

WORLD FAITH

INTERFAITH YOUTH IN ACTION

Measuring Peace: Reducing Acceptance of Religious Violence in Pakistan

The Program of Women's Empowerment and Reform (POWER) in Lahore, Pakistan has a twofold mission: to give women the skills they need to start their own business in order to support themselves and their families, and to create an environment where interfaith collaboration and relationship-building is modeled and normalized.

To evaluate fulfillment of the second part of this mission, we wanted to know if participation in this program improved impressions of religious others, and in turn, helped diminish the likelihood of religious violence. In the most recent class of the POWER program in early 2015, participants were asked to take one survey before starting the program and an identical survey after completing the program to gauge if their attitudes had changed in regard to religious diversity, the role of religion in society, the acceptability of religious violence, and more.

While the content of the POWER program was not focused on interfaith cooperation or understanding, the survey results demonstrate that simply working in a religiously diverse context toward a common goal increased reported comfort with religious others and reduced feelings of anxiety, fear, and violence. Three key data points help illustrate this result:

1. *"I feel comfortable speaking to people from religious traditions different than my own."*

We know that having a single positive relationship with someone of a different religious tradition generally improves how people see others from that community.¹ With this in mind, we asked participants about their degree of comfort in speaking with people from other religious traditions before the program and after, when they had the opportunity to build relationships with their teachers and fellow students of different religious identities.

Before the program, participants reported comfort levels at an average score of 1.55 (on a scale from 1 to 5, with one being "completely disagree" and 5 being "completely agree"). That is, most participants reported being mildly to moderately uncomfortable speaking with people of another religion, as displayed by Figure 1 below.

¹ "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 27, pg. 665

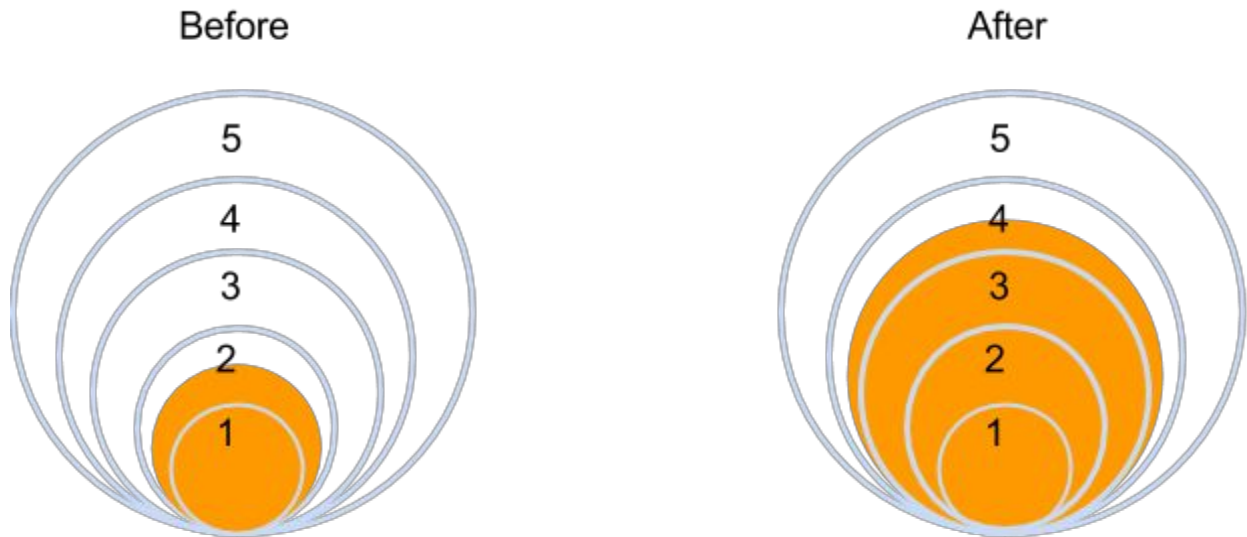


Figure 1

After the POWER program the participants, on average, reported agreement with the statement “I feel comfortable speaking to people from religious traditions different than my own,” a two point (or nearly 40%) change in their reported comfort.

2. “I believe that the rules of my religion should be the laws for all Pakistanis.”

Beyond simply feeling comfortable speaking with people of different faiths, participants also reported a significant change of opinion about national and political issues with regard to religion.

