

“Interfaith Brief on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

“Created in Gods Image”

Southern Africa Faith Leaders Support Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights for All

1. INTRODUCTION

We, as members of the faith community, believe that we cannot stand by and watch when our people are without information on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) within a region which accounts for 10% to 13% of maternal mortality,¹ 95% of teenage pregnancies worldwide² and an HIV burden that estimates one in five adults aged between 15 and 49 to be HIV positive.³ Girls Not Brides⁴ estimates that “15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriages in the world are in Africa”.⁵ In sub-Saharan Africa it is estimated that 39% of girls are married before their 18th birthday, while 13% are married by their 15th birthday.⁶ Child brides are most likely to be found in rural areas, among the poorest and most illiterate segments of the population.⁷ Faith communities are present in all these societies.

We have a collective duty as the faith community to use our leadership influence to educate and advocate for greater access to age- and context-appropriate SRHR information and services. We acknowledge the existence of SRHR policies in 13 out of 15 countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), some of which are outdated and need to be updated to align with the Southern African Development Community SRHR Strategy 2019-2030.⁸

As faith communities in Southern Africa, we have been responding to, and will continue to respond to, issues relating to SRHR. We have been actively involved in preventing and responding to early and unplanned pregnancies, child marriage, gender-based violence, and HIV/AIDS.⁹ While we concede that “we have a mixed track record, sometimes promoting empowerment and fostering protection; and at other times suppressing young people’s rights and hampering their wellbeing,”¹⁰ we are determined to deepen and strengthen our responses to SRHR issues. Building on the teachings of our respective faiths, we are striving to promote the health and wellbeing of all our members.



This policy brief represents reflections by theologians from diverse communities of faith, on the engagement of such communities with issues relating to SRHR in Southern Africa. It serves to communicate the value that the faith communities bring to the discourse and practice of SRHR in the region. Further, it expresses the centrality of faith to the debates and activities relating to SRHR at different levels.

2. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

As communities of faith, we are called upon to attend to the “total person,” that is, address the person holistically. We are enjoined by our different religious traditions to address the physical, social, spiritual, emotional, occupational, intellectual, political, security, economic and environmental dimensions of wellness. Consequently, issues relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights are integral to our identity as communities of faith. We are acutely aware of the numerous SRHR challenges that adolescents and young people in our region face.

"We bring about the compassionate face of God in Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights discussions"

Father Oliver Siandele

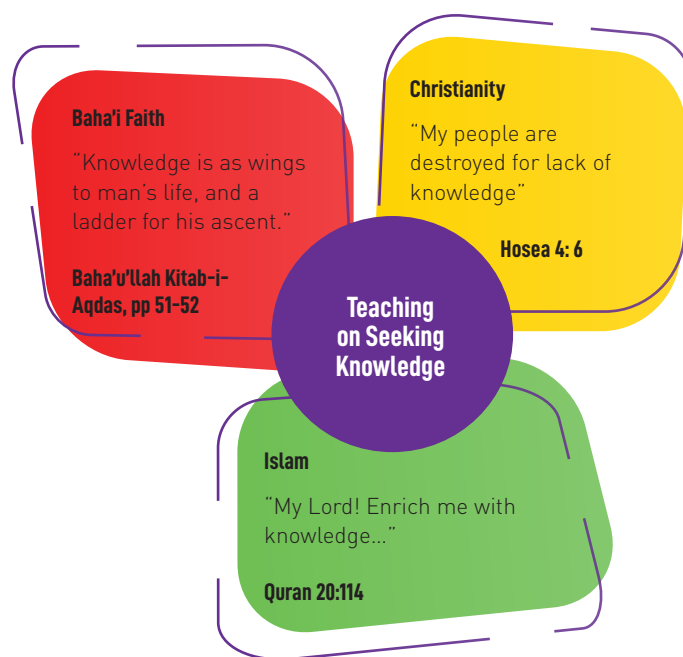
In particular, we are struck by the high incidence of teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence and the high incidences of HIV among young women in the region.¹¹ We also take note of cyber and other forms of bullying in our communities, especially among children and adolescents.

