

“When a child has not made 18 years and you marry her off ... don’t bother to invite me! I will not come”: the role and involvement of faith leaders’ wives in child protection issues

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Abstract

This chapter draws on ongoing research conducted with World Vision’s Channels of Hope (CoH) Child Protection programme in Senegal and Uganda, and focuses on the perspectives of faith leaders’ wives on engaging with child protection issues in their communities. In the CoH programme, spouses of faith leaders are included primarily for two reasons: firstly, to jointly undergo the training with their marital partners so that the envisaged change in attitudes and behaviour is mutually understood and reinforced within the household; and secondly, as respected faith actors in their own right who have a certain status within the communities and influence over congregation members. Findings suggest that far from being a homogenous group, faith leaders’ wives constitute a diverse group of women with varying roles and responsibilities in the Muslim and Christian congregations. As a consequence of the faith-based engagement with child protection issues in the CoH workshops, many wives initiated actions to improve the wellbeing and protection of children in their communities. These included individual, family, congregation and community-focused activities and strategies involved working alone, as part of a team, with other faith congregation members as well as collaborating with existing, formal child protection actors in the communities. Significant challenges were experienced by the wives in relation to the specific issues they sought to address, the strategies they employed as well as their own status within the communities. This was particularly noticeable when they challenged entrenched harmful attitudes and practices such as corporal punishment and early marriage. The ambiguities involved in this are explored and discussed. The wives, despite the difficulties they encounter, emerge as local faith actors who effectively use informal community mobilization mechanisms and as important contributors to changing negative norms in their communities.

Introduction

Community involvement on child protection issues is increasingly seen as an effective way to strengthen the child protection system in settings where social work systems and law enforcement structures are weak (Wessells, 2015). The underlying assumption is that expanding the available formal and informal resources within a community and establishing a normative social context that fosters collective responsibility for child wellbeing will lead to positive changes in the lives of children (Daro & Dodge, 2009). However, the manner in which community involvement is promoted seems to play a crucial role in how successful such initiatives are. Experts note for example that there often seems to be a disconnect between formal structures in the community and the existing informal practices that local people have for resolving child-related issues (Wessells et al, 2012; Stark et al, 2012; Palm et al, 2019). At times, they may be at odds with one another, as seen in Sierra Leone, for example, where community members preferred to bring cases of sexual violence against girl children to the imam to resolve, rather than report them to the authorities (Wessells, 2015). Reasons for this preference were that the imams tended to find

solutions that addressed not only justice and punishment of the perpetrator, but also the social and cultural stigma associated with the sexual violence.

Local faith actors thus play a significant role in how social norms, both positive and harmful ones, are perpetuated in communities in many different settings (UNICEF, 2019). This recognition has led to initiatives to harness this influence by many actors within the child protection systems who especially seek to use faith leaders to bring about positive changes for children (Partnership for Faith & Development, 2017). The focus has been criticised on the one hand for its potential to instrumentalise the influence of faith leaders, and on the other as being excessively focused on leaders as opposed to local faith actors in general (UNICEF, 2019). This chapter seeks to bridge some of these debates by analyzing the roles, strategies and challenges experienced by a group of people who are ordinary congregation members and informal faith leaders in their own right, namely the wives¹ of faith leaders.

While some attention has recently focused on the faith leaders themselves, their wives have been comprehensively ignored by not only the secular actors but also by faith based INGOs. This particular group of local faith actors is of interest, however, in examining the interface between formal and informal approaches to child protection as they hold a unique position in faith communities on a continuum of being respected organisers, role models and community mobilisers on the one hand, and regular congregation members on the other. As women and mothers, they are frequently called upon to express opinions on a range of controversial child-related practices and attitudes in their communities, as well as being at the forefront of negotiating ambiguities between existing socio-cultural norms and formal policies seeking to regulate practices.