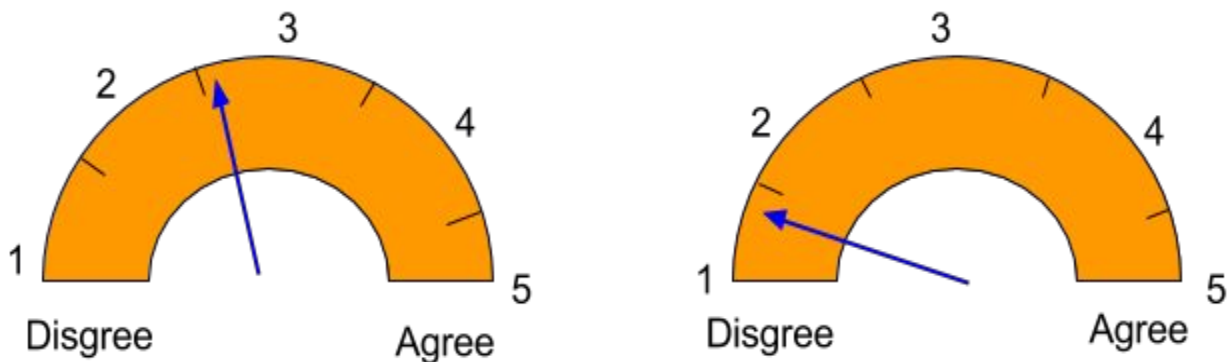


Figure 2



When asked if they believe that the rules of their religion should govern all Pakistanis, participants averaged a score of 2.55 before the program, meaning that they somewhat agreed with the statement. After the program, respondents' average agreement dropped to 1.45, a measurable shift in political views around codification of religious regulation.

3. "I feel violence against people of faiths different than my own is acceptable."

Perhaps the most exciting data emerged from responses to whether participants thought violence against others of a religion was acceptable. Out of the 20 participants, 30% responded with something other than firm disagreement, as shown in Figure 3.

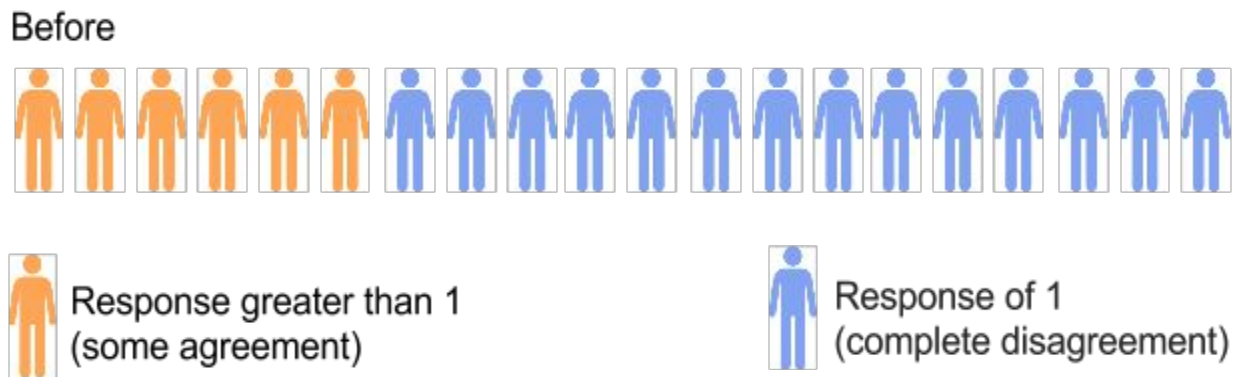


Figure 3

After the POWER program, *not a single respondent* agreed that violence against people of a different faith is acceptable. This data point is the clearest indicator that exposure to religious others in a cooperative setting reduced the likelihood of violence.

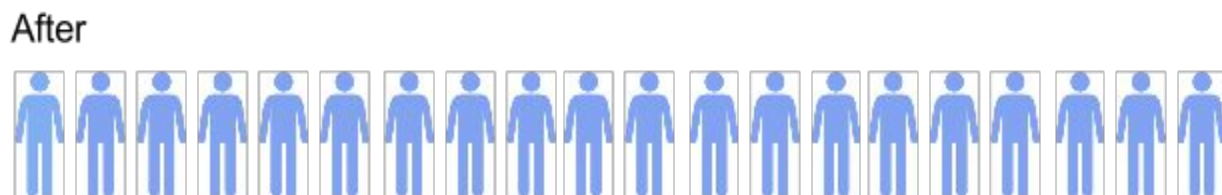


Figure 4



This is especially important in the current socio-political climate of the region. One recent Pew Research study found that, “the highest social hostility concerning religion [occurred] in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Somalia and Israel.” The same study also found that “the share of countries where violence, or the threat of violence, was used to compel people to adhere to religious norms also increased in 2012.”² That the POWER program was able to change the course of these trends, even on such a small scale, demonstrates an exciting success.

Moving Forward

Such a major shift in the attitude of 30% of this population is significant. However, the sample size for this data set is small. These results require replication, both in subsequent sessions of the POWER project, and in World Faith’s other projects with diverse populations all over the world. If we see similar results across our work with upwards of 150,000 beneficiaries worldwide, the data will validate our model of interreligious youth collaboration on key development projects.

The fact that we have observed measurable change in attitudes in this long-standing program has promising implications. If the experience of these 20 women in Pakistan is replicable through other kinds of World Faith programming, bringing this model to a significant scale could significantly stem the tide of religious violence.

Imagine if one million young people in the developing world were involved with a World Faith program. The 300,000 whose attitudes shift from condoning religious violence to denouncing it, from feeling disempowered to regaining agency over their lives, could mean the difference between destabilizing violence and sustained peace in their communities.

² Pew Research Study, *Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High*. January 14, 2014.
<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high>