We interact and engage regularly with individuals, families and communities and are very well placed to promote holistic health. We guide individuals "from the womb to the tomb" and are central to the success of SRHR initiatives at the local, national and regional levels. From our different faith backgrounds, we understand SRHR as being:

Our faith encourages all people, including adolescents and youth, to acquire life-giving knowledge. Accessing age-appropriate, accurate and up-to-date information about how our bodies function, promoting healthy

The right of all human beings to have access to knowledge, information and services relating to their health, sexual and reproductive roles whilst upholding the common humanity and dignity for all. Sexual and reproductive Health and Rights expresses this quest for all human beings to be who they have been created to be and be treated as worthy persons.¹²

sexuality and preventing violence, provides individuals with a sound platform to contribute towards national and regional development. We encourage our members to seek knowledge relating to SRHR so that, alongside the teaching of our faiths, they can make informed decisions. Seeking knowledge is central to the teachings of our faith traditions, as explained below.



By promoting effective SRHR programmes, our communities of faith in Southern Africa will also be contributing towards the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals are consistent with our faith. For example, investing in SRHR will contribute towards meeting SDG 3, to "Ensure healthy lives for all and promote the well-being for all at all ages," and SDG 5, to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."

Our sacred writings and teachings, traditions and reflections guide us in our response to SRHR. Some of the central principles are explained below.

2.1. Created Equal

"In God, we all have one face"

Imam Lawrence Turo

We are convinced and uphold the principle that men and women are created equal. We concede that sometimes our teaching, interpretations of holy texts and practice has not demonstrated this basic truth. In many instances, we have used problematic interpretations of our sacred texts to allow boys and men to have more opportunities than girls and women. This has had unfortunate consequences, both in our faith communities and in the larger society. Bias against girls and women has stalled the development of our families, communities, countries and the region.



We seek to promote the positive interpretations of sacred texts to reflect the dignity of all human beings. Our communities of faith will continue to strive to teach and exemplify the principle that all human beings, regardless of sex and gender, are created equal.

Our active involvement in SRHR as faith communities in Southern Africa is, therefore, motivated by the following principles:

- **Reflecting the face of God**

We consider human beings as being, "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14) and "all created by God" (Quran 39: 6). Our communities of faith invest in SRHR because it enables human beings to develop and enjoy full and fulfilling lives. Every human being is valuable and must be respected as he or she reflects the image of God. Human beings possess inherent dignity. Therefore, our approach to SRHR is inclusive, as we seek to ensure that all human beings access quality information and services, as guided by our faith traditions.

- **Compassionate Care**

Our different faiths make it clear: we are responsible for each other's welfare. We are 'our brother's and sister's keeper. As human beings, we are not atoms that float about without relating to one another. Each one of our traditions teaches that we have the responsibility of caring for each other. In the Southern African region, the concept of Ubuntu, "I am because you are, and because we are, therefore I am," promotes solidarity. As such, from our faith standpoints, we stand in solidarity with adolescents and youth as well as adults, as they negotiate SRHR issues

in life. We therefore have an obligation to provide support to teenage girls who fall pregnant, to teenage fathers, as well as young people who survive gender-based violence.