The chapter draws on evidence from a three-year study of the processes and impact of the World Visions' CoH child protection programme to examine the involvement of faith leaders' wives in two different contexts: in predominantly Muslim communities in Senegal and in interfaith, Christian and Muslim, communities in Uganda. The aim of the chapter is to present findings on the roles and responsibilities of the wives and their spheres of influence and strategies as congregation and community mobilisers. The challenges they experience are discussed focusing on some of the divisive issues where local practice and national laws are in conflict with one another. Finally, their contribution to effective and informal community mobilisation on child-related matters from a faith perspective is discussed.

Background: Child protection concerns and faith communities

Uganda

Uganda has a population of 37.7 million people with 54.7 % of the population is under the age of 18 (UBoS, 2017). Child protection is a primary concern for the Ugandan government and communities. The latest statistics indicate that 8% of children are critically vulnerable and 43%

¹ In World Vision programming, the marital partners of faith leaders are referred to as spouses, in recognition that both leaders and spouses can be of either male or female. Taking into account that all spouses in Senegal and 91% of spouses in Uganda were female, in this chapter, the focus is only on female marital partners of faith leaders as their roles are intricately related to being women in the communities, as will be explained. Hence, they are referred to as 'wives' throughout this chapter.

are moderately vulnerable. Violence against children in Uganda is recognised as a significant public health concern (Ashburn, 2017). Girls face such risks as FGM, child marriage, adolescents' pregnancy, and sexual abuse² (UNICEF, 2013).

The latest census data indicates that the participation in religious life in Uganda is high with religious affiliation declared by a majority of the population (99.8%) (UBoS, 2016). , 84.5% of people practice Christianity, 13.7% are Muslims, and 1.6% belong to other religions. Among Christian groups, the main denominations include Catholics (39.3%), Anglicans (32%), and Pentecostals/Born Again/Evangelicals (11.1%) (UBoS, 2016).

Senegal

Senegal has a population of 16.7 million people. Young people aged under 25 years account for 62% of the population (UNFPA, 2018). Children are affected by a number of protection concerns such as child labour, low school retention and low birth registration rates (UNICEF, 2016). Female genital cutting (FGC) continues to be practised in some parts of the country amongst specific ethnic groups although rates seem to be declining (Pereznieto, 2009; UNICEF, 2016). Child marriage affects girls disproportionately and, although outlawed, continues to be practised throughout the country (UNICEF, 2016). Young boys are frequently sent to Quranic schools (*daaras*), to become *talibés*³ (Zoumanigui, 2016). A Quranic teacher, often a *marabout*⁴, takes responsibility for their education and care. The boys are expected to beg for their upkeep and hand some of the money over to the *marabout*⁵ (Zoumanigui, 2016). While begging is considered to be part of the *talibés*' education by serving moral and religious purposes such as learning humility and piety, concern about the boys' physical wellbeing and reports of physical punishment by some *marabouts* have been noted (Ballet et al, 2012).

Approximately 94% of the Senegalese population identifies as Muslim, predominantly practicing Sunni Islam. Of the remaining 6%, approximately 4% are Christians of various denominations and 2% follow traditional or other religions (Berkley Center, 2016). Sufism is widespread with four main Sufi brotherhoods (*confréries*) dominating the religious landscape. Sufi communities often organize themselves into congregational groups, known as *dahiras*, which provide spiritual support as well as social functions as they foster feelings of solidarity and provide social support (Berkley Centre, 2016).

The CoH programme

Channels of Hope (CoH) is a WV programme which provides education and training for faith leaders on the most difficult development issues that are traditionally associated with stigma and marginalisation in many settings (Greyling, 2016). The structure of the programme follows a cascading 'training of trainers' model where senior faith leaders are trained as facilitators in a five-

² This was defined in the study as a sexual contact with a child such as sexual touching and fondling, kissing, and penetrative sex or defilement; as well as engaging a child in other sexual behaviour that she or he does not comprehend or give consent to (UNICEF, 2013).

³ According to Ballet et al (2012), the term *talibé* is a French word derived from the Arabic *tâlibe*, meaning a person seeking knowledge.

