

# Live What You Believe

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*BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN  
GENDER EQUALITY AND  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM*



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Before beginning this journey, we would like to honor the work and contributions of all the experts, women advocates, and partners who supported this booklet. Thank you for leading the path toward increased respect for women's religious freedom.

## Letter from the Director

Welcome to *Live What You Believe*, a booklet designed to equip stakeholders and leaders to support freedom of religion and women's empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Over the last decade, violence toward women from groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, and the Taliban has increased. Despite women's resilience, we rarely hear positive stories of women who challenge these violent acts of intolerance. This booklet, created in partnership with religious freedom advocates, explores how freedom of religion and belief is critical for women's rights, peacebuilding and thriving societies.

Many organizations already put in significant efforts in documenting and publicizing the tragic cases of religious discrimination of women in Muslim contexts. While our booklet acknowledges these human rights violations, our focus is to draw attention to what is not being talked about enough – the many positive benefits of the universal right of freedom of religion, belief, and conscience for women in Muslim-majority contexts. As one of our network participants perfectly explains, “cultivating freedom of belief and conscience unleashes creativity and innovation which is needed more than ever in our increasingly global world.”

With the right tools and approaches, leaders can play a particularly important role in shifting attitudes and building social movements to support religious freedom for all. Unfortunately, religion has sometimes been misused to justify incitement to violence and discrimination toward women, and it is vital that leaders from all faiths show leadership to counter religious-based violations.

In preparation for this booklet, we conducted dozens of interviews with women's rights advocates and religious freedom experts from around the world.

We connected with lawyers, social workers, artists, businesswomen, faith leaders and scholars as they shared their lived experiences. Complementing these interviews, we interwove case studies and women's captivating personal stories about the benefits of religious freedom they shared in their workplace and community.

Through our work and research, we have learnt that women are more entrepreneurial and productive when they are allowed to freely express their beliefs (whether religious or secular) and bring their whole selves to work. Along these lines, Jacqueline Isaac, an international lawyer and religious freedom advocate, makes an excellent point: “We cannot ignore that in order to flourish, people have to be able to address their deepest questions of existence and meaning, both privately and in community with others.” With these words in mind, we are excited to share with you this religious freedom training booklet.

If you have any questions or feedback, feel free to contact us personally. We hope this booklet stimulates rich conversations and fruitful advocacy efforts that shift the culture to support greater religious freedom worldwide. As we continue pushing for change, let us work together to support women's rights to religious freedom and dignity.

**Shirin Taber, Executive Director of Empower**

# I. Religious Freedom: A Platform for Social Change

## Introduction

*When freedom is following a path toward honoring our humanity and our neighbor's humanity, it is a path society can walk together, without forcing each other off the road.<sup>1</sup>*

According to Cardus Religious Freedom Institute, a faith-based think tank dedicated to enhancing public dialogue with independent research and critical reflections, religious freedom protects our 'metaphysical need' to seek meaning, deeply rooted in human nature; "since human beings desire the truth, they must be free to search for it without state interference."<sup>2</sup> Based on this idea, religious freedom is not merely a public affair, a right granted by the state; rather, it "exists because of our humanity."<sup>3</sup>

Building on this idea, this booklet highlights an inclusive concept of religious freedom, focused on human dignity, inviting believers and non-believers alike to consider the value of religious freedom, and the capacity of the individual to seek truth and meaning to transform lives and societies:

*For those who do not believe in God...if they do, however, believe in the dignity of the human person, in justice, in liberty, in neighborly love, they also can cooperate in the realization of such a conception of society and cooperate in the common good.<sup>4</sup>*

“Freedom of religion or belief gives a woman the right to choose for herself what she believes in and how she wants to live her life according to those beliefs. When that freedom is denied, there is a high chance her other human rights, such as freedom of speech and expression, will also be violated.  
-Mariya Dostzadah Goodbrake, NGO leader



## Empower Women Media: Background and Vision Statement

Empower Women Media (EWM) was founded in 2013 by Shirin Taber. Raised by an Iranian Muslim father and an American Christian mother, Taber has authored two books and been a lifelong advocate of religious freedom. EWM supports freedom of conscience and the notion that individuals have the right to explore and define their own faith or non-faith values. For women, this choice is powerful, empowering, and sometimes a matter of life or death.

