

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION REPORT

Rise Academy, San Francisco

Sex education remains a highly sensitive and often controversial topic, particularly in religiously conservative societies. Despite the growing global consensus on the importance of comprehensive sex education, many communities around the world continue to struggle with integrating such programs into their educational systems. In these societies, cultural and religious norms often dictate that discussions around sex, sexuality, and gender roles are either minimal or completely absent from formal education. This lack of education has far-reaching consequences, including the perpetuation of harmful gender norms, increased rates of gender-based violence, and the continuation of unhealthy attitudes towards sex and relationships.

Statistics reveal the alarming gap in sex education within conservative communities. For instance, a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) highlighted that in many regions where religious conservatism is prevalent, fewer than 30% of adolescents receive any form of sex education. This is particularly concerning given the evidence that comprehensive sex education can significantly reduce rates of sexual violence, improve reproductive health outcomes, and foster more equitable relationships between genders. Furthermore, a study by the World Health Organization (WHO) demonstrated that young people who receive sex education are more likely to make informed decisions, delay the onset of sexual activity, and engage in safer sex practices.

The importance of sex education cannot be overstated. It serves as a critical tool in promoting understanding, respect, and healthy behaviors. By equipping young people with accurate information about their bodies, relationships, and consent, sex education can help mitigate the risks associated with misinformation and ignorance. It empowers individuals to make informed choices and fosters attitudes that challenge harmful gender stereotypes. Moreover, sex education plays a vital role in preventing gendered violence by teaching the principles of consent, mutual respect, and equality. In societies where discussions about sex are taboo, the absence of such education only reinforces harmful practices and leaves young people vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

However, in many religiously conservative societies, sex education remains a taboo subject. Cultural and religious beliefs often frame discussions about sex as inappropriate or immoral, particularly when involving young people. This reluctance to address sexual health and education creates significant barriers to implementing comprehensive programs. As a result, many adolescents in these communities grow up with little to no understanding of sexual health, consent, or healthy relationships, leading to a range of

negative outcomes, including unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and pervasive gender-based violence.

Shia Islam, one of the two major branches of Islam, represents a significant portion of the global Muslim population, with adherents primarily concentrated in countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, India, and Lebanon. The Shia faith is characterized by its belief in the spiritual and political leadership of the Imams, who are considered the rightful successors of the Prophet Muhammad. Shias hold a deep reverence for the family of the Prophet, particularly Imam Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and his descendants. This lineage of Imams is central to Shia theology and community life, guiding religious practice and social norms.

The Shia community is known for its rich traditions, including the commemoration of Muharram, which marks the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, a pivotal event that shapes Shia identity and spirituality. These traditions are not just religious observances but are deeply intertwined with the community's values of justice, sacrifice, and solidarity. Shia Muslims emphasize the importance of these values in their daily lives, shaping their approach to education, family, and community engagement.

In San Francisco, the Shia Muslim community is a vibrant and dynamic group, reflecting the diversity and resilience of Shia communities worldwide. While deeply committed to their religious practices, members of this community also navigate the complexities of living in a cosmopolitan and culturally diverse city. This duality creates a unique environment where traditional values meet modern societal pressures, particularly for younger members who are often caught between the expectations of their faith and the realities of life in a secular society.

The Shia community in San Francisco includes individuals and families from various ethnic backgrounds, including Iranian, Iraqi, Pakistani, and Indian origins. This diversity enriches the community's cultural life but also presents challenges in maintaining a cohesive religious identity amidst differing cultural practices. The community is closely knit, with institutions like the Saba Center playing a central role in preserving religious traditions and providing support to its members.

Living in a city like San Francisco, known for its progressive attitudes and cultural diversity, the Shia community often finds itself at the intersection of tradition and modernity. While the community remains steadfast in its religious beliefs, its members are exposed to a wide range of perspectives and lifestyles that can sometimes be at odds with their traditional values. This tension is particularly pronounced for young people who, while being raised in a conservative environment, must also engage with a broader society that holds different views on issues such as gender roles, relationships, and sexual health.

For many young Shia Muslims in San Francisco, the transition from a religiously guided upbringing to interacting with peers in a more secular environment can be challenging. Without a solid foundation in sex education that respects their cultural and religious values, these young individuals may experience significant culture shock when they move on to

higher education or enter the workforce. This shock can manifest in various ways, from confusion and anxiety about relationships and sexual health to difficulties in understanding and navigating gender dynamics in a broader societal context.

The absence of comprehensive sex education leaves these young people ill-equipped to deal with the realities they will face outside their community. For instance, they may struggle with understanding concepts such as consent, gender equality, and sexual health, which are increasingly emphasized in educational institutions and workplaces. Moreover, the lack of such education can perpetuate harmful gender norms and leave students vulnerable to exploitation or misunderstanding in their interactions with others.

The Saba Center and Rise Academy are two institutions that play pivotal roles in the Shia Muslim community in San Francisco. The Saba Center, a hub for religious and cultural activities, is dedicated to fostering the spiritual and educational development of the Shia community. It provides a range of services, including religious instruction, community events, and charitable activities. The Center serves as a vital gathering place for the community, promoting Islamic values and encouraging members to live their lives in accordance with these teachings.