⁴ The term *marabout* denotes a Muslim holy man and/or religious teacher.

⁵ The factors and motivations that sustain *talibés* begging in many towns and cities in Senegal are complex. See Zoumanigui (2016) for a detailed discussion of these.

day master training workshop (World Vision, 2016). These facilitators then run local 3-day residential workshops with approximately 20-30 faith leaders and their spouses where child protection issues are discussed from a faith perspective. At these workshops a small number of community child protection actors such as health workers, teachers, police representative also participate to foster links to the existing child protection structures. During these 3-day workshops a faith-based transformation of attitudes on child protection occurs, with faith leaders and spouses subsequently encouraged to initiate actions in their communities.

The role of faith leaders' spouses in the CoH programme

The CoH programme design sees spouses of faith leaders as playing an important role in the success of the programme in several ways. On the household level, spouses undergo the same transformation as the faith leaders through attending the workshops, thereby also experiencing the personal changes on child protection attitudes from a faith perspective. Undergoing this transformative process together with their spouses facilitates a shared understanding between the marital partners on child protection issues, thus ensuring that a unified and mutually supportive approach to addressing child wellbeing in the congregations and communities ensues. A further value added of involving spouses is that some of the activities planned require a person of the other gender to lead on these, e.g. if women's groups exist in the congregation, it is usually the female partner who mobilises these groups.

Methodology of the study

The objective of the study is to collect evidence from the CoH CP implementation across three different settings (Senegal, Uganda & Guatemala) to establish the impact of engaging local faith communities in efforts to strengthen the protective environment supporting child well-being. The study follows the implementation of the CoH CP module closely and does not aim to interfere or change the intervention. A mixed methodology design was implemented at five time points over two and half years that the CoH CP project runs and draws on a range of methods such as focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KII), participatory activities (PRA) with children and two surveys. In each country, three intervention rural and semi-rural sites and one comparison site (in which the intervention is not implemented until the research has been completed) were chosen. The intervention sites were selected based on diversity in child protection issues, socio-economic factors and religious identities as much as possible, given logistical restraints.

The findings presented in this chapter draw on data collected only in two of the countries namely Senegal and Uganda, during baseline (T0), post-workshops (Ta), mid-term (T1) and end-term (T2)⁶ data collection points. Data collection was conducted with the assistance of local research teams who were trained and guided by the Queen Margaret University researchers in both countries. Interaction between researchers and participants took place in the local languages that participants were most at ease with (in Senegal the languages were Wolof, Fulani/Pular and Jhahanke; in Uganda this was Luganda). Each data collection point constituted of 3-4 weeks of fieldwork. Data collection in Senegal took place between March 2016 and May 2019, and between April 2017 and November 2018 in Uganda. The number of participants involved in qualitative and quantitative data collection varied from 450 to 650 in Senegal and 550 to 850 in Uganda and included faith leaders, their spouses, child protection actors, congregation and community members and children aged 13-17.

⁶ The T2 data was only available for Senegal, as this had not taken place in Uganda at the time of writing.

Data analysis

All the qualitative methods were recorded, except in a few situations where permission was not granted and in those instances handwritten notes were taken. The KIIs, FGDs, and participatory activities with children were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English by a professional interpreter. The notes and transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach in Nvivo 10; experiences between and across participants' accounts were explored and themes extracted, coded and analysed. In this chapter, only qualitative data will be presented as quantitative analysis is ongoing at the time of writing.

Findings

Diversity in demographic profiles of wives

The demographic profiles show that there is extensive heterogeneity amongst both the Ugandan and Senegalese wives with differences in age, religious affiliation and roles they fulfilled in the congregations. In Senegal, for instance, the youngest wife to participate was age 22 and the oldest 61, whereas in Uganda the age range was from 20 to 69. In Senegal 90% of the wives were Muslim and 10% were Christian whereas in Uganda the split between Muslim and Christian wives was 31% to 69%. In both religious groups, various denominations were presented. Within the Muslim households, the faith leaders tended to have more than one wife with sometimes decades of differences in age between the first and the last wife. Their roles and status within the family varied with the first wife being accorded greater respect and decision-making power than the younger ones (Lépine & Strobl, 2013).

