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Strengthening Women's Leadership in Faith Communities to Prevent Gender-Based Violence

Learning from SASA! Faith Implementation in Zimbabwe

BIKITA · MUTASA · INSIZA

Implemented by

Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA) · Youth Alive Zimbabwe (YAZIM) · Emthonjeni Women's Forum (EWF) · Trócaire

Irish Civil Society Partnership Programme

Executive Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a major challenge in Zimbabwe, driven by harmful social norms, unequal power relations and discriminatory gender practices. Since 2023, the SASA! Faith programme has been implemented by the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe, Africa (UDACIZA), Youth Alive Zimbabwe (YAZIM) and Emthonjeni Women's Forum (EWF), with technical and financial support from Trócaire. The programme uses faith institutions as platforms for transforming harmful social norms, strengthening women's leadership and preventing GBV.

276 women assumed leadership positions	**27** Gender Desks established
11 Church Gender Committees	**3** districts: Bikita, Mutasa, Insiza

Implementation across Bikita, Mutasa and Insiza districts demonstrated that faith institutions can become effective agents of social change when women, men and religious leaders are intentionally engaged in dialogue on power, justice and gender equality. Women increasingly assumed leadership positions, facilitated community dialogues, supported survivors of violence and participated in church decision-making. Religious leaders also played an important role in promoting gender-equitable interpretations of scripture while strengthened collaboration between churches and GBV service providers improved referral pathways and survivor support.

The programme also contributed to institutional reforms within participating churches through the establishment of Gender Desks and Church Gender Committees, creating safer spaces for survivors and strengthening safeguarding systems. Although challenges such as patriarchal resistance, conservative theological interpretations and stigma surrounding GBV persisted, implementation demonstrated that these barriers can be addressed through sustained dialogue, mentoring and institutional commitment.

> *The report concludes that strengthening women's leadership within faith communities is both an important outcome and an effective strategy for preventing GBV.*

Continued investment in faith-based leadership development, institutional reforms, safeguarding systems and partnerships with faith leaders will be essential for sustaining and expanding these achievements.

Background and Context

Gender-based violence remains one of Zimbabwe's most persistent human rights and public health challenges. Harmful social norms, unequal power relations and discriminatory gender practices continue to limit women's participation in leadership while increasing their vulnerability to violence. These challenges are particularly evident in rural districts such as Bikita, Mutasa and Insiza, where poverty, recurrent climate shocks and changing livelihood patterns have further increased household stress and risks of violence against women and girls.



Figure 1: *A woman giving her testimony during the celebration of women's leadership on International Women's Day in Ward 15 at Nazarene Church.*

Faith institutions occupy a unique position within Zimbabwean society. They shape community values, influence social norms and provide guidance to millions of people. While some religious teachings have historically reinforced unequal gender relations and discouraged survivors from reporting violence, faith communities also possess significant potential to promote justice, equality and non-violence when scripture is interpreted through a gender-transformative lens.

Recognising this opportunity, UDACIZA, EWF, YAZIM and Trócaire introduced the SASA! Faith methodology to strengthen women's leadership and promote positive social norms within faith communities. Adapted from the Raising Voices SASA! methodology, the programme guides communities through the Start, Awareness, Support and Action phases, encouraging critical reflection on power, gender and violence while promoting justice, peace and dignity.

This learning report documents implementation experiences from Bikita, Mutasa and Insiza districts and highlights lessons that can inform future faith-based programming on gender equality and GBV prevention.

Programme Overview

SASA! Faith is a faith-based community mobilisation approach that combines scripture-based reflection, participatory learning and social norms change to prevent violence against women and girls. Working through existing faith institutions, the programme strengthens women's confidence, leadership skills and participation in decision-making while engaging religious leaders, congregants, community men and women, Community Activists and traditional leaders in promoting gender equality.

Implementation was supported through partnerships between UDACIZA, EWF, YAZIM and Trócaire under the Irish Civil Society Partnership Programme. Collaboration with government departments, the Zimbabwe Republic Police Victim Friendly Unit, Musasa, the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association and health facilities strengthened survivor referral pathways and improved access to legal, psychosocial and health services.

> *Rather than creating parallel structures, SASA! Faith strengthened existing church systems, increasing local ownership and improving prospects for sustainability.*



Figure 2: *Women posing after an engagement meeting with EWF in Ward 19.*

Women's Leadership Before SASA! Faith

Before implementation, women actively contributed to church life through caregiving, fundraising, counselling and organising church activities but had limited influence over leadership and decision-making. Leadership positions were predominantly occupied by men, while women were expected to perform supportive roles that reflected deeply rooted patriarchal interpretations of scripture and cultural norms.

These unequal power relations also affected responses to GBV. Violence was often viewed as a private family matter, discouraging survivors from seeking support and limiting opportunities for faith institutions to address violence openly. Women's limited participation in leadership meant that safeguarding, survivor support and gender equality received little attention within church governance.

