

SASA!

Faith

Lessons from a 5-Year journey in Sub-Saharan Africa and the South Pacific



Alisi Dari (right) is making a positive influence in her community and at home. She poses with her husband, Tomu (left) who followed her footsteps to become a Community Activist with the House of Sarah in Newtown, Suva.

Photo: UN Women/
Miho Watanabe

What is SASA! Faith?

SASA! Faith is an initiative in which leaders, members and believers of a faith come together to prevent violence against women (VAW) and HIV. It mobilizes faith communities and everyone to live the faith-based values of justice, peace, and dignity in their intimate partner relationships. Adapted by Raising Voices and Trócaire for use in Christian and Muslim communities,¹ **SASA! Faith** seeks change in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behavior and operates through a phased approach. Furthermore, it uses planning, learning and assessment tools to measure the level of engagement and the progress towards achievement of the expected outcomes.

Learning from SASA! Faith implementation in six countries

Raising Voices and Trócaire commissioned an independent study of the first implementation cycle of SASA! Faith, focusing on the work done by multiple implementing partner organisations in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, Fiji, and Ethiopia. The study² included a) a review of learning and assessment reports from different Trócaire and Raising Voices-supported partners; b) 12 virtual joint interviews; and 1 virtual focus group discussion.³ This brief shares some of the key findings of this learning exercise.⁴



Making a difference: SASA! Faith impact

The study found that partners and support staff experienced *SASA! Faith* as impactful at various levels, with many of those involved in *SASA! Faith* choosing to end violence in their own relationships, vigorously promoting non-violence and gender equality in their communities, and supporting survivors and using referral pathways.

SASA! Faith impacts religious leaders. It engages religious leaders directly, both as gatekeepers into religious communities, but also as change agents within communities. For example, in Uganda, Muslim Centre for Justice and Law reported Muslim religious leaders incorporating *SASA! Faith* messaging into their weekly radio programmes and devoted every last Friday of the month to raise awareness on VAW; SOCIWODA in Uganda reported religious leaders dedicating at least one day per week to supporting families and making appropriate referrals.

Many of religious leaders first had to undergo some form of personal transformation before taking up roles in *SASA! Faith* implementation. For instance, A Muslim religious leader called Iman Balinda was selected to be part of *SASA! Faith* roll-out and was asked to join as a community activist. Thereafter, the partner organization learned that Imam Balinda was known throughout the community for ill-treating his three wives, including beating them. The partner considered selecting an alternative mosque to work with but decided to approach Imam Balinda as a 'test' to see if *SASA! Faith* works. They regularly engaged with him through one-on-one sessions, and gradually he began to change and the transition was affirmed by his wives. During *SASA! Faith* sessions, the wives' attitudes changed from bitterness and

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silence to active and positive engagement. They shared stories of the changes in him: of how he now shares tasks with them, how he does not segregate them anymore, and how he now supports them. Imam Balinda became one of the project's strongest community activists since he was previously known in the community for his patriarchal, harmful attitudes towards women, and for beating and mistreating his wives. The changes in his behavior and beliefs convinced many others of the significance of *SASA! Faith* messaging and principles.

SASA! Faith impacts the community activists involved in its implementation. Many community activists experienced their involvement as transformative, for they were guided and encouraged to engage in critical self-reflection and had their capacities strengthened to act as change agents. Some community activists encountered violence or perpetrated violence prior to being enrolled in *SASA! Faith* and it was their journey with *SASA! Faith* that ended that violence:

“ One afternoon, my wife sent me a picture from the training. In the picture, men were using all sorts of violence. I saw myself in those men. For the rest of the afternoon, I kept on thinking about the times I used violence on my wife and kids. Weeks later, (the) Reverend and a few others came to my house, encouraging me to become a community activist. I went to the training and learned about biblical texts. There were verses about how God created men and women equal, giving them authority to look after each other. That was eye-opening... Now I'm a community activist. (Community activist, Fiji).

SASA! Faith emphasizes various categories of power and the importance of balancing power which impacts couples. Partners shared many stories of intimate relationships that were harmful and violent to women, but where a couple was able to mend their relationship and build one where mutual respect is paramount and the violence perpetrated against the woman ended. One such story was of a couple where the wife was regularly experiencing violence at the hands of her husband. One day, after attending church and sharing with a fellow church member about the recent abusive treatment she received, the wife was referred to someone who worked for the Ministry of Women's Affairs – and was also part of *SASA! Faith*. The wife met with this woman, who advised her to start attending the *SASA! Faith* sessions with her husband. She agreed and joined, and after a while the husband also started attending *SASA! Faith* sessions – and it transformed how he sees his wife, their relationship, and the use of violence. Now,

the wife no longer experiences violence, is one of the leading community activists in the programme and has started various successful income-generating activities. Her husband regularly speaks at *SASA! Faith* meetings on how the programme positively impacted him and his relationship with his wife.