Varied roles of wives in congregation and community activities

Faith leaders' wives inhabit many different identities within their communities. On the one hand, they are ordinary women who have the same responsibilities for their own households, the upbringing and care of their children and income-generation as any other woman in the community does. On the other hand, some also perform specific duties related to the religious congregations they are part of. This could involve, for example, leading the Sunday school for the Christian congregations, organising women's groups within their faith congregations or taking care of the *talibé* in the *daara* who are taught by their husbands.

What seems to be common across both religions, however, is the fact that many wives see themselves as role models in upholding socially appropriate values and behavior. In Uganda, for example, pastors' wives emphasised their pastoral role in providing moral and religious guidance to predominantly female congregation members on a range of issues:

I am the one who speaks with the girl children in church and I always get a week in a month and I speak to them on how they are supposed to behave [KII with Christian wife, T1, Uganda].

Especially within the Christian communities, guiding women and children to God and the church and teaching them the meaning and use of sacred texts and rituals is seen as a remit the wives have to fulfill, thus clearly making them informal faith leaders in their own right:

We help children through teaching them the scriptures for example you find that some parents leave their children home and come alone to church, so what we do is we move to different families and mobilize children into Sunday school. There we teach them good morals, the honor for God, respect for elders [FGD with Christian wives, Baseline, Uganda].

This aspect of their role was also evident in the Muslim communities, albeit to a lesser extent as a few wives were involved directly in religious teaching. One of the wives of an imam in Senegal described her role in the following way:

My husband is the imam but he also has *talibés*. He leaves the female *talibés* with me, I teach them the Qur'an and he takes the boys with him to seek the means of subsistence [FGD with Muslim wives, T1, Senegal].

The wives form part of the women's *dahira* which is responsible for arranging practical and logistical issues such as cooking communal meals or organising transport for religious festivals. However, there was less of an expectation that imam's wives would be women leaders in their own rights and more of an acceptance that the wives were more like any other women in the community with varying degrees of activism and involvement in *dahiras*. When an imam has a *daara* with *talibé* who stay in the imam's compound, the wives tended to be directly involved in the care and welfare of these boys (i.e. health care, food, shelter, and clothing). As one of the wives put it: "The Imam is a stranger at home, it is his wife who is always with the children" [FGD with Muslim wives, T1, Senegal].

Apart from the practical responsibilities, the wives, by virtue of their position within the congregations, often provide psychosocial support in the form of counselling and mediation when women faced difficult personal circumstances. In both Muslim and Christian congregations, wives were involved in conflict mediation between parents and their children. Some of this advice had clear moral overtones linked with cultural and religious norms that influence definitions of what appropriate and acceptable behavior is. The concern for conveying socially acceptable behavior arises frequently from the motivation to protect children and young people, as they take risks by not adhering to the guidelines set out.

While most of the data collected indicated the positive roles of wives in the communities, some comments referred to negative aspects or shortcomings of wives in fulfilling their duties. Some wives were said to show little compassion to children in need:

You find that some wives to faith leaders have no caring heart. For example there is one of the faith leaders' wife in our community whom when the husband tried to bring children home who have no support, she feels really bad about it [KII with Christina wife, T1, Uganda].

In Senegal, some reports indicate that some wives neglected taking good care of the *talibés*:

Speaker 1: There are *talibés* that are dirty and do not even have a place to go to sleep, as we see here.

Speaker 2: Yes, it is like this because the wives of imams should not only wash the clothes of their own children but also those of the *talibés*, or let their own children wear shoes and the *talibés* don't have [FGD with Muslim women congregation members, T2, Senegal].

