

ENGAGING FAITH LEADERS

'We Believe'

A public service campaign in Lebanon organized by ABAAD-Resource Center for Gender Equality, featuring prominent religious leaders delivering anti-violence against women messages rooted in Koranic and Biblical texts.



MenEngage Alliance

working with men and boys for gender equality

CASE STUDY

SUMMARY

'We Believe' was a 2012 public service announcement video campaign in Lebanon organized by MenEngage Alliance member ABAAD-Resource Center for Gender Equality in observation of the 16 Days of Activism to End VAW (Violence Against Women), featuring four prominent Lebanese religious leaders, Muslim and Christian, delivering anti-violence against women messages rooted in Koranic and Biblical texts. The video was accompanied by billboards reinforcing its messages, sited across Beirut, in addition to a wide social media campaign. Stemming from a mutual interest by ABAAD and religious leaders to address VAW in Lebanon, 'We Believe' generated a public debate: religious leaders reported encouraging feedback among some congregants who were pleased to see the problem confronted, while some feminist groups criticized the campaign, claiming that its approach reinforced the patriarchal authority of those



Regional roundtable 'What Role Do Religious Leaders Have in Ending VAW,' November 2012.

leaders, who are already granted significant control over women's autonomy and family affairs by virtue of personal status laws in Lebanon that several CSOs are in fact trying to amend.

Following the completion of the 16 Days campaign, and despite the global shift of donors' resources to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis, both ABAAD and Lebanese religious leaders have expressed interest in continuing their dialogue and even expanding it to other issues and countries. As MenEngage Alliance begins to focus greater attention on work with faith-based leaders and organizations, lessons learned from 'We Believe' may prove instructive for Alliance members as they balance seemingly competing agendas of FBOs and secular CSOs in order to find common ground that enables them to address issues such as VAW.



Lebanese citizens rally marking International Woman's Day demanding that parliament approves a law that protects women from domestic violence in Beirut, Lebanon, Saturday, March 8, 2014. (Bilal Hussein/ AP Photo)

DESCRIPTION

ABAAD Founder and Director Ghida Anani devised the idea for 'We Believe' after a 2012 regional meeting with religious leaders from the MENA region in which violence against women was raised as an ongoing problem, prompting discussion on the question, "What role can religious leaders play in addressing VAW in the region?" Anani subsequently approached Lebanese religious institutions about joining forces to make a statement condemning VAW in observance of the International Day to End VAW (November 25), and found them receptive; it was their idea to incorporate scriptural texts into the message, in the belief they would resonate with followers. ABAAD in turn saw it as an opportunity to combine both religious and right-based approaches in a mutual effort.



ABAAD described the campaign as follows:

'ABAAD is seeking to assure through the nation-wide campaign "We Believe" its belief that: The message of rejecting violence against women can bring together all poles under one shared agenda; setting up frames for networking with men in general, and religious men in particular, has become of increasing importance to accelerate eliminating violence against women in our communities; and religious leaders truly believe in the importance of elimination of violence against women and girls. The national campaign includes a TV commercial; hundreds of billboards and uni-poles in different areas of Lebanon, radio commercials, as well as online ads on websites of Lebanese journals and newspapers.

'ABAAD created a campaign with religious leaders because in Lebanon religion carries great weight - as seen in Lebanon's 19 religious sects and 15-year civil war, fueled by religious divisions. In Lebanon, religious jurisdiction is not only spiritual, but also extends to issues of law and state. ABAAD aims at finding common ground between religious leaders and women's rights NGOs in their efforts to end GBV, believing that religious leaders can be allies to bridge the divide and to influence policy and legislative changes for women'.

The dimensions of the campaign include:

- 1 Nation-wide campaign "We Believe... Partners to End Violence Against Women"
- 2 Launched for 16 Days of Activism in 2012
- 3 Leaders of four largest religious groups in Lebanon - Maronite, Orthodox, Sunni, Shiite
- 4 Messages based on religious text & beliefs, endorsing human rights & condemning VAW
- 5 Leaders issued own statements - using religious texts to support their decree
- 6 Leaders committed to join ABAAD to end VAW in Lebanon
- 7 The bottom line: all women are entitled to a life of dignity free from violence - & all religions agree on this

“ Through this program, religious leaders agreed to become voices for Lebanese women of all faiths, and catalysts for positive change. Through religious institutions, the weight of the message is more acknowledged, especially with men who might not otherwise be listening. ”

The 'We Believe' campaign was funded by Save the Children International; Norwegian People's Aid; International Medical Corps; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; World Vision Lebanon; International Rescue Committee; Heartland Alliance International; Open Society Foundations; BBAC; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; Palestinian Women Union; Forum for Development Culture & Dialogue; and the Women's League for International Peace and Freedom.