Rise Academy, an educational institution closely associated with the Saba Center, offers a unique blend of religious and academic education. The Academy is committed to providing students with a rigorous academic curriculum while also nurturing their spiritual and moral development. With a focus on instilling Islamic values, Rise Academy prepares students to navigate the complexities of modern life while staying rooted in their faith. The school's mission is to develop well-rounded individuals who can contribute positively to society while maintaining a strong sense of their religious identity.

Rise Academy was selected as the ideal institution to pilot the "*Fitrah* Fulfillment" sex education program due to its dual commitment to academic excellence and religious integrity. *Fitrah* or فِطْرَة in Arabic means the innate disposition of a person, their desires, needs, and nature.

The Academy's close ties to the Saba Center mean that it is deeply embedded in the Shia community, making it uniquely positioned to introduce a curriculum that aligns with both Islamic teachings and contemporary educational standards. Furthermore, Rise Academy's leadership has demonstrated a forward-thinking approach to education, recognizing the need to prepare students for the challenges they will face in a diverse and often secular world.

The project was designed to address these challenges by creating a sex education program that is deeply informed by Islamic teachings while also providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the complexities of modern life. By collaborating with religious scholars, educators, parents, and students, the project aims to develop a curriculum that is both respectful of the community's values and responsive to the realities faced by young people today.

The curriculum is designed to cover a wide range of topics, including sexual health, consent, gender roles, and relationships, all within the context of Islamic ethics. By grounding the program in religious teachings, *Fitrah* Fulfillment seeks to make sex education not just acceptable but integral to the students' spiritual and moral development. The project recognizes that educating young people about sex and relationships is not merely a matter of imparting knowledge but of shaping character and guiding them towards fulfilling, ethical lives.

The decision to pilot this program at Rise Academy is a strategic one, given the institution's commitment to holistic education. The Academy's leadership understands that to prepare their students for the future, they must provide them with the tools to engage with the world in a way that is informed, confident, and grounded in their faith. The success of the project at Rise Academy could serve as a model for other religiously conservative communities grappling with similar challenges, demonstrating that it is possible to provide comprehensive sex education that is both culturally and religiously sensitive.

The project was designed to address the challenges faced by the Shia community in San Francisco by creating a sex education program that is deeply informed by Islamic teachings while also providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate the complexities of modern life. The project involved several key phases, including community consultations, curriculum development, and the piloting of the program at Rise Academy. As the lead on this project, I was responsible for coordinating with religious scholars, educators, parents, and students to develop a curriculum that was both culturally sensitive and educationally robust. The curriculum was designed to cover a wide range of topics, including sexual health, consent, gender roles, and relationships, all within the context of Islamic ethics. The goal was to create a program that was not only informative but also respectful of the community's values, providing students with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions while staying true to their faith.

The impact of the project can be measured through several key indicators. Throughout the six-week course, attendance and engagement levels were consistently high, indicating strong interest and commitment from the students. This was further reinforced by the active participation in discussions and activities during the sessions. To evaluate the effectiveness of the program, pre- and post-module assessments were conducted. These assessments revealed significant improvements in the students' knowledge and understanding of the topics covered, particularly in areas such as consent and healthy relationships. Feedback from the participants, as well as their parents and community leaders, was overwhelmingly positive. Many parents expressed their gratitude for the program, noting that it provided their children with essential knowledge in a manner that was respectful of their religious beliefs. Community leaders also recognized the value of the program in addressing a critical gap in the community's education. Follow-up surveys will be conducted to monitor the long-term impact of the program on participants' behavior

and decision-making. These surveys will help assess whether the knowledge gained during the program has been retained and applied in the students' lives.

The sustainability of the project will be ensured through ongoing community engagement and support from the Saba Center and Rise Academy. By integrating the curriculum into the regular educational offerings at Rise Academy, the program will continue to benefit future generations of students. Additionally, the involvement of religious scholars and community leaders in the development and delivery of the program will help maintain its relevance and acceptance within the community. The project has also set three SMART goals to guide its future development. The success of the project will continue to be measured through attendance, engagement, and assessment results, as well as ongoing feedback from participants and the community. The project is designed to be achievable within the resources and constraints of the community, leveraging the existing infrastructure and support of the Saba Center and involving religious scholars, healthcare professionals, and educators in its delivery. Finally, the project addresses a critical gap in sex education within the Shia Muslim community in San Francisco, contributing to broader societal goals such as gender equality and violence prevention.

Implementing the project was not without its challenges. Integrating modern sex education with Shia Islamic doctrine required a delicate balance to avoid misinterpretations or perceived disrespect towards religious teachings. Additionally, some community members, including parents and religious leaders, were initially skeptical or opposed to discussing topics related to sex openly, particularly with young adults and teenagers. To overcome these barriers, several strategies were employed. From the beginning, the project engaged with community leaders, parents, and potential participants to incorporate their perspectives and address concerns. This inclusive approach helped build trust and ensure that the program was tailored to the needs and sensibilities of the community. The program also ensured confidentiality and created a safe, non-judgmental environment where participants could feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. This was crucial in encouraging honest participation and engagement.

The project represents a significant step forward in addressing the unique challenges faced by the Shia community in San Francisco. By providing a culturally sensitive and religiously informed sex education program, the project has empowered young people to make informed decisions about their health and relationships while remaining true to their faith. The success of the project at Rise Academy demonstrates the potential for similar initiatives in other religiously conservative communities, offering a model for how sex education can be both respectful and effective.