Strategies employed by wives to challenge existing harmful norms

After participation in the CoH workshops, the wives became more actively involved in child protection activities. The most common strategies were intervening in individual family cases of neglect, violence or other forms of abuse, initiating activities to directly assist children and young people, and community mobilization.

Many of the wives reported starting to address parents directly when they see a child being mistreated, as for instance described below:

... most people in our community that we stay in, have been deciding on their own what concerns children: [the father] is the one who decides that the child has reached the age of marriage, he is the one who decides whether to buy a pencil for my child or not, but he doesn't know that it affects the child. So when I see a parent in such a situation it concerns me and it takes me time to explain to him... "No, you have done bad, by denying that child food, you are harming him" [FGD with Christian wives, T1, Uganda].

A frequently repeated insight that the wives obtained through the child protection workshops was the notion of having a collective responsibility for all children in the community instead of just for their own:

Me, I used to mind about my own children but now all the children in the community belong to everybody, for example before the workshop, when I happened to be moving around and I found children misbehaving, I would not be bothered for I would say "after all she is not my child". But after the workshop I changed my ways and now I know that every person is responsible for all the children regardless of whether they are his or not [FGD with Muslim and Christian wives, T1, Uganda].

Most wives chose the route of negotiation with families that they thought were mistreating their children. Some wives, however, chose a course of action that was more directly confrontational in relation to what they identified as a serious child abuse issue, such as early marriage:

For me now when a child has not made 18 years and you marry her off, even though you give me a card, don't bother to invite me! I don't attend a ceremony of a young child eeeh! ... don't bother me for your ceremony. I will not come. What I have to say to others: "let us do it and boycott such ceremonies and if we boycott ceremonies of such a kind, they will stop
[FGD with Muslim and Christian wives, T1, Uganda].

The wives also initiated activities that directly benefitted children and young people, often based on the ability to analyse the difficulties of young people. This was evident in the research where wives talked about the need to take initiative and develop context-specific solutions to address them. The issue of menstrual hygiene management is one such issue, which was described by a pastor's wife in Uganda:

I go back to church and tell them that we are supposed to help girls on the issue of [sanitary] pads and we put a bag [for money collection]. so girls come and approach me when their parents don't have support to give them those pads [KII with Christian wife, T1, Uganda].

There was evidence of wives being involved in community mobilisation activities which they engaged in through using routine church/mosque-related gatherings to sensitise congregation members, in particular women, on childcare, wellbeing and protection issues. They used their leadership roles and status as a means to influence parents to observe and respect children's rights, linking religious authority and child protection in effective ways:

We implemented this in another congregation, *dahira* Tidiane, in which we have men, women and young people. We meet once a month, and we invite in that occasion too, a Qur'anic teacher to preach and read the words of Allah, to talk about the wellbeing of the child, his education, his rights and his duties.... Islam forbids hitting severely or savagely a woman, let alone a child [FGD with Muslim wives, T1, Senegal].

The wives thus become involved as informal faith leaders in their own right, drawing upon religious structures and opportunities, religious gatherings offer to bring about social change that they have identified as important. The women took the initiative to address issues within their religious groupings from an emic perspective, as they understand the concerns and challenges of the congregation they are part of. To strengthen this approach, the wives worked predominantly with two types of actors: their husbands and other formal and informal child protection actors.

Working together with their own husbands regarding child protection issues occurred predominantly in relation to individual domestic cases which necessitated intervention on a family level. The husbands have moral authority due to their religious status as well as community leaders who have influence over deciding a course of action, should this be necessary. Additionally, approaching families as a husband-wife couple allows them to speak to other male and female couples in a locally acceptable manner. This approach was more common amongst Christian than Muslim faith leaders and wives; however, there were also instances where the imam and his wife worked together as part of a mutually reinforcing husband-wife team:

The Imam, during the naming ceremonies, always preaches on children-related issues. He reminds parents that children must have birth certificates. And the heads of households are really submissive to the Imam. All that the Imam tells them about child well-being, they accept and collaborate with him for the work. On my side too we are working well through our women's group to fulfill the same tasks [FGD with Muslim wives, T1, Senegal].

