

# Engaging religious leaders to advance women's rights

ABAAD's "We Believe" Campaign in Lebanon



## USING THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Lebanon continues to grapple with economic, political, and social instability, and the Syrian crisis has exacerbated tensions between host and refugee communities. Consequently, women and girls are more exposed to various forms of exploitation, domestic violence, and harmful practices.

As the influence of religious men and institutions in Lebanon grows, Prevention+ partner ABAAD is working to engage religious leaders to advance and protect women's rights. Capitalizing on religious leaders' influential roles in norms and standards setting - particularly in shaping social norms and behaviors - is a key approach in the effort to end violence against women and girls (VAWG).

## INTERFAITH RESPONSE TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

The “We Believe” campaign was designed to prevent violence against women and girls by engaging religious and faith leaders from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt, in a 2-day regional workshop to share approaches to VAWG using religious texts and to explore how to use their positions of influence and power to promote gender equality and positive masculinities. The religious leaders shared a commitment and a sense of responsibility to collaborate with civil society organizations in an integrated, interfaith response to prevent violence, and to collaborate on influencing policies and legislation that address GBV in Lebanon.

“We Believe” tapped into the capacity of religious leaders as positive role models in the Lebanese society. The leaders developed and issued statements promoting human rights and condemning VAWG using religious texts to support their messages. The campaign was shared through TV advertisements, billboards, radio commercials, online ads, and in the press and media.

## CLOSE INVOLVEMENT WITH FEMINIST GROUPS

A few feminist groups were concerned that this approach reinforced the patriarchal authority of religious leaders, who are already granted significant control over women’s autonomy and family affairs by virtue of personal status laws in Lebanon. Furthermore, they feared working with religious leaders could indirectly impact their fight against child marriage, an area of constant debate.

This prompted ABAAD to closely engage feminist groups and organizations during all discussions with religious leaders, and to create platforms for dialogue around common areas of interest and understanding of various gender equality and violence-related terms and ideas. This also helped ABAAD’s future preventive strategies and advocacy work become more inclusive and impactful.

## THE “WE BELIEVE” CAMPAIGN LED TO A NUMBER OF ACHIEVEMENTS:

### Enhancing Dialogue

ABAAD coordinated seven roundtables with religious leaders and women rights organizations in 2013 and 2014. The roundtables covered subjects including: violence against women and domestic violence; guardianship; discipline and obedience; custody and its applied effects; marital rape; and inheritance.

### Ensuring Sustainability

ABAAD hosted another roundtable in 2018 with religious leaders and civil society organizations that aimed to contextualize advocacy on gender socialization, fatherhood and caregiving, and engaging young men in gender equality. The discussions and findings were documented to be published as policy briefs in Arabic and English. The campaign and these follow-up activities have informed ABAAD’s future work with religious men committed to ending VAWG.

### Creating Partnerships

ABAAD succeeded in bringing together a diverse group of religious leaders and civil society organizations to collaborate, create, and strengthen partnerships in advocating for the rights of women and girls in Lebanon.

## INCLUSIVE APPROACH

ABAAD and religious leaders continued their discussions, expanding it to other issues and countries across the region. ABAAD has drawn from these experiences to advocate for an inclusive approach that recognizes the vital role religious leaders play as allies and partners in efforts to change attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate violence, especially in marginalized and underserved communities.