- **Dignity for all**

Stigma and discrimination against fellow human beings goes against the basic tenets of our faith. As people of faith, we affirm the worth, value and dignity of all human beings. We refuse to associate with those who attack, demean and ostracise others in the name of our faith. We uphold the conviction that all human beings must be respected and that their dignity should not be compromised. Human dignity is central to our approach to SRHR in our families, communities, nations and the region. Genesis 1: 27 in Christianity communicates the view that the human being was created in the image of God. Human dignity (karamah) in Islam is grounded in the Quranic verse: "We have bestowed dignity on the children of Adam... and conferred upon them special favours above the greater part of Our creation." (17:70). In the Baha'i faith, equality and human dignity are seen as being the same for women and men: "Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element. As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs." (Abdu'l-Baha: "The Promulgation of Universal Peace")



- **Conscience**

Alongside our sacred writings, teachings and traditions, individual conscience plays an important role in our response to SRHR. Our different religions are united in the belief that God gifted humans with conscience. This is the "inner voice" that enables people of different faiths to separate right from wrong. Conscience is a powerful resource that facilitates people of faith to respond to contested SRHR issues, alongside sacred writings and teachings found in our respective traditions.

2.2. Role of faith in promoting justice for all

"An injustice to one is an injustice to us all as a community of faith. We need to go back to the people we are called to serve and not to power."

Bishop A.M.Mnisi

Another principle that guides us in our response to SRHR is that true faith is meant to promote justice for all. Faith is not distant or far removed from the affairs of the world. In fact, our faith must be lived and expressed in concrete terms. Our faith expressions are underpinned by the principle: Do no harm.

Our faith and values serve to guide the faithful. We seek to nurture the people of faith so that they are better equipped to navigate the challenges they face. We are guided by the values of love, acceptance, compassion and solidarity. Therefore, we endeavour to provide accompaniment and journeying with the faithful. We seek to "listen with love," particularly by accepting that adolescents and youth can make mistakes. However, we regard it as our responsibility to be available to offer support to individuals and families as they negotiate life, with both its joys and challenges.

2.3. Spread the message: Using our already existing Internal and external platforms

"Walk this path of faith with us. Bahai teachings say that education is extremely important. If I can't educate my own child, it is a duty to educate a child of the community."

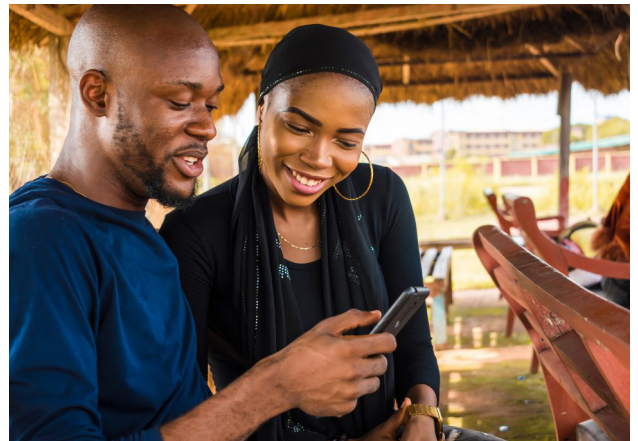
Abdia Naidoo

We are already actively involved in responding to SRHR issues at various levels, although we accept that we could be doing much more. For example, some of our faith communities have developed theologically informed policies and guidelines to respond to SRHR issues. Others are running campaigns against gender-based violence, such as the "Thursdays in Black Campaign". Other initiatives include holding interactive sessions with adolescents and youth, reflections on sacred texts and SRHR, substituting oppressive cultural gender practices with more liberating ones and others. We run schools and health centres that offer SRHR services and information in respect of our faith. In case our faith does not allow,

we refer our clients to other organisations who can do better than ourselves. However, we undertake to engage in the following activities to deepen our response to SRHR issues.

- **Preaching from the sacred platforms**

It is very strategic for us to utilise the sacred platforms that we have, to broadcast positive messages on SRHR. We have the distinct advantage of having large audiences that gather for worship and reflection on different days of the week. We will strive to maximise the opportunities that we have to communicate life-giving messages on SRHR from the sacred platforms that we have within our communities. We advocate for sermon guides to harmonise the interpretation of sacred texts to safeguard against misinterpretation.