Connecting with other child protection actors was used by the wives in situations where they realised that their influence is insufficient to change entrenched social norms or when corruption, through the taking of bribes, circumvents perpetrators being brought to justice:

You know, some of us know that there is a certain level at which we should end, in that if I am a church person, and I have talked and it has failed, I have to end there. I understand that oh! there are procedures I can follow ...we have to look for another committee in the community that works on children or to go to LC⁷, ... you can go to the CDO⁸ or to police, there is a person in charge. Or if there is someone in the middle there who wants to eat a bribe, I can continue ahead to another level to see that I finally win on behalf of that child [FGD with Christian wives, T1, Uganda].

⁷ Local Council constituted of government officials responsible of social and welfare issues at local municipal level.

⁸ Community Development Officer responsible for community development, including children's rights, as part of the government structures at district level.

The initiatives to actively seek assistance from other child protection actors, as outlined as part of the CoH workshops where some of these actors were present, demonstrates the wives' ability to bridge the formal/informal divide and to show how faith and secular actors can collaborate effectively to achieve their aims.

Challenges experienced by wives

Social, cultural, resource-related and personal challenges were recounted by the wives in their attempts to improve child protection and address social norms and practices within their communities. A reluctance for community members to be engaged due to time constraints, disinterest in the specific issues and 'mobilisation fatigue' leads to irregular attendance at community sensitisation meetings:

... some people get bored of seeing the same faces every time. Because when you call for a meeting, people begin to grumble: "Again it is so and so calling us, aaah". So it would be better if we equally share this responsibility [FGD with Muslim and Christian wives, T1, Uganda].

The wives recognized that deeply entrenched social norms around how children, and particularly girls, are viewed means that a limited number of mobilization and sensitization sessions cannot change what are embedded attitudes and behaviours. The manifestation of such norms in almost all spheres of domestic and communal life is widespread and difficult to counter. Some decisions concerning children are seen as the remit of families themselves, where outside interference is not acceptable nor justifiable.

The inability to assist children and families with physical and material resources contributes to rejection experienced by some wives which the wives saw as a major challenge and felt that community members were to some extent justified in their responses:

Now like for us... you reach their home and you find that the other children are also not in school and the mother tells you that "we don't even have food to feed on". So we find it challenging because we don't have much to offer but just sacrificing the little we have because on top of that, we also have to provide for our own families [FGD with Christian wives, T1, Uganda].

The controversial nature of some child protection concerns that they were trying to address at times made the wives' position complex and divisive. This most notable concerned corporal punishment of children, which was viewed in all communities in Senegal and Uganda as accepted – and beneficial - parenting practice. Attitudes towards the physical punishment of children varied amongst the wives themselves, with some being convinced that it must be stopped, and many others expressing the view that light beating is necessary when the child is young and cannot, according to them, be reasoned with. In informal conversations with women in the communities, it emerged that when children are not beaten by their parents, the children are viewed with a mixture of pity and an expectation that bad behaviour will follow. Their parents are considered neglectful, as they do not care if their children start behaving badly, and to avoid being seen as a 'bad mother' many women beat their children in public view to circumvent this:

What I never agreed with is over-pampering children, when I don't discipline him. Okay, I have not said that I should cane to kill but at least I should discipline a bit. ...because when

I over -pamper a child like an egg, I might again bring him problems in the future in that he will grow up knowing that he ... has no manners, he ...has no respect for all people, even the father, ... You see that he is not well behaved and when I see that he has gone astray, I have to mould a bit [FGD with Christian wives, Ta, Uganda].

A further difficulty was that some wives did not have the backing of their husbands, who may, as faith leaders, be directly involved in perpetrating harmful practices themselves.

Imams need to be educated on the rightful age of girls to marry because they always consent to girls marrying at a very young age which has implications in child delivery and caring for the child [KII with a Muslim wife, Baseline, Senegal].