Many stories of **impact on the community** were shared. For example, COWLHA in Malawi shared that female initiation practices in the community have changed due to *SASA! Faith*. After community members were exposed to *SASA! Faith*, the length of initiation was reduced from two months to one week, to ensure that girls do not miss an excessive amount of school. WOLREC, also in Malawi, shared that the community ended the harmful practice of testing girls who complete initiation, where they were expected to have sex with a man as a 'test' to see if they have learnt all they needed to know. In Uganda, men who after exposure to *SASA! Faith* had changed how they engage with their wives, formed a group that share their testimonies during *SASA! Faith* meetings. There they explain how much better they and their families are now that they are following the principles of justice, peace, and dignity, as espoused by *SASA! Faith*, but also their religion.

Why does *SASA! Faith* have this impact?

According to partners, *SASA! Faith* allows people to create associations between their religious beliefs and VAW. The faith component of *SASA! Faith* is what convinces believers of the legitimacy and importance of *SASA! Faith* ideas. Furthermore, as *SASA! Faith* can tap into already-existing religious structures, it gets integrated much more easily. It also mobilises religious leaders, who, as gatekeepers and influencers, are crucial to community members' acceptance of *SASA!*

Faith. These leaders also already have a platform and influence, which *SASA! Faith* capitalises on.

“ I think the most impactful aspect of *SASA! Faith* is the fact that it taps into religion to teach. Especially looking at the African context, and (our country), we are really religious. So, it really makes sense how the entire programme was developed to tap into that thing that people really believe in. So just looking at *SASA! Faith* and how it makes sure it does not take away from what the religious faith says but builds on it. (Tracey, Partner staff, April 2022).

SASA! Faith's approach allows it to take the needed time to journey with individuals to achieve social norms change. This approach to learning is different, as it invites people to question and discuss, rather than telling them what they should think.

“ The training content worked really well in supporting people into what can be a new way of learning. For what it is, it is reflective, it is considered, it is strategic... All these parts are coming together to help to come to a place where it isn't just head, absorbing information... There is a curiosity brought into that space that allows for that questioning. Questioning is a key part. We are supporting you in learning to think differently, without telling you what that thought has to be. (Melissa, Support staff, April 2022)

At the same time, *SASA! Faith* could also be used to engage with the wider community (not only the faith community). This helps it to impact the entire community, part of its community-based technique that reaches out to women, men, youth, and community leaders. The communication materials developed make the approach effective even when engaging those with low literacy.



Amina Mohammed, (left) in the company of fellow community activists at Jamia Mosque, Gulu city in one of their weekly women-only spaces meeting

Implementing the SASA! Faith cycle

SASA! Faith has four phases – Start, Awareness, Support and Action – each with specific objectives, activities, and outcomes. In partners' implementation of the phases, constant engagement with community activists and religious leaders, repeated exposure to SASA! Faith ideas and discussions, the building of stakeholder capacity, and putting sustainability measures in place right from the start of implementation, emerged as important to the success of implementation.

In their implementation, partners were supported by the learning and assessment tools and technical assistance provided by Trócaire and Raising Voices. Partners experienced the tools as helping them to understand the situation in the community, see what the impact of SASA! Faith implementation has been, and (re)plan their future implementation accordingly:

“ In whatever the idea you have, you want to implement it on the ground, you still need to have a picture on how you are performing on the ground. So, the tools helped us to know whether we are making a progress or not.
(Steven, Partner staff, April 2022)

Raising Voices and Trócaire provided technical assistance to the partners, consisting of the phase trainings, one-on-one remote assistance, and on-site visits. All partners praised the technical assistance they received, describing it as flexible, non-judgmental, and crucial to the success of their implementation:

“ I think I need a whole hour to tell you about that!

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They provided a lot of technical support... the technical support they provided was enormous
(Denise, Partner staff, April 2022)

“ I don't have words to express their commitment, their support, the way they approach you. Really, personally, I learnt a lot from these guys... We get a lot, we were capacitated, they worked on our challenges... They guided us... I have more than 15 years of professional experience, and I (have never seen) professionals like (this).
(Max, Partner staff, April 2022)

The importance of being agile and adaptable: learning from COVID-19

The cohort of 16 partners started implementation in 2017. With implementation lasting from 3-5 years, all partners were affected by COVID-19. This forced partners to become creative in designing adaptations that can ensure implementation continues.

A key adaptation was the shift to using remote modalities. Depending on the country, this included the use of WhatsApp, Zoom or Skype to do the SASA! Faith activities; engagement via Twitter, Facebook, and text messages; distribution of short video dramas; billboards; sessions on local radio stations; mobile awareness campaigns; distribution of dignity kits or Personal Protective Equipment; tollfree phone lines offering referrals and counselling; and focused media campaigns.

