



#ImamsForShe: Concept Note and 5-year Progress Synopsis

I. Background and Introduction:

Violence and discrimination against women and girls in Muslim communities across the world, including in the West, are often rooted in misogynistic cultural practices and religious misinterpretations. To address these factors, which undergird and are used to justify human rights abuses, we must sensitize and empower communities, especially men and boys, to re-examine prevailing narratives that demean and degrade women. This approach relies on inculcating a culture of human rights from the bottom-up and on transforming social norms and policies from the top-down.

To this end, inspired by UN Women's #HeForShe campaign, Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) introduced the #ImamsForShe initiative during the 59th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in March 2015. The initiative was conceived in response to prevailing human rights violations that affect Muslim women and girls, as a platform/network to convene religious leaders for the promotion of women's rights within Islam, and as a method to inoculate communities against fundamentalist and extremist narratives.

The #ImamsForShe initiative's overarching objective is to empower Muslim women and girls, as well as faith leaders, community leaders, youth, Islamic scholars, and organizers of influence in local communities, regardless of gender, committed to challenging misogynistic interpretations of Islamic scripture and eradicating harmful cultural practices in their communities with sensitization training and educational forums, and cultural/arts-based programming.

An integral component of the #ImamsForShe initiative is the #ClubsForShe program, which was developed into an overnight camp that hosts young Muslim women ages 18 - 25 as they engage in education and empowerment activities to develop their leadership, critical thinking, entrepreneurial skills and their economic, social, and sexual and bodily rights in the context of both Islam and international human rights standards. The #ClubsForShe program has been implemented in local communities in Burundi since 2016, and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda since 2018 by our partner the North Corridor Alliance of Imams for Humanitarian Development (AICNDH). Other channels used to amplify the messaging was a weekly AM radio show hosted by a trained imam in Burundi "La Femme en Islam" (Women in Islam) broadcasted nationally reaching 5.9 million listeners. In 2023 we started a #TeenClub in three Islamic high schools introducing the same messaging to a younger audience reaching 2100 teenage boys and girls.

Thanks to Wallace Global Fund, since launch and for the past eight rounds of funding at \$50,000 per year for three countries, the #ImamsForShe project has developed institutional credibility in Burundi, the DRC, and Rwanda. This success has garnered support from prominent religious authorities, including the Chief Muftis of Burundi and



Uganda; the funding of #ClubsForShe programming from UN Women in Burundi in 2020, and from the Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Netherlands funding for the development of an Inclusive Islam Curriculum for children ages 4-10 distributed through our #ImamsForShe network, giving much needed tools for imams to teach gender equity, human rights for all, and care of the environment to children.

II. Conceptual Framework (Strategic Approach):

Fundamentalist cultural and religious practices imposed by patriarchal institutions and actors constrict the ability of women and girls to exercise their rights, and enable cultures in which women's rights violations are neither addressed effectively nor remedied. Muslim women's right to education, right to work in the formal sector, and sexual and bodily rights are also often denied due to widely held patriarchal and misogynistic cultural and religious beliefs, undermining their economic and bodily autonomy and independence. Such beliefs thus pose a threat to the realization of sustainable development, which can only be realized if women and girls are empowered to achieve their human capabilities, have personal agency to contribute economically, and their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

Any attempt to counter and ultimately eliminate these misogynistic social norms must be made in a culturally and religiously appropriate manner to maximize impact. This is especially true at the nexus between women's and girls' sexual and bodily autonomy and economic independence, as enshrined in Goal 5 of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Village imams are influencers. With a congregation of 100 to 120 per village, they have a direct relationship with community members. If an imam preaches in favor of child marriage and thus "there is no point educating girls", that has consequential impact on girls. Building schools will not bring these girls in. Having an #ImamsForShe preach in favor girls' education and her right to work outside the home as an economic investment in caring for the parents in old age, and backed up with religious text is a winning formula for the girl, the parents and for society in meeting its SDGs.