- **Community radio**

In many settings, our faith communities own local radio stations. We undertake to do more to ensure that we utilise these community radios to impart relevant SRHR information. They are a valuable resource for sharing ideas, information and good practices relating to SRHR in our communities. They provide information to those hard to reach populations that we serve, alongside addressing social, economic, cultural, educational, health, water and sanitation and disaster related issues.

- **Documentation**

Although our communities of faith are undertaking some activities relating to SRHR, these often go undocumented. One of our major challenges within the faith community has been to engage in many activities, but without documenting them. Therefore, we undertake to embark on more systematic documentation of our SRHR activities. This is also strategic for our monitoring and evaluation process. Our faiths mandate us to ensure that we work effectively and efficiently, hence documentation, monitoring and evaluation are not strange concepts for us. We will strive to design simplified reporting templates that synergise with other forms of internal reporting.

BAHAI FAITH RALLIES AROUND AN ISSUE OF INCEST AND FAMILY VIOLATION

Some years ago, it so happened that a family became new members of the Bahai faith community. Not too long after their joining, one of their teenage girls fell pregnant. At the time many girls in the area where the family lived sadly found themselves in this situation. After the pregnancy was discovered the girl absented herself from all community spiritual activities and only after the birth of the baby, did she quietly attend some gatherings. Nonetheless, the spiritual institution became aware of the gross violation experienced by the girl and through consultation with

the family confirmed that the father had raped his daughter. This was a shocking revelation and the institution had to find a way to deal with this harsh reality for the well-being of the girl and the rest of the family. Through a process of consultations and approaches to professionals in the Baha'i community, the family took action against the father, who according to other reports had also been involved with other girls and women in the community. He served a prison sentence.

The girl sadly remains scarred by all of this emotionally and the boy child unfortunately struggles with the circumstances surrounding his birth. Some members of the family were so

affected that they moved to another province in an attempt to avoid facing the unbearable truth in the home.

This true story merely touches the surface of the long-term impact of this form of abuse. The girl and her family had access to help and support from the faith community and its institutions. The mother remained active in her faith community activities until her passing and worked at the personal process of healing with support. But the teenage girl and her son are in continuous need of counselling with some days better than others. This perhaps is one of the critical lifelong needs. The Bahai community continues to support the family.

- **Engage the different faith structures within our organisations**

We are cognisant of the fact that our organisations possess structures that ensure that SRHR programmes are rolled out effectively. Many of our organisations are organised according to age and gender; for example, there are groups for youth, women, and men. We endeavour to utilise these structures more strongly to promote effective SRHR initiatives.

- **Collaborate with other stakeholders**

One of the challenges that we have faced as communities of faith is that we are very often exclusively inward looking. This tends to prevent us from collaborating with other stakeholders who are relevant to the response to SRHR. These include health professionals, teachers, politicians,

legal officers and others. In many instances, these people are members of our communities of faith. Therefore, we seek to be more deliberate in our collaboration with other stakeholders in addressing SRHR in our communities.

- **Share with other faiths**

We recognise the value of collaborating as people of faith. Although some have sought to promote division and competition, we resolve to work together to address the challenges relating to SRHR that we face together. Our sacred texts underscore the importance of working together for the common good. We are confident that by sharing our resources and experiences with people of other faiths, we will develop more effective SRHR programmes. This will contribute towards a healthier, more robust and well-developed region.

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Conclusion

Communities of faith are critical to the success of SRHR initiatives in the region. We have huge membership, networks of experts, resources and the commitment to contribute towards effective programmes. Driven by our faith and large pools of motivated volunteers, we have the capacity to provide leadership in the overall response to SRHR at family, community, national and regional level. Our faith is our life blood. It underwrites and informs our engagement with SRHR issues. It drives our passion and sheds light on contested themes. Our faith guides our SRHR involvement and enables us to share the conviction that our participation lays a solid foundation for robust and effective programmes throughout the region.

THIS BRIEF WAS DEVELOPED BY THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS:



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