

Religious leaders open up spaces for women's leadership

Women and girls are now in leadership positions in religious, student and community-level government institutions

What was the situation before V4C's support?

From the outset of the programme, V4C has been working with a group of 'key influencers' – including religious leaders (RLs) and institutions – that it regards as critical to achieving a change in attitudes towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Up to this point, there were few opportunities for RLs to discuss the misconceptions, biases and socio-cultural practices which disempower women and girls or explore practical ways to address these issues in their work and personal lives. RLs who wanted to speak up about gender equality found it difficult to do so in a way that they thought was consistent with the teachings of their religion.

The changes described in this case study summary follow the outcome described in *'Religious Leaders speak up for gender equality'* which documents how and why RLs have become more gender aware, and are taking action in the spaces they influence.

What did V4C do?

Since February 2015, V4C has facilitated gender and masculinity training for 276 Christian and Muslim religious leaders, and provided follow-up support in the shape of review meetings where RLs can continue to share and learn, and brokering meetings to help secure high-level endorsement.

The gender and masculinity training for religious leaders encourages participants to examine and discuss their own values with regards to gender, the nature of gender roles and stereotypes, definitions and types of violence, and what constitutes healthy and unhealthy relationships.

What happened as a result of V4C's involvement?

Since attending the training, participants have reported a wide range of positive changes, to their own awareness and behaviour, and in their ability to influence others on the issue. Some RLs have begun to promote women's leadership and this has led to a rise in the number of

women taking on senior roles in religious, student and community level government institutions. RLs have had both a direct and indirect impact on these changes to women's leadership – from instigating and determining change to inspiring women who wish to take up leadership roles to do so, and convincing community members of its benefits.

RLs are using their influence to bring about rapid change.

Although it is difficult to draw conclusions about the degree of widespread change, there are several clear examples of how RLs have applied their new insights to influence a relatively fast increase in the number of women leaders. Decisions leading to an immediate change were mostly seen by leaders of independent churches or faith-based centres, where the RL is free to make and implement decisions without seeking approval from their organisation's hierarchy.

Several Christian pastors in Enugu and Kaduna spoke of how they had simply announced that going forward, a proportion of decision-making positions would be allocated to women. One example of this is a Christian leader (a pastor and church founder) from Enugu who reported that he had returned to his congregation after V4C training and appointed a female to head the youth wing of the church. He hoped this, "will promote the message of supporting women in leadership and decision making roles." He also decided to train the men's, women's and youth fellowship leaders so that they can teach others about gender justice in his absence.

Other RLs, while working with less autonomy, have been able to instigate far-reaching changes by teaming up with others in other organisation. RLs within churches with a more complex and extensive organisational structure have also been able to make changes by working in partnership with others across their Diocese. An example of this are the CMO¹ leaders in Enugu who plan to step down gender and masculinity training to all parish priests in their diocese and work with their Bishop to encourage Catholic traditional rulers and town unions to incorporate women into their cabinets and executives.

Muslim leaders from the Islamic Centre in Enugu, which is carrying out a campaign against early child marriage, are encouraging young Muslim women who are members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) to be mentors and teachers and stand out as role models for the younger girls. They have also backed the initiative of a group of female Muslim NYSC members to sensitise other Corps members in the State.

RL endorsements are reinforcing GEWE messages already being received by young women and men.

The support and encouragement of RLs is described by young people as one of several factors that has led to an enabling environment for women to take on leadership roles – particularly among students.

Gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) endorsements expressed by RLs on the radio or at various events in tertiary institutions are reinforcing the messages that young women leaders (and the young men who support or make way for them) are already receiving through V4C training (Purple Academy) and the media (Purple Tinz). For example, one NYSC member

¹ CMO is an umbrella body of all men in the Catholic Church

who was inspired by the V4C training she received, was encouraged by the leader of the Islamic Centre in Enugu to spread the gender equality message to all her NYSC colleagues. She has formed a group who are developing a proposal to reach out to Community Development Service (CDS) groups with GEWE messages² in the various LGAs in Enugu State, beginning by training the Presidents of the various CDS groups, who will then train their members.

What are the reasons for these changes?

V4C training has inspired religious leaders to make unilateral decisions to take action to rectify imbalances in women's representation in structures over which they have authority.

The combined exposure to GEWE messages from V4C training, the words of religious leaders on the radio or speaking in various events and spaces in tertiary institutions have all played a part in increasing women's leadership.

For some religious and women leaders, the V4C intervention simply resonated with their existing conviction about gender equality and was thus only partially the cause of the change. For others it was a revelation and thus almost wholly the cause of their action.

RLs who are convinced of the need for GEWE, have been equipped with the tools and confidence to present and express it in a variety of spaces. For some, this has led to them make changes where they feel they can, while others have been inspired to. In this case, they have opened up spaces for women's leadership and decision-making, and endorsed and inspired women who wish to take up leadership roles to do so.

What lessons have been learned?

1. Creating space for dialogue on GEWE among RLs is critical. Enabling RLs to meet with others and hear ideas, talk through possibilities, and come up with a plan can help them see the range of spaces they can choose to influence, both within their organisation and outside it.
2. RLs are indeed very influential and should continue to be partners in the drive towards GEWE. As V4C learned from its initial scoping studies, they are gatekeepers, and so RLs giving permission can make the difference between people taking action and not. RLs endorsing what the student women are hearing at their places of learning and on-line, has helped to give them a sense of a consistent an enabling environment.
3. GEWE changes can be achieved no matter what the organisational arrangements. An established hierarchy can make policy decisions that mobilise the achievement of extensive change, while a small independent religious organisation can make rapid changes. Where an RL has announced gender balance as policy, the changes have been widespread within that sphere of influence. Women's representation in decision-making bodies of church organisations can be heavily and rapidly influenced by RLs although there is the potential for this to be reversed if the RLs are no longer present to insist on the change.

² The NYSC CDS group is a subgroup within each state NYSC team that plans mini project(s) within the service year in various areas including environmental hygiene, sensitisation on health and livelihoods, economic empowerment, health promotion and human rights. Each group usually is formed of between 50-100 Corps members.