likely to succeed in national resource mobilization through national taxes.

This resource mobilization is essential if empowerment, the provision of services and reduction of poverty, is to be successful. Currently, financing gaps for the implementation of national action plans on gender equality are as high as 90%.⁵⁹

54 Platform for collaboration on tax (2021) *How tax reform can promote growth and gender equality in the post-COVID era*. Accessed from: <https://www.tax-platform.org/news/blog/Tax-Reform-Gender-Equality-in-the-Post-COVID-Era>

55 Oxfam (2020) *Time to Care*. Accessed from: [Time to Care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis \(openrepository.com\)](#)

56 United Nations (2023) *Promotion of inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the United Nations*. Accessed from: [A-78-235 advance unedited version_0.pdf](#)

57 United Nations (2023) *Promotion of inclusive and effective international tax cooperation at the United Nations*. Accessed from: [N2335675.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

58 Ibid

59 UNWomen (2015) *Transformative financing for gender equality*. Accessed from: [FPI Brief-Gender-Financing.pdf \(unwomen.org\)](#)

Moving towards universal health care – an example from Tanzania

Securing universal access to healthcare is key to overcoming gender-based violence and secure sexual and reproductive health and rights. In Tanzania, Norwegian Church Aid and partners have worked to secure this since 2007.

Since 2007 Norwegian Church Aid in collaboration with inter-faith partners have been conducting various research related to mining such as the Golden Opportunity (2008)⁶⁰, One Billion Dollar Question (2012)⁶¹, One Billion Dollar Question Revisited (2017)⁶² and the “Make it Possible – report on how tax commitments can move Tanzanians towards Universal Health Coverage (2018)”⁶³.

All these reports were aiming at showcasing how much Tanzania is losing in potential tax revenue and provided recommendations to improve tax collections to finance social services delivery, including realizing universal health care for all Tanzanians.

The Inter-faith Standing Committee on Economic Justice and Integrity of Creation (ISCEJIC) is the national inter-faith platform that represents major faith communities in Tanzania. The platform is jointly owned by the National Muslim Council of Tanzania (BAKWATA), Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC) and the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT). For years, it has taken a lead role in national advocacy for universal health insurance for all Tanzanians.

The Universal Health Care bill was passed by the Tanzanian parliament in November 2023. It ensures access to health care and medicines for 15 million Tanzanians who until then were not able to afford hospital visits and health care.⁶⁴



For seven years, Norwegian Church Aid, along with our church network in Tanzania, has been fighting for a new health law. The bill has been postponed twice in parliament, but after extensive lobbying efforts, the bill was passed. In the image above, we see Doctor Jane Manyahi at Cardinal Rugambwa Hospital in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania.



60 Curtis and Lissu (2008) *A Golden Opportunity?* Accessed from: [untitled \(kirkensnodhjelp.no\)](http://untitled(kirkensnodhjelp.no))

61 TEC, BAKWATA and CCT (2012) *The One Billion Dollar Question*. Accessed from: [one-billion-dollar-question.pdf \(kirkensnodhjelp.no\)](http://one-billion-dollar-question.pdf(kirkensnodhjelp.no))

62 TEC, BAKWATA and CCT (2017) *The one billion dollar question*. Accessed from: [untitled \(curtisresearch.org\)](http://untitled(curtisresearch.org))

63 Christian Council of Tanzania, National Muslim Council of Tanzania and Tanzania Episcopal Conference (2018) *Make it Possible. How tax commitments can move Tanzania towards universal health coverage*. Accessed from: [make-it-possible.pdf \(kirkensnodhjelp.no\)](http://make-it-possible.pdf(kirkensnodhjelp.no))

64 Tanzaniainvest (2023) *Tanzania's Parliament Passes Universal Health Care Bill*. Accessed from: Tanzania's Parliament Passes Universal Health Care Bill - TanzaniaInvest

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the backdrop of a widespread backlash against women's and girls' rights and a systematic pushback on gender equality policy gains, we must unite and work across boundaries to secure and advance human rights for all.

NCA works for a holistic and coordinated effort to prevent GBV, harmful practices and norms, including FGM and CEFM, by working in dialogue with traditional and religious leaders for a transformation of harmful norms and normative frameworks and with duty bearers on legislation. In the fight against the gender backlash and for securing human rights for all we urge individuals, churches and civil society actors to be important allies. We urge governments, donors and the international community to actively support existing rights, and especially those relating to gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights. These are Norwegian Church Aid's policy recommendations.

NCA recommends individuals, churches and civil society actors to:

- ✓ Be an ally in preventing violence against women and girls in all their diversity by taking a stand publicly, engaging in activities and events to raise awareness in communities.
- ✓ Refrain from using Freedom of Religion and Belief to limit the human rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people.
- ✓ Champion bodily autonomy for all and strengthen the global normative framework on SRHR.

NCA recommends all governments and donors to strive for:

A life free from gender-based violence, and should therefore:

- ✓ Allocate national budgets to prevent violence against women and girls in all their diversity, including through national action plans and prevention across education, health, and social protection sectors.
- ✓ Increase official development assistance (ODA) and investments towards prevention of violence against women and girls, both in long-term development work and in humanitarian settings.
- ✓ Increase efforts to prevent GBV in conflict and crisis situations, and center responses on survivor-led priorities.
- ✓ End impunity for sexual violence as a weapon of war.
- ✓ Strengthen access to SRHR services and information in humanitarian response.

Transforming harmful norms and practices, and should therefore:

- ✓ Increase funding for work against FGM.
- ✓ Engage embassies in countries with high GBV prevalence to support advocacy work to end FGM.
- ✓ Strengthen normative frameworks against child marriage.

Comprehensive sexuality education, and should therefore:

- ✓ Secure access to age-appropriate, comprehensive sexuality education within and outside of school.

Universal access to healthcare, and should therefore:

- ✓ Strengthen healthcare systems nationally so that primary healthcare includes universal access to sexual and reproductive health services (SRH(R)).
- ✓ Secure universal access to healthcare.

Equality, and should therefore:

- ✓ Work for a universal, legally binding UN tax convention, and work to ensure that this convention becomes an effective tool in efforts to combat tax abuse.

TOGETHER FOR A JUST WORLD

Norwegian Church Aid works to save lives and seek justice. Our support is provided unconditionally with no intention of influencing anyone's religious affiliation.

Norwegian Church Aid is a member of the ACT Alliance, one of the world's largest humanitarian coalitions. Together, we work throughout the world to create positive and sustainable change.

To save lives and seek justice is, for us, faith in action.



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