



## SUCCESS STORY

### Engaging Religious Leaders To Combat Violence Against Women



Religious leaders participate in a workshop on international law and Islam in Nyala, South Darfur.

**August 2008** – More than five years of armed conflict has led to a general breakdown of law and order in Darfur. Women – and girls in particular – are subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) with alarming regularity. However, as the social fabric of Darfuri communities threatens to unravel, religious leaders remain a trusted source of guidance on matters linked to ethics and human behavior.

USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) supports the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its efforts to engage religious leaders in the fight against SGBV. The UNDP’s Rule of Law Program recently organized a workshop for 56 imams from South Darfur State to initiate a dialogue on the relationship between international law and Islamic values, and to discuss the role that

these key opinion shapers can play in combating violence against women.

The facilitator of the workshop, himself an imam, emphasized the similarities between international human rights standards and the basic principles of Islam, and how both international law and religious values can be used to address the current crisis facing Darfuri women. The workshop, however, did not shy away from contentious issues like female genital mutilation (FGM), which is widely practiced in Darfur and rarely denounced by religious leaders. The imams were exposed to the appalling figures: for every 1,000 cases of FGM, one woman will die during childbirth from circumcision-related complications. Furthermore, more than 20 percent of circumcised women suffer from infertility.

Despite differing opinions, the leaders proved that they are not above a healthy debate on the subject. While some of the imams openly embrace their role in advancing the human rights agenda, others remain skeptical of “international values.”

Initiating a change in attitude among those whose duty it is to bear the flame of religious values is a significant challenge, yet raising awareness among imams and enabling respectful dialogue is a positive first step in the process. Witnessing increasing levels of openness, USAID/OTI and its partner are encouraged that such events not only raise awareness of SGBV among key community leaders but also help build confidence and foster reconciliation by dispelling the popular belief that international law is antithetical to Islamic values.

*“...if we have fifty imams speaking in fifty mosques, this would make a big difference.”*

— A Darfuri imam’s position on fighting extreme forms of female genital mutilation.