Strategically engaging and collaborating with the network of #ImamsForShe made up of inclusive, women's rights-affirming Muslim faith leaders, community leaders, youth, and organizers (both men and women) as members of the #ImamsForShe network is necessary in creating a safe echo-system, galvanizing the public support needed to achieve positive social, cultural, and policy change.

These actors are uniquely poised to advocate against harmful practices justified in the name of culture and religion (including child, early and forced marriages, marital rape and forced pregnancy, female genital mutilation and cutting, honor killings, and domestic violence) and to promote awareness and education of women's and girl's rights (including rights to inheritance and economic independence, marriage, divorce, autonomy regarding pregnancy, and child custody) within Muslim communities.



Through training, sensitization, capacity building exercises, empowerment activities, and media, members of the #ImamsForShe network and participants of the #ClubsForShe program have served as agents of transformational social change towards the achievement of gender equity within their communities.

A. **Theory of Change (abridged):**

1. Promoting inclusive, rights-affirming narratives of Islam while challenging and subverting those narratives and expressions of religion and culture that undergird or otherwise justify rights violations against women and girls → A positive shift in macro-system norms, attitudes, and practices towards respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the rights of Muslim women and girls at all levels.
2. Community level and grassroots campaigning for religious and legal reform towards the respect, protection, and fulfillment of women's and girl's human rights → Violations to the rights of women, misogyny, and gender-based violence at the societal level decrease in prevalence and ubiquity.
3. Increasing number of women employed in the formal work sector in Muslim societies, and empowering women and girls to contribute to economies for sustainable economic development → Sustainable gender equality in formal work sectors and women's economic empowerment is achieved, as per Goal 5 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
4. Appealing to emotion in order to enable lasting social, attitudinal, and moral change regarding women's and girls' bodily autonomy and SRHR → Gender equitable societies and economies predicated on the sexual and bodily autonomy of women and girls in Muslim societies and the achievement of their human capabilities.

B. **Goals and Objectives:**

1. Establishing a global movement of #ImamsForShe network members who actively and publicly promote and support women's rights, gender parity and women's empowerment in their communities.
2. Providing national and international platforms for policy makers, academics, religious leaders, civil society, lay audience and UN officials to convene and discuss the empowerment of women from within Islam.
3. Raising global awareness about the responsibility of imams, Muslim leaders, and Islamic scholars have in elevating the status of women and girls in their societies from within an inclusive Islam framework.
4. Disseminating educational materials that address women's rights issues to civil society and religious leaders, which are adapted for local contexts and used in Muslim communities.
5. Offering workshops for imams and religious leaders to address community issues related to the rights of women and girls.



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III. 5-year Progress Synopsis on #ImamsForShe and #ClubsForShe Activities:

Through the #ImamsForShe network and #ClubsForShe programming, the following activities are data collected over the course of 5 years between 2016 to 2020, in Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Rwanda by AICNDH. Key outcomes are listed under each respective activity and figures derived from an external program evaluation which relied, in part, on questionnaires distributed to and focus group discussions organized with #ImamsForShe network members, and #ClubsForShe program participants. The evaluation was conducted by the Multisectoral Consultancy and Capacity Building Office in Burundi:

1. Expanding/building roster of #ImamsForShe network and #ClubsForShe participants through recruitment activities and pledges:
 - a. 5 years since launch in 2015 and the #ImamsForShe network has expanded to include a total of 541 religious leaders (referred to as #ImamsForShe Champions) across Burundi , DRC, and Rwanda;
 - b. 988 including 340 in Burundi, 327 in Rwanda and 321 in DRC, have undergone training on the #ImamsForShe campaign;
 - c. 565 #ImamsForShe community group members across Burundi (237), DRC (176), and Rwanda (152);
 - d. 2,770 #ClubsForShe participants (referred to as #ClubsForShe Ambassadors) have been registered across Burundi (870), DRC (920), and Rwanda (980).
2. Creation of/maintenance of inclusive Islam TV and radio programs broadcast in local communities:
 - a. 5.9 million listeners of radio talk show in Burundi;
 - b. Since 2020, monthly television programming has aired on a local national channel in Burundi.
3. Training, capacity building, and empowerment exercises for young women and girls through #ClubsForShe programming to inspire them as autonomous agents of social and cultural change and sustainable development:
 - a. Of the 3,900 women and girls interviewed, 1,049 have reported positive improvements in their ability to exercise decision-making power within the home, to attitudes regarding gender-equitable education opportunities for girls, and engagement of imams and sheikhs in the promotion of women's and girls' rights through the #ImamsForShe initiative;
 - b. Among the 3,900 women and girls interviewed, 3,888 across Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda affirm the contribution that #ImamsForShe and #ClubsForShe programming has made towards increasing schooling of Muslims girls in their communities over the last 3 years.
 - c. Membership of Muslim women in political parties has increased across Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda, with 371 of the 390 women and girls who belong



- to social and political organizations affirming support received through the #ImamsForShe initiative and #ClubsForShe programming;
- d. Business cooperatives and associations were created and organized by Muslim women and girls, with 3,888 out of 3,900 women and girls interviewed indicating they're aware of economic initiatives, business cooperatives, and associations created and led by other Muslim women who received support through #ImamsForShe;
 - e. Muslim women who participated in focus group discussions (of which a total of 12 were organized across all target countries, 4 per country with 25 participants) reported improved knowledge of their SRHR, increased knowledge of family planning services, voluntary screenings, and reduction of early marriage and illegal abortions.
4. Sensitization, training, and capacity building workshops/sessions with Muslim faith leaders to empower them to reinforce and promote the human rights of women from within religion.
 - a. Of the 2,100 imams and sheikhs interviewed, 988 across Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda indicate they have participated in trainings supported by the #ImamsForShe initiative;
 - b. Of the 2,100 imams and sheikhs interviewed, 1,626 across Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda affirm that the #ImamsForShe initiative and #ClubsForShe programming has contributed to the promotion of women's and girls' rights in their communities;
 - c. Out of 2,100 Imams and Sheikhs interviewed, 2,074 including 697 in Burundi, 690 in Rwanda and 687 in the DRC recognize the right of Muslim women to work outside the home;
 - d. Of the 2,100 imams and sheikhs interviewed, 290 across Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda are very satisfied with increased rates of education for women and girls in their communities during the last 3 years, and 773 across all countries are satisfied;
 - e. Of the 2,100 imams and sheikhs interviewed, 1,724 across Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda recognize the right of Muslim women to participate in political affairs on an equal basis with men due to support from the #ImamsForShe initiative;
 - f. Of the 2,100 imams and sheikhs interviewed, 2,096 across Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda pledge to promote and defend women's and girls' rights from within Islam and with the support of the #ImamsForShe initiative.

IV. Conclusion:

Through the #ImamsForShe initiative and #ClubsForShe programming, measurable progress has been made towards improving and achieving the respect for, protection, and fulfillment of the human rights of women and girls in Muslim communities in Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda. Participants reported improvements that reflect key aspects of the intended outcomes and impacts of #ImamsForShe and #ClubsForShe as indicated by the figures and qualitative assessments provided above. These outcomes and impacts were achieved with only \$250,000 over the course of 5 years of program implementation.



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Sustainable funding and support is needed to expand the initiative even further and build the capacity of our partners to increase their scope of engagement within their communities and beyond. MPV intends to tap into the momentum generated by the successes of #ImamsForShe and #ClubsForShe in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda to scale up in 10 East African countries to meaningfully engage and positively impact the lives of about 54 million people across local Muslim communities in those countries.



Pictured: #ClubsForShe graduates



Pictured: Imam Khalfan & Ani Zonneveld