

# ACT ALLIANCE ZIMBABWE

## NO LONGER SILENT, RAISING FAITH- GENDER CHAMPIONS



LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND AS YOU  
FIGHT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE,  
MEN'S VOICES MUST ALSO BE  
HEARD

REV E MOYO, LUTHERAN CHURCH IN  
ZIMBABWE

### INTRODUCTION

In 2019, ACT Alliance Zimbabwe Forum (Zimbabwe Forum) joined interfaith dialogues on sexual and reproductive health and rights and religion in Southern Africa. The Zimbabwe Forum co-created three interfaith briefs on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies.

ACT Alliance is the largest coalition of Protestant and Orthodox churches and church-related organizations engaged in humanitarian, development, and advocacy work in the world. It consists of more than 130 members working together in over 120 countries to create positive and sustainable change in the lives of poor and marginalised people regardless of their religion, politics, gender, sexual orientation, race or nationality, in keeping with the highest international codes and standards.<sup>1</sup> Within countries, ACT Alliance operates through country Forums. These are shared platforms or spaces comprising ACT members and observers who are in a particular country, sub-region or region.

ACT Alliance Zimbabwe Forum as the Zimbabwe country chapter is deeply rooted in the communities. Members of the Zimbabwe

forum include, Bread for the World, Church of Sweden, Christian Aid Zimbabwe, DanChurch Aid (DCA), Diakonia, Ecumenical Church Leaders Forum, Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, Lutheran Development Services (LDS), Methodist Development and Relief Agency Development Service (MeDRA), Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and Zimbabwe Council of Churches.

The Zimbabwe Forum has identified faith communities in Zimbabwe as active resisters of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRHR) issues in communities. This is mostly because faith communities tend to adopt positions that regard discussion about sex and sexuality as either unacceptable or as promoting promiscuity. However, in Zimbabwe, there is growing acceptance that when faith communities have access to the right information, they do play an important role in implementing SRHR programmes.

### FAITH LEADERS INFLUENCING CHANGE



ACT Alliance Zimbabwe has acknowledged the strategic position of faith leaders in encouraging their communities to address SRHR issues such as teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence (GBV). Religious leaders have authority, live among the people and are trusted. Therefore, the Zimbabwe Forum has actively worked with faith leaders to improve SRHR outcomes in the communities.

Using Contextual Bible Studies (CBS) and theological reflection sessions, ACT Alliance Zimbabwe and its partners invited male and female faith leaders to capacity building workshops on gender-based violence (GBV). The Contextual Bible Study approach helps participants analyse a specific portion of scripture within its given context, while drawing on participants' experiences and perspectives. Hence, the workshops were designed to build faith

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BARAK WAS LED BY DEBORAH AND WILLINGLY WENT TO ASK FOR DIRECTION ON WAR. HE FURTHER REFUSED TO GO INTO BATTLE WITHOUT DEBORAH BEING PHYSICALLY PRESENT, SHOWING THE LEVEL OF TRUST AND RESPECT HE HAD FOR DEBORAH

**JUDGES 4:1-5: CBS, TRANSFORMATIVE MASCULINITIES**

leaders' understanding of the scourge of GBV, urging them to use their pulpits to advocate to end GBV and thereby directing GBV survivors towards viable referral pathways. The Interfaith Advocacy Brief on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) was used as a resource during dialogues where faith leaders challenged each other's attitudes and beliefs from a position of respect and curiosity.

### **START WITH WHATEVER IS IN YOUR HAND**

With the goal of holding transformative dialogues and reaching Christians in Zimbabwe, who constitute approximately 85% of the population, implementation took place in the four major cities of Zimbabwe – Harare (104 participants), Bulawayo (70 participants), Gweru (83 participants) and Mutare (87 participants). The Alliance engaged members of the Apostolic, Catholic and Pentecostal Churches in conversations about the prevalence of GBV in their communities. The dialogues extended to the mandates and influence of faith leaders in speaking out against GBV and assisting survivors.

The use of Contextual Bible Studies and theological reflection sessions focusing on sacred texts which Faith Leaders uphold as the highest measure of love, community and standards, helped

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WE WERE ALL BORN OF A WOMAN; WE OWE IT TO THEM TO RAISE OUR VOICES AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

**REVEREND S. CELE, ECUMENICAL CHURCH LEADERS FORUM**

to contextualise the problem. For instance, the biblical book of Esther was used to articulate and encourage discussions on toxic masculinities, leadership influence, GBV and transformative masculinities.

This ensured that discussions on GBV were anchored in positive and liberating teachings that resonated with members. Training was conducted with 500 male and 200 female faith leaders on how to interpret scripture through a gendered lens, using sacred texts to speak out against GBV and harmful practices

### **SHIFTS AND MOVEMENT**



There was a notable increase in the awareness of and interpretation of texts as faith leaders started using a gendered lens to approach and frame issues. There is a view that the first step towards change is awareness, and on that basis faith leaders have begun to commemorate the 16 Days of Activism against GBV and International Women's Day. The Zimbabwean government and United Nations agencies have officially recognised the efforts of ACT Alliance in ending GBV and have extended hands for partnership and collaboration. Male leaders now discuss GBV in their groups of faith leaders and male community members. This is very promising as positive male engagement is critical in the overall response to GBV.

As these shifts are celebrated, it must also be acknowledged that there were some challenges. Due to the government's restrictions on movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, it became necessary to cancel several meetings and move to online platforms



which was not very popular. Faith leaders generally prefer face-to-face meetings and online meetings did not work well as these appeared to stifle debate. The use of online platforms also automatically excluded those in rural areas without access to electricity and the internet. Extensive time and resources must be invested in the faith leaders to ensure the same level of understanding of SRHR issues across the board and during their efforts to share this knowledge with their communities.

### **IT STARTS WITH A TRICKLE... SOON IT WILL SPRING FORTH!**

Efforts have started towards building a critical mass of faith leaders who have the knowledge and capacity to speak out against GBV. Linkages between service providers and faith leaders have been established to clear the referral path of any obstructions and so that all parties “do no harm”

Gradual change is also evident in the use of scripture. For instance, in the book of Esther, “Vashti” used to be defined as an irreverent woman who was cast out of the palace due to her disobedience and disrespect. However, after the training, the faith leaders started pointing out the irresponsible behaviour of men who expect and make unreasonable demands on their wives. In addition, in 2020, the churches held large International Women's Day Celebrations and commemorated the 16 days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence.

The Alliance is confident that a seed has been planted and will flourish. The faith sector is making great strides towards accepting that GBV is against biblical teachings on equality and dignity. By seeking to fulfil the recommendations, the Alliance anticipates that a sleeping giant of the faith community will become an active agent in the struggle against GBV and in promoting SRHR for everyone.

### **REFERENCES**

1 <https://actalliance.org/about/> Accessed on 10 April 2021

Act Alliance Zimbabwe Forum participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organisations from seven countries in Southern African countries 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; Interfaith brief on gender-based violence; and Interfaith brief on teenage pregnancy. They also identified opportunities in engaging more effectively within their faith communities. Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano supported their action plans through micro-grants and technical assistance, contributing to the inspiring results documented in this case study.

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