The wives were thus at times critical of their own husbands and other faith leaders:

The [faith leaders] should ensure that children are not exploited because I see that some religious leaders use five-year-old children in the fieldwork [FGD with Muslim wives, T1, Senegal].

The criticisms underscore the fact that the wives are independent actors who can work – or at least – express opinions that differ from those of their husbands in significant ways, especially when harmful practices have been identified.

The women also talked about personal challenges, including their own lack of confidence in assuming a leading role or in confronting harmful practices within the communities. While this was, on one level, a matter of personal judgement as to their own levels of skills, knowledge and ability, on another level it relates to their relative status as faith leaders' wives. Some of the wives did not have the confidence to engage with other women on child rights' issues, feeling that they lacked knowledge, skills and status to do so. Others, however, found their voice through beginning to engage on issues that they felt passionately about such as this young pastor's wife in Uganda:

The moment that changed my life is... [when I] held a meeting to teach them about children's issues: "A child is not supposed to be abused, a child is supposed to be given their needs, a child is supposed to be shown religion". ... I sat down with people who were above 30 [years of age], it changed my life and I felt it and said, "Eeeh" so I have also got respect. People listen to me on what am speaking out and teaching them". I also said: "Who am I, who can stand and speak and people listen to me like this?" [FGD with Christian wives, Ta, Uganda].

Some of the wives thus started on a road of discovery and personal development that leads to the development of greater confidence as leaders within their congregations and communities.

Discussion

The wives are not the primary target group for the CoH CP programme which focuses primarily on their husbands, the faith leaders. They are thus included in the workshops and activities by virtue of their marriage, and not because of their own standing and roles in the communities. As shown above, they constitute a diverse group of people with a range of demographic profiles, ages, and denominations as well as the various roles they fulfill within their congregations. While some are respected faith leaders in their own right with distinct responsibilities in religious and

communal life, others are ordinary faith and community members with no particular position beyond that of a married woman. The variations in roles and perceived remit (both their personal and the social perceptions of the remit) as well as capacities played a part in how the wives approach child protection issues, how active they are and the changes they seek to initiate.

This study suggests that some wives have a high level of engagement, enthusiasm and motivation to address child protection issues. In a previous study of CoH in Malawi, strong satisfaction was expressed by the pastors' wives about their inclusion in the programme, which was also evident in Uganda and Senegal:

Normally we are just the wives. We are not important - our husbands are important. But this time we could go to the workshop and this was very good [FGD with Christian wives, Malawi] (Kachale, Eyber & Ager, 2015).

Some used innovative and socially appropriate approaches in which they use the insights gained through the CoH workshops to improve child wellbeing in the communities. The wives operate at the interface between formal and informal approaches, with the ability to speak both as women and as mothers in the community, facing the same dilemmas over how to discipline children, for example, and as respected women leaders who are called upon to comment and negotiate some of the child-related problems. The wives showed that personal insights into how children should be treated and about how damaging some of the existing practices are, were the foundation upon which they built their initiatives. While the insights originated from the CoH workshops, the ideas for how to address CP issues came from the wives themselves. The fact that different initiatives were taken based on opportunities that presented themselves, particular cases of abuse or contextual practices that they decided to 'sensitise' about, shows that the wives used their own judgement on how best to negotiate with community members. The study suggests that the personal transformation of attitudes which occurred in the workshops played a role in allowing the wives to speak with conviction and knowledge based upon their own experience. Engaging them as people of faith and from a faith perspective enabled this transformation to take place.

One central insight that the wives attributed to participation in the CoH workshops is the realisation that children are not the private property of parents but that all adults, women and men, have a collective responsibility for their welfare. This was expressed by the wife above who stated that "every person is responsible for all the children". As indicated in the introduction, it is this shift in perception that enables community mobilization to strengthen existing child protection systems (Daro & Dodge, 2009).