BACKGROUND

ABAAD's report on its November 2012 regional roundtable 'What Role Do Religious Leaders Have in Ending VAW?' held in partnership with Oxfam International and the Forum for Development, Culture & Dialogue, serves as a foundational outline for its approach to working with religious leaders to address VAW, as well as a window into participating leaders' understanding of the problem and their conception of a potential joint partnership with civil society actors.

"It is without doubt that religion has functioned as one of the most important agencies of socialization thus determining social norms and moral values with regards to gender equality in all societies," the report states. "Religious institutions possess the moral authority in their communities that could shape social identities of men and women, but also shape policies and legislation. Hence, religious groups have the authority that could promote women's dignity and dictate equality at the level of rights and responsibilities.

"ABAAD, Forum for Development and Cultural Dialogue (FDCD) and Oxfam strongly believe that communication channels between civil society actors and religious leaders can be found and flourish towards the goal of ending violence against women."

Religious leaders identified several causal factors for the prevalence of GBV in their communities, among them lack of awareness of women's rights and gender equality; current laws and practices which hinder women from accessing those rights; misconceptions in religion teachings; and a failure to adequately engage men in awareness education on human rights. They agreed that societies impose "traditional and patriarchal social norms in the name of religion. This, according to them, is the main challenge facing them as well as women victims of GBV."

Elements of a viable effort to address VAW in faith communities should include: a 'real and transparent' partnership between religious institutions and civil society based on 'common ground to work for the

Direct Services

Men Centre

Individual Therapy for Men with Aggressive Behaviour and Issues with Masculinities

ABAAD launched our pioneer Men Centre in June 2012. The Centre aims to improve men's reactions and emotions due to daily stress, and to support them in better dealing with and managing this stress. Two therapists receive men, who voluntarily seek out the Centre's confidential and anonymous services, and offer them one-on-one psychosocial support sessions, counselling by phone, group therapy, and/or stress and anger management workshops.

ABAAD has been running the Centre in a private and inconspicuous location. Through catchy public campaigns and active work towards institutional referral systems, ABAAD has, to date, reached over 375 men.

Hotline
71283820

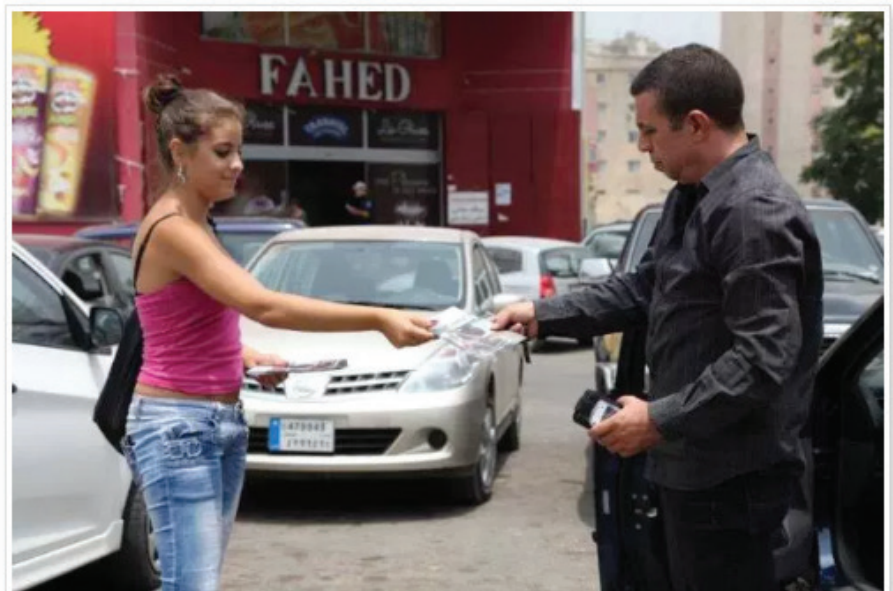


Lebanese advocates ABAAD partner with men for gender equality

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Elahe Amani - WNN Interviews



benefit of citizens and to promote social justice and gender equality,' in turn based on a common vision on ending VAW, which should be founded on the 'moral values of Arab society;' demands from civil society organizations for new and progressive explanations from religious institutions regarding fatwas to prevent and

prohibit VAW; and the provision of awareness sessions for religious leaders who work directly with their communities on issues related to women's rights. Participating religious leaders agreed that they have preventive, supportive, therapeutic, as well as legislative role in addressing VAW.

