



“NO LONGER A MYTH”

FATIMA ZAHRA WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION DEMYSTIFIES SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS IN ZIMBABWE'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY



AS AN ORGANIZATION, WE HAVE COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IS NOT A MYTH OR A SECRET TO BE SPOKEN ABOUT IN WHISPERS. FATIMA ZAHRA WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION IS TABLING THE MATTER OPENLY FOR DEBATE AND RESOLUTION WITHIN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN ZIMBABWE

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Guidance Council, Fatima Zahra adapted and produced an Islamic Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights Toolkit. These initiatives have deepened Fatima Zahra's reach and effectively countered the notion that Islam is intrinsically opposed to women's sexual and reproductive health rights. By engaging Muslim communities, Fatima Zahra has laid a solid foundation for healthy and thriving communities. The Ahlul Bayt Islamic Guidance Council's endorsement is highly strategic as it represents a seal of approval by senior religious leaders.



INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Fatima Zahra Women's Organization (FZWO) joined faith organizations from seven Southern African countries to dialogue on religion and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies. These organizations co-created three interfaith briefs to serve as discussion papers in their communities. The Fatima Zahra Women's Organization, through dialogues, workshops and awareness creation events, engaged rural and urban Muslim communities in Zimbabwe to enhance women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. Assisted by the Ahlul Bayt Islamic

BROADER, INCLUSIVE INTERVENTIONS

The Fatima Zahra Women's Organization (FZWO) is an Islamic faith-inspired non-profit organization that was formed in 1994 with a mandate to empower women and the community by providing education to vulnerable groups. Its vision is to provide religious and moral guidance while uplifting communities. The FZWO's work is based on the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and his purified household.¹ The actual practices of the Prophet himself and his purified family provide further guidance about how Muslims might translate the lessons of the Qur'an.

About 420,000 Zimbabweans are Muslim or 3% of the 14 million that is the total Zimbabwean population. There are 43 mosques in the capital city of Harare and eight mosques in Bulawayo. Several mosques are also located in rural areas. Small madrassah – or schools – are attached to these mosques to teach Muslim children.

The FZWO has deepened its interventions to include empowering women and girls to access SRHR within the context of their faith. It collaborates with the Ahlul Bayt Islamic Guidance Council, an Islamic sister organization to the FZWO, named after the household of Prophet Muhammad, whose mandate is similar to that of FZWO but focuses on interfaith dialogues, religious training, youth and development, among other objectives.

The FZWO wants to counter the narratives that Islam does not consider women's and girls' rights. It has drawn attention to issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights, generally considered sensitive subjects in the Zimbabwean Muslim community, and therefore, rarely discussed. Local traditional norms that are patriarchal in nature have also contributed to the general silence, including the belief that because the man is the head of the family, all grievances must be presented to him and thus the challenges that relate to the abuse of women and girls are mostly ignored and

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AND WOMEN HAVE RIGHTS
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OVER THEM...

AL BAQARAH VERSE 228

remain unresolved. As a result, many Muslim women, adolescents and youth have limited SRHR knowledge. Suspicion, myths and negative attitudes prevail and this has hampered women's access to, and use of, SRHR services.

The FZWO has taken steps to address the issues related to SRHR based on the conviction that Islam has always valued and protected women and girls, holistically guided by the Holy Qur'an and traditions. The Holy Qur'an chapter 9 (At-Taubah verse 71) states that,

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THE BELIEVERS, BOTH MEN AND
WOMEN, SUPPORT EACH OTHER;
THEY ORDER WHAT IS RIGHT AND
FORBID WHAT IS WRONG; THEY
KEEP UP THE PRAYER AND PAY THE
PRESCRIBED ALMS; THEY OBEY GOD
AND HIS MESSENGER. GOD WILL GIVE
HIS MERCY TO SUCH PEOPLE: GOD IS
ALMIGHTY AND WISE

THE HOLY QUR'AN CHAPTER 9 (AT-TAUBAH VERSE 71)

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP



Through convening three workshops, two conferences and 14 community dialogues (including Jumma² Sessions in mosques), FZWO has reached 35,000 community members and opened space for interrogating SRHR issues within Muslim communities in Zimbabwe. The advocacy briefs provided an opportunity for individuals at different levels of leadership within the Muslim community to express their views and contribute to finding solutions that enhance individual and communal well-being.