“ The WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter - the ball keeps rolling. Just sitting and saying 'this has happened, so there's no way forward'... it puts everything back to stationary. (With adaptations) the pace of the ball rolling (may) have been decreased to some extent, but still it's rolled.
(Martha, Community Activist).

Partners and community activists came up with innovative methods for SASA! Faith community activists to continue reaching out in-person to community members, despite faith spaces being closed. For example, in some settings SASA! Faith community activists started speaking with anyone as the opportunity presented itself, e.g., at water points or baby weighing stations. In other settings, SASA! Faith community activists started engaging with households through home visits where they would speak with all household members.



Going Forward

Partners that have completed the *SASA! Faith* cycle, or are close to completing it, are convinced that the changes they see at a community level will be sustainable. This is as all four phases, and especially the final Action phase, intentionally worked on strengthening the leadership and response capacities of activists, creating collaborative structures and relationships at community-level.

“ Even if we are not there in the community... Religious leaders are (reacting appropriately when VAW cases arise)... in coordination with community leaders and the other government structures in the community, because their capacity was strengthened... so they are now able to do it. Which assures us of the sustainability of the project, because even if the project ends today, these people will continue to implement the project. Because they now have the skills, the knowledge, they have been empowered to do these things even in the absence of supervisors. (Steven, Partner staff, April 2022).

All the partners want to continue with *SASA! Faith* once they have completed the cycle. Some have even already secured funding to support their scale-up:

“ Trócaire trained us on resource mobilisation... so that we can continue with *SASA! Faith*. One (proposal) was successful, so we have a new donor who is supporting us in implementing *SASA! Faith* in one subcounty” (Carl, Partner staff, April 2022).

In reflecting on their implementation experiences, partners and support staff made the following key recommendations:

To those considering *SASA! Faith* implementation:

- To reach the desired outcomes and impact, follow the *SASA! Faith* phases, using the *SASA! Faith* guide, resources, and materials as stipulated.
- *SASA! Faith* is resource-intensive, so make sure you have the staff, time, and budget to follow the full four phases over a period of 3-5 years.
- Use the *SASA! Faith* learning and assessment tools to guide your implementation and to ensure that you are adjusting and adapting your implementation where needed.

- Do not implement *SASA! Faith* on your own – technical assistance from Trócaire or Raising Voices is a crucial component of successful implementation.

To those considering funding *SASA! Faith* implementation:

- Social norms change takes time. *SASA! Faith* journeys with people to achieve this change. To reach the intended outcomes, and for it to be sustainable, this process cannot be rushed.
- Provide adequate, flexible funding of 3-5 years, so that partners can take the needed time in each phase, to ensure that outcomes are achieved.
- Ensure that the partners you are funding receive the needed support and mentoring to ensure successful *SASA! Faith* roll-out.

Opportunities for further consideration

In the light of the research findings, the following issues were highlighted as needing further discussion and exploration in upcoming cycles of implementation:

Development of guidance to prospective partners on whether *SASA! Faith*, *SASA! Original*, or *SASA! Together* should be used in their context.

- The development of guidance, content and learning and assessment tools to be used with remote modalities.
- More research into understanding under what conditions virtual engagement can achieve the same level of social norms transformation as in-person meetings.
- Development of further guidance on the successful engagement of men, as some partners struggle with this.
- The formation of national-level Communities of Practice, where peer learning and support can take place amongst partners implementing *SASA! Faith*.
- Prioritizing the implementation of *SASA! Faith* within Muslim faith communities, especially Muslim faith communities within Muslim-majority countries, to better understand if and how *SASA! Faith* works in these settings.

Endnotes

- 1 *SASA! Faith* was adapted from the *SASA! Activist Kit*, which was developed by Raising Voices.
- 2 The full report, “There is a forest of stories!” Learning from *SASA! Faith* implementation in six countries, can be accessed here.
- 3 The following partner organisations participated in the research: Diocese of Mutare Community Care Programme (DOMCCP), Zimbabwe; Emthonjeni Women’s Forum (EWF), Zimbabwe; Women’s Empowerment Link (WEL), Kenya; WOLREC, Malawi; COWLHA, Malawi; Muslim Centre for Justice and Law (MCJL), Uganda; SOCIWODA, Uganda; Church of Uganda Tesso Diocese Planning and Development Office (TEDDO), Uganda; Ethiopia Orthodox Church, Ethiopia; House of Sarah, Fiji.
- 4 All the names of participants are pseudonyms, so as to ensure their anonymity. In selecting pseudonyms, typical Western names were intentionally used, so that a participant’s identity is not inadvertently revealed through the use of a name that is associated with a certain country. The term ‘partner staff’ is used to refer to all participants who are/were employed by partner organisations, while ‘support staff’ is used for the Raising Voices and Trócaire staff who were part of joint interviews and the focus group.