Several controversial issues were being addressed by the wives, including early marriage, corporal punishment and, in Senegal, the treatment of the *talibés*. In both Uganda and Senegal, marriage for girls under 18 is forbidden by law but local practices – sometimes with the assistance of male faith leaders – continue to contravene these laws. The wives differed in how they approached these practices, with some – as illustrated in the title - choosing to boycott events such as the celebrations of an underage girl. The wives, as insiders to the community, have the potential to challenge and disrupt such practices which other formal actors and outsiders do not necessarily have. Not all wives assumed such confrontational stances, however, and most of the wives preferred to use talking and persuasion ('sensitisation') to begin changing social norms that are harmful to children. Changing attitudes and practices concerning physical violence against children was another controversial issue across all communities in both countries, with wives educating, challenging and leading by example to reduce the amount and harshness of corporal punishment. The quotes above indicate that some wives were working towards the complete elimination of physical punishment, whilst others felt that some moderate hitting for younger children was part of good parenting practice. The differences of opinion reflect the fact that the wives continue to operate within contexts where parenting norms are deeply grounded in

convictions not only about what is in the best interests of the child but also what being a good parent means. The wives are not immune to these social norms and do share some of these convictions.

In addition, it is evident that they often seem to be mediating between parents and children, families and schools, and sometimes between faith leaders and children, as is the case with the imams and the *talibés*, where wives felt that the *talibés* were treated harshly by being made to work excessively in the fields. The ability of the wives to inhabit socio-religious spaces and use these to engage in complex personal, family and communal issues is evident through these mediations. The wives initiated many practical actions to improve the wellbeing and protection of children in their communities which included individual, family, congregation and community-focused activities and strategies. These involved working as individuals, as part of a group, with other faith congregation members and collaborating with existing, formal child protection actors in the communities. Noteworthy aspects of this work include the fact that informal mechanisms for community mobilisation were used effectively and flexibly by the wives, often through existing faith-related activities in congregations (i.e. the *dahira*, Sunday school, women's church meetings etc.) thus reinforcing their ability to work from a bottom up emic perspective as opposed to imposition top-down or from the outside.

Conclusion

The unique aspects of the way in which the faith leaders' wives work to improve child protection include their ability to speak as insiders of the communities and 'from the heart' as they have themselves undergone a faith-based conversion that changed their own perspectives on children. They thus engage in a holistic way with social norms, practices and the people who uphold these, not imposing but challenging people to think and respond differently. The wives know what is required, what the difficult circumstances are within which families try to raise their children, and that other ways are possible some of the time. Through the legitimacy that this brings with it, and their existing social relationships between neighbours and congregation members, they are able to start these conversations and influence others around them. Faith leaders' wives have long-term stakes in their communities, and as such are accepted as people whose actions and words contain authentic and sustainable approaches to child protection. This applies, however, not only to the wives but also to other women who are active and/or prominent in the communities. The contribution that CoH has made here, is to bring child protection to the attention of women through personal insight from a faith perspective and give some more reticent wives the motivation to become active community mobilisers.

Yet the work that the faith leaders' wives engage in is often unseen and unrecognized as they are largely disregarded by formal child protection systems and NGOs working to improve child wellbeing in communities. Formal child protection systems tend to separate secular from faith actors as the latter are seen as having mostly a welfare remit for child wellbeing but little involvement beyond this. Given that child protection issues are complex and contextual, but are always based on shared values, the contributions that the wives make to changing attitudes is hugely important in promoting positive and sustainable change from grassroots up. Their position as local faith actors involved in informal community mobilisation activities needs to be recognised to support their activities, given the significant challenges that they experienced in their activities. As the wives become active champions of child protection, their legitimacy and credibility not only as local actors but also as leaders in their own right needs to be supported through capacity-

building focused on empowering them with positive parenting, conflict mediation and community mobilization skills. Faith leaders' wives, despite the difficulties they encounter, emerge as significant contributors to changing negative norms in their communities.

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