Recognising the importance of collective action, FZWO partnered with different religious and civil society organizations. These included the Ahlul Bayt Islamic Guidance Council of Zimbabwe and Population Services Zimbabwe as well as local authorities such as city councillors, activists and community leaders. This collaboration was very effective as it enabled FZWO to reach outlying Muslim communities that are often excluded from SRHR programmes. This collaborative approach enabled multiple partners to share around the importance of SRHR information and services by combining religious, medical and legal arguments.

The FZWO sought the support of major national Islamic bodies, including The Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe.

The Supreme Council endorsed FZWO's work, which afforded the organization credibility as it set out to increase Muslim communities' awareness on SRHR. The support of senior religious leaders helped FZWO in gaining trust as well as access to religious platforms in Muslim communities. FZWO sought the buy-in of community leaders and influencers before rolling out SRHR training and messages.

For example, the FZWO, assisted by the Ahlul Bayt Islamic Guidance Council, adapted and produced an Islamic SRHR toolkit. The original toolkit was produced by the Kenyan Muslim Youth Organization and adapted to the Zimbabwe context. The Ahlul Bayt Islamic Guidance Council was instrumental in the contextualisation of the toolkit and subsequent adoption of SRHR and mainstreaming into Islamic forums and gatherings by obtaining and collating religious information that would be acceptable to all schools of thought in the Muslim community. The Islamic Guidance Council and The Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe used their influence over Sheiks in Zimbabwe to help create opportunities for FZWO to share SRHR information at workshops. This enabled the sharing of the same SRHR messages in all the communities (youth groups, any Islamic forums and gatherings)



that FZWO reached. The topics covered included any issues to do with religious rights and practices and local current affairs on Sexual and Gender Based Violence.

The FZWO also facilitated an interfaith Christian-Muslim workshop to offer a safe space to jointly plan advocacy actions including on SRHR. Workshop participants found that religious leaders have extensive influence within their communities. Islam and Christianity both have millions of adherents and are thus both important in advocating for justice including SRHR rights for their adherents and communities. Faith leaders were encouraged to be ambassadors of peace through the practice of good deeds which would build the trust of their communities and thereby encourage greater reporting of SRHR issues. Faith leaders were urged to make use of social media and help build and amplify the voices of those in need, especially women and children.

BRIDGE BUILDING AND OPEN CONVERSATIONS

The FZWO has increased and deepened the ownership of SRHR among Zimbabwean Muslim leaders. The organization held a strategic planning meeting with leaders of the Ahlul Bayt Islamic Guidance Council of Zimbabwe to adopt their newly developed SRHR toolkit and to promote its mainstreaming into Islamic forums and gatherings.

The FZWO built trust and support from leaders of the Islamic Supreme Council of Zimbabwe for collaboration on community initiatives on SRHR and related dialogue activities. The Council was able to facilitate open conversations within the Muslim communities and those sessions served to create a bridge between Muslim women, human rights activists and legal practitioners who have become defenders of Muslim women and can amplify the voices of Muslim women.

The organization's public awareness campaigns, education and training have increased the SRHR knowledge and information of Muslim participants who have appreciated these activities and resulted in members from other Muslim communities requesting similar workshops in other provinces. In addition, women leaders have acknowledged the importance of these spaces and the dynamic nature of the engagements. The introduction of these discussions has laid a strong foundation where both Muslim men and women are now capable of discussing SRHR publicly, thereby promoting positive outcomes in families and communities.

The FZWO has nonetheless encountered some challenges. These include the impact of government restrictions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented systematic large-scale outreach activities. Some adolescents and young people could not access the information on social media platforms because they did not have the gadgets to facilitate connectivity. There has been resistance amongst some religious leaders towards dialogue and discussions on SRHR. Specific engagement sessions will be held with these leaders to try and address concerns. It is acknowledged that the whole process is a journey that must be walked with a diversity of stakeholders and leave no-one behind.

Going forward, FZWO is confident of mobilising a critical mass of SRHR champions within the Muslim community in Zimbabwe. It is important to defuse the myths around women's rights in Muslim communities as a more dynamic path towards gender justice is being charted.

REFERENCES

1. *An Islamic phrase according to Shia Muslim Beliefs*
2. *Friday congregational sermons in Mosques*

The Fatima Zahra Women's Organization participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by the Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organizations from seven countries in Southern Africa declared, "We can no longer be silent as we are called to uphold human dignity for all creation." Coming from Bahai, Christian, Muslim and Traditionalist faiths, they developed three Interfaith briefs

on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy. They also identified opportunities for engaging more effectively within their faith communities. The Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano supported their action plans through micro-grants and technical assistance, contributing to the many inspiring outcomes documented in this case study.

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