Strategies to Strengthen Women's Leadership

- SASA! Faith strengthened women's leadership through an integrated approach that combined **confidence building, mentoring, theological reflection and institutional reform**. Women participated in safe dialogue spaces where they discussed gender inequality, leadership barriers and violence, while practical leadership opportunities enabled them to facilitate discussions, coordinate faith community activities and participate in church governance.
- Scripture-based reflection challenged harmful interpretations of religious teachings by highlighting biblical principles of justice, dignity and equality. At the same time the programme established **Gender Desks and Church Gender Committees** that strengthened safeguarding systems while creating practical leadership opportunities for women.
- Recognising that sustainable change requires collective action, SASA! Faith actively engaged all ecological model levels through dialogues and **positive masculinity** discussions that promoted shared leadership and equitable relationships.



Figure 3: *Female Gender Desk members posing for a photo during First Line Support Training.*

Results

- Implementation demonstrated significant progress in strengthening women's leadership and transforming faith communities. Across the programme districts, **276 women assumed leadership positions** within faith institutions, increasing women's visibility, confidence and participation in church governance. Religious leaders increasingly recognised women's leadership abilities while churches integrated messages on equality, respect and non-violence into sermons, bible studies and pastoral counselling.
- Institutional reforms further strengthened safeguarding and survivor support. The establishment of **27 Gender Desks and 11 Church Gender Committees** improved referral pathways, increased survivor confidence in seeking help and strengthened collaboration between churches and specialised GBV service providers. Women serving within these structures became trusted advocates, mentors and referral focal persons,

demonstrating that women's leadership contributes directly to community protection systems.



Figure 4: *Francisca Mudzeke, elected Regional Leader of the Chiedza Apostolic Church from Ward 1, Mutasa District.*

- The programme also contributed to significant institutional changes within participating churches. In **Mutasa District**, policy reforms within the Pentecost Apostolic Church enabled women to assume leadership positions for the first time, while Chiedza Apostolic Church appointed a woman to oversee women's ministries across affiliated churches in Southern Africa. In **Bikita District**, the Kuratidzwa kwaJohane Apostolic Church revised its constitution to allow women to occupy senior prophetic positions (Rabaoma). These examples demonstrate that sustained engagement with faith leaders can influence institutional policy and create more inclusive leadership structures.



Figure 5: *Anna Ngwarirai, elected Rabaoma of the Kuratidzwa KwaJohane Apostolic Church from Ward 21, Bikita District.*

- Beyond increasing women's representation, the programme strengthened community ownership of GBV prevention. Women leaders became advocates for gender equality, male allies increasingly supported women's participation in leadership and faith institutions emerged as trusted partners in preventing violence and supporting survivors.



Figure 6: *Joyce Munhundishe, elected Mother Advisor of the Zion Apostolic Church from Ward 13, Bikita District.*

Lessons Learnt

- Meaningful social norms change requires **sustained engagement with religious leaders** whose influence helps legitimise discussions on gender equality within faith communities.

- Strengthening women's leadership requires **practical opportunities** for women to exercise leadership rather than training alone.
- Engaging men and religious leaders alongside women reduces resistance and encourages shared ownership of gender equality.
- Institutional structures such as Gender Desks and Church Gender Committees strengthen sustainability by embedding safeguarding and leadership within church systems.
- Partnerships between faith institutions, government departments and specialised GBV service providers enhance referral pathways and improve survivor support.



Figure 7: *Feedback session on women in church leadership, bringing together women from different faith spaces in Bikita District.*

Challenges and Adaptations

Key challenges included patriarchal resistance to women's leadership, conservative theological interpretations and stigma surrounding GBV. Women leaders occasionally experienced resistance from families and faith communities while differences in church doctrine influenced the pace of institutional change.

In response the programme strengthened engagement with religious leaders, expanded mentoring for women leaders and increased dialogue with men on positive masculinity and shared leadership. Greater integration of SASA! Faith activities into routine church programmes also strengthened institutional ownership and sustainability.

Recommendations and Sustainability

Future programming should continue strengthening women's leadership through mentoring, theological reflection and practical leadership opportunities while supporting churches to review policies that limit women's participation in governance. Continued investment in Gender Desks and Church Gender Committees will help sustain safeguarding systems and survivor support.

There is significant potential to expand SASA! Faith to additional districts and denominations by building on existing faith structures and local leadership. Integrating gender-transformative leadership into theological education, strengthening peer learning among churches and supporting Community Activists to mentor new faith communities would further enhance sustainability and facilitate scale-up.



Figure 8: *A group of women from Mutasa District from Zviratidzo ZvavaPostori Church.*

Conclusion

The SASA! Faith implementation experience demonstrates that faith institutions can play a transformative role in preventing GBV by addressing the social norms that sustain inequality and violence. Strengthening

women's leadership not only increased women's participation in church governance but also improved safeguarding, strengthened survivor support and fostered greater community ownership of GBV prevention.

The programme shows that sustainable change is achieved through a combination of leadership development, institutional reform, theological reflection and community mobilisation. Although challenges remain the experience from Bikita, Mutasa and Insiza demonstrates that investing in women leaders and working through trusted faith institutions provides a practical and sustainable pathway for advancing gender equality and building safer, more inclusive communities.

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