IMPACT

SOCIAL MEDIA

YouTube PSA:

20,524 views (41 percent female;
59 percent male)

Facebook:

6908 new fans
(58 percent female)
for a new total of
25,312 fans

PRINT & ELECTRONIC MEDIA

35 print & online articles
22 banners in major
Lebanese newspapers
Mass emails - 10,000
recipients

TELEVISION

Ads shown 6-7 times daily during 16
Days of Activism on 11 local and
regional channels
Eight TV interviews
1 news report on
Lebanese Broadcasting
Corporation (LBC)
International

BILLBOARDS

430 billboards displayed
during 16 Days of
Activism

RADIO

Ads shown 6 times
daily on 11 local
stations

7 radio interviews

MOBILE MEDIA

3 trucks with LED
screens showed
images of the
campaign for 16
Days

Separately ABAAD, supported by KVINFO (the Danish Centre for Research and Information on Gender, Equality and Diversity), in 2014 developed a manual detailing different approaches civil society organisations working on women's issues can use to engage religious leaders in combating GBV and ending violence against women. It was developed after conducting a number of focus group discussions with religious leaders and representatives from women's CSOs, and was peer-reviewed by lawyers, religious leaders, and activists in the field, a process by which it was made relevant to Lebanese society, taking into consideration existing social norms and beliefs.

OPINIONS ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN



The 'We Believe' campaign was criticized on social media and in Lebanese media outlets, particularly for its accompanying billboards, which were seen by some civil society actors as 'male patriarchal figures taking up space.' (Ghida Anani, ABAAD Founder and Director, July 2016).

A substantive critique was found in activist Riwa Salameh's Gender politics in Lebanon and the limits of legal reformism (Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support, September 2014). She argued that whereas the campaign "intended to create a space in the religious realm to enhance women's chances in attaining justice in the case of violence inside the family," it had the opposite effect of legitimizing the authority of those religious institutions, "whose main role is to protect the patriarchal and sectarian system." Should any reforms in fact follow, therefore, they "would still have to follow the whims of religious authorities, who could manipulate such reforms when they start to threaten the status quo."

For Salameh, campaigns such as 'We Believe' are symptomatic of a larger problem: ownership of 'women's activism' by a "group of elite or middle class women" who leave "the majority of women, the most vulnerable and marginalized ones, those who belong to the working class or working class families, [with] little or no say at all in shaping strategies and policies purported to represent their interests." Such alienation, she writes, "explains the movement's inability to mobilize on the ground" and has steered women's organizations "away from engaging with other women, preferring to address the powers that be, who continue to legitimize the sexist structure."

[Note: ABAAD leaders contacted Ms. Salameh in order to clarify ABAAD's strategy, but she declined to meet with them; nor did she contact the organization before submitting her article.]



I am a man fighting for women's rights in the Middle East: any questions?

I work for a Lebanese gender equality NGO, running programmes to reform macho culture. Ask me anything



Anthony Keedi of ABAAD at the gender violence summit in London. Photograph: Anna Leach for the Guardian

Guardian, June 10, 2014

RESPONSE FROM ABAAD

In interviews in June and July 2016, ABAAD Founder and Director Ghida Anani and Program Manager Anthony Keedi said criticism of 'We Believe' shortchanged the campaign's strategic sophistication in several ways:

- It failed to grasp the value of accessing large numbers of both men and women, many of them members of the very working class that Salameh argued weren't reached by women's organizations:

“
NOT ALL WOMEN HAVE THE SAME STARTING POINT, SO WE CAN'T RELY ONLY ON [CHANGING] CIVIL CODE – WE MUST LOOK BEYOND OUR OWN IMMEDIATE UNIVERSE. WE SAW THE CAMPAIGN AS SERVING AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO [COMMUNITIES], COMPLEMENTING EACH OTHER AND PROTECTING THE LARGEST NUMBER OF WOMEN IN THE COUNTRY THAT ARE ACTUALLY MARRIED UNDER THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PERSONAL STATUS LAW GOVERNED BY RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS.
”
(Ghida Anani)

“
IN ORDER TO BE HOLISTIC, WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS IS A MUST: THEY'RE VERY INFLUENTIAL THROUGH PERSONAL STATUS LAWS – THERE ARE 15 IN LEBANON – AND THEY AFFECT THE LIVES OF MANY WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE COUNTRY.
”
(Anthony Anani)

- It assumed a lack of genuine interest in addressing VAW on the part of religious leaders:

“
THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WE WORKED WITH WERE AGAINST VAW, WHICH HAD EMERGED AS A PROBLEM IN THEIR COMMUNITIES – THAT WAS THE COMMON DENOMINATOR AND, THEREFORE, THE PLATFORM. WE REGARDED THEM AS STAKEHOLDERS, AND DIDN'T WANT TO MISS AN OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH PROGRESSIVE ONES.
”
(Keedi)

“
RELIGIOUS LEADERS CAN BE VERY ELOQUENT IN EXPRESSING VALUES THROUGH RELIGIOUS TEXTS, AND THEREFORE PROVIDE A SOLID BASIS FOR DEFENDING WOMEN'S RIGHTS.
”
(Anani)

- It implied that ABAAD had been coopted by religious leaders (and perform their defense of patriarchy) and therefore compromised its integrity:

“
OUR APPROACH WAS TO DETERMINE POINTS OF AGREEMENT, AND FROM THERE TO PURSUE DIALOGUE. WE WEREN'T TRYING TO FORCE POINTS OF INTERSECTION. WE'RE NOT SAYING YOU CAN END PATRIARCHY SIMPLY BY WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS. INSTEAD, WE USED THIS INITIATIVE AS A SITUATIONAL STRATEGY TO PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS. NOT TO TALK WITH THEM ASSUMES THINGS CAN'T CHANGE, AS WELL AS A LACK OF INGENUITY AND CREATIVITY.
”
(Keedi)

“
IT WAS NOT A SYSTEMIC APPROACH, BUT A SPORADIC ONE. IT NEEDS TIME TO DEVELOP. CHANGING ATTITUDES IS VERY CHALLENGING. WE WANTED BOTH A RELIGIOUS AND RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH THAT WAS MORE UNIVERSAL. AT THE END OF THE DAY, THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS NEEDED US AS MUCH AS WE NEEDED THEM – THIS WAS A WAY FOR THEM TO REACH WOMEN AND GIRLS.
”
(Anani)

CONCLUSION

The time period of the 'We Believe' campaign was too brief to assess its long-term, measurable impacts on targeted religious populations in Lebanon and their attitudes toward violence against women.

However, reaction to the campaign was instructive: Initiatives such as 'We Believe' challenge actors interested in addressing societal problems like VAW – faith-based and secular alike – to prioritize affected populations over the defense of norms and power dynamics which feed those problems; to hold in abeyance the blanket dismissal of engaging with opposing viewpoints for fear of diluting principles or unintentionally empowering the opposition, which often attend such partnerships; and to seek out common values – be they faith-, human rights-based, or a combination of the two – to frame their initiatives in ways that respect both the human rights and faiths of their targeted populations, and express those commonalities in ways that can be usefully and hopefully embraced by those populations.

CONTEXT: LEBANESE ATTITUDES TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY AND ISLAM, 2012

A June 2012 survey of six Muslim-majority countries in the greater MENA region – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Tunisia and Turkey – by the Pew Research Center helps to situate Lebanese attitudes toward gender equality, Islam and democracy within the region.

Lebanese support for gender equality far exceeded that in the five other countries: 93 percent of overall Lebanese respondents said women should have equal rights as men (Turkey was next-highest at 84 percent, the average of the other five countries 71 percent), and within that total 88 percent of Lebanese men and 98 percent of women supported it. Asked 'What is important in a democracy?' 76 percent of Lebanese respondents said equal rights for women was 'very important,' outpacing runner-up Turkey by 11 percent.

Lebanese also distinguished themselves among their neighbors for low support for:

- Belief that men has more right to jobs when scarce;
- Belief that men make better political leaders; and
- Belief that family should have a say over women's husbands; and high support for:
- Belief that women should be able to work outside the home

Other findings:

- Belief that nations' laws should follow the Koran or its principles was particularly low in Lebanon (population 55 percent Muslim, 40 percent Christian), and fully 42 percent said laws should not be influenced by the Koran at all;
- All countries believed Islam played a large role in politics, but Lebanese respondents stood out for their regard for that influence: only 43 percent said it was 'good,' compared to a 65 percent average in the five other countries;
- The appeal of democracy was especially strong in Lebanon, where 84 percent said it was preferable to any other kind of government; on this point, there was broad agreement among Sunni Muslims (90 percent), Shia (84 percent) and Christians (83 percent).

CONTEXT II: PERSONAL STATUS LAW IN LEBANON

Lebanon does not have a civil code regulating personal status matters. Instead, there are 15 separate personal status laws for the country's different recognized religious communities including twelve Christian, three Muslim, the Druze, and Jewish confessions, which are administered by separate religious courts.

Religious authorities often promote this judicial pluralism as being essential to protecting Lebanon's religious diversity.

In reality, the multiplicity of laws means that Lebanese citizens are treated differently when it comes to key aspects of their lives, including marriage, divorce, and custody of children. This variation has prompted rights activists in Lebanon to advocate for an optional unified civil personal status law that would guarantee that citizens are treated equally, while ensuring that their freedom of belief is respected.

A 2015 report by Human Rights Watch discerned a clear pattern of women from all sects being treated unequally with men when it comes to accessing divorce and primary care for their children:

“

Across all confessions, women faced legal and other obstacles when terminating unhappy or abusive marriages; limitations on their pecuniary rights; and the risk of losing their children if they remarry or when the so-called maternal custody period (determined by the child's age) ends. Women were also systematically denied adequate spousal support during and after marriage—with religious courts often unfairly denying or reducing payments, including if a judge found a woman to be “recalcitrant” by leaving the marital home and refusing to cohabit with her husband or filing for severance.

”