Across cultures, patriarchal values shape gender roles and expectations placed on women to uphold the purity and honor of the society or community they live in. While it is well-known that women positively contribute to peace and reconciliation internationally – in their roles as mothers, homemakers, caretakers, and agents of change in their own unique contexts – they are often exploited and their rights violated in the name of religion. Male neighbors, community members, as well as local and national leaders continue to misrepresent women, their unique visions, ideas, and understandings of the world. This is something we want to change.

Advocating for female leadership, solidarity across struggles, and accountability in the international community, we seek to offer women opportunities for training, mentoring, networking, and collaboration. We also partner with other human rights and religious freedom organizations, business leaders, policymakers, and high-profile individuals across sectors, to stand up for women's rights to freedom of religion – without compromising their rights, our rights, to gender equality. After all, we are an initiative led by women, for women, seeking to redefine our history and future.

Supporting movements and initiatives for gender equality, and opportunities to change narratives about and for women, we believe there is a significant value and potential in harnessing technology and digital spaces. Therefore, our training is focused on strengthening

women's digital literacy, storytelling, and media engagement. As a result of our women's media training fellowships, film competitions, religious freedom e-courses, and targeted resources, several collaborative media projects have emerged for the Middle East and around the world.

Drawing from lessons learned and women's voices of resilience, this booklet aims to encourage more stakeholders, advocates, and laypeople to create religious freedom strategies and movements for social change, reaching millions and moving the needle for generations to come.



## Live What You Believe: Scope and Research

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is often considered in broad terms, loosely interpreted as a universal human right protected for communities and individuals alike. However, the dialogues, forums, and platforms that promote such values are often dominated by men, failing to include voices from nearly half of the world population.

Despite the diverse and critical roles women have played historically in their faith communities and the struggles women experience at the intersections of religion and gender, women of faith are still largely underrepresented or excluded from awareness-building efforts and decision-making processes in FoRB spaces and beyond. As a women's empowerment organization, we intentionally and strategically advocate together with women from diverse backgrounds to achieve gender equality and religious freedom, at the same time.

To identify women's unique needs for religious freedom and equip advocates with new, practical tools to counter gender gaps, this booklet addresses the following central questions:

- What is the gender gap in religious freedom?
- What is the scope of religious freedom needs for women?
- What are women saying about the need for religious freedom?
- What strategies are religious freedom advocates employing?
- What are the outcomes of religious freedom training for women's empowerment?

## Women and Religious Freedom In the Middle East and North Africa

Since the early 2000s, the world has seen a growing number of atrocities and human rights violations by extremists who use and manipulate religious arguments in their favor, to spread fear and exert violent control over the value systems of societies around the world. We have witnessed a rise in gender and sexual-based violence in the region, exerted by terrorist groups who kidnap innocent young girls and women, traffick them as sex slaves, force them into armed conflict as disposable soldiers, and treat their bodies as a weapon of war both at home and on the battlefield.

In the MENA region, the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to discriminate against young girls and women, justifying child marriages, and harassing or persecuting women and female activists who demand respect for their rights. Egypt allows husbands to divorce their wives without going to court, whereas divorce procedures for women, on the other hand, are made overly difficult and inconvenient. Tunisia, despite its achievements in women's rights, continues to impose unequal inheritance laws, and in Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Syria, and Palestine, rapists are still able to escape punishment through the loophole of marriage. These are just a few examples that demonstrate the significant divide between religious freedom and equal citizenship that limit the lives of millions of women around the world.

In Muslim-majority societies in the MENA region, religious ideas, cultural traditions, and jurisprudence based on the interplay of religion and politics feed patriarchal understandings of women's roles and their rights.<sup>5</sup> Laws and customs, influenced by religious codes and gender bias, are often interpreted as a direct command from God. This further perpetuates the idea that women are naturally unequal to men; that women's natural, God-given roles include subordination to men. In the modern era, where women are constantly renegotiating their roles in society, this worldview leads to discrimination, exploitation, violence, and crimes against women worldwide. Some of these atrocities include but are not limited to the following:

- Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
- Child and/or Forced Marriage
- Polygamy
- Female Infanticide
- Trafficking of Women and Girls
- Unequal Child Custody Laws
- Unequal Divorce Laws
- Unequal Inheritance Laws
- Unequal Transference of Nationality
- Restrictions on Remarriage
- Regulations on Clothing
- Compulsory Hijab
- Guardianship Laws
- Freedom of Movement Laws
- Honor-Based and Domestic Violence

As seen in this list, the civil, political, economic and social rights of women in the MENA region are serious matters. Despite the links between religion and gender, discussions of women's empowerment often overlook the crucial role that religious

freedom plays in achieving gender equality. Women's rights activists in the Muslim world and beyond report that they personally relate religious freedom to women's empowerment. This may be because they support the freedom to choose their religious beliefs or because they engage with feminist interpretations of religious texts. Regardless, the journey toward increased respect for women's religious freedom requires working together, adopting proactive approaches, and engaging with a diversity of viewpoints and voices, to foster positive relationships, ongoing dialogue, and build a shared future for all. By empowering women to speak up about their experiences of discrimination, challenge gender inequality, and promote inclusion-based models of hermeneutics within their communities, we are taking a crucial step for humanity and for hundreds of millions of women around the world.

Dedicated to examining the gender gap in FoRB, this booklet aims to illustrate the unequal relations between men and women, in the eyes of a nation's laws, norms, or customs, and unequal opportunities to fully and freely exercise freedom of religion or belief. For women from marginalized faith communities, this gender gap widens even further through the "intersection of religious vulnerabilities with pervasive, destructive forms of gender inequality and violence," also known as gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP).<sup>6</sup>

To demonstrate the ways in which this gap expresses itself in practice, this booklet highlights specific cases from the MENA region. While we build awareness on violations of women's human rights, the problem remains that religious discrimination against women continues, and little is known about practical solutions to promote reconciliation efforts. Very few organizations provide women training at the grassroots level to shift laws and culture, with religious freedom as a starting point. Therefore, this booklet aims to explore the gender gap and practical solutions that advocates can adopt to develop intersectional tools to comprehensively approach religious freedom and gender equality in the MENA region.

## Closing the Gender Gap

When state actors, policymakers, social workers, the police, business communities, and faith leaders ignore the synergies between religious freedom and gender equality, the result is increased conflict, ineffective social integration, and misguided efforts in response to human rights violations. Helene Fisher, Global Gender Persecution Specialist for Open Doors International, emphasizes that attacks on freedom of belief and religion are far from gender-blind; on the contrary, the intersection of gender and religion intensifies the experience of religious persecution among faith communities even further.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, Marie Juul Petersen, confirms that there is no inherent contradiction between FoRB and gender equality; “they are mutually reinforcing, overlapping and intersecting in various ways.”<sup>8</sup>

While the separation of gender equality and religious freedom is a key challenge to achieving the full realization of women’s human rights, gender-based discrimination cannot be explained by religion alone. Religious discrimination, and restrictive ideas or bias rooted in patriarchal religious interpretations, constitute only one facet of the oppression women face. Therefore, religious freedom alone cannot address gender inequality. On the other hand, it is a critical link and platform toward more effective and intersectional advocacy.

To build new practices of social change and productive interreligious and secular dialogues on women’s rights and religious freedom, this booklet highlights women’s diverse perspectives, agency, and capacity to transform social structures around them, acknowledging the value of religion as a positive force for social change.

## International Human Rights Conventions and Standards

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China marked a significant milestone for women around the world.<sup>9</sup> For the first time, specific demands for women’s rights to freedom of religion or belief were discussed at an international level. The Conference prompted new steps toward gender equality and changes to the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on FoRB, including close attention to gender considerations. Today, international leadership and state actors like the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) have broadened their focus areas, now supporting international civil society in monitoring violations of religious freedom around the world and strengthening the role of women and their equal rights to freedom of religion or belief.

In addition to the Beijing Conference, several key documents and agreements help articulate women’s unique needs for religious freedom. These include but are not limited to the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** and **Article 18**, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325).

**Article 18:** *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.*<sup>10</sup>



Despite the integral role gender plays in the advancement of religious freedom, international human rights declarations, conventions, and treaties fail to explicitly address the relationship between gender equality and religious freedom. For instance, while CEDAW asserts the importance of non-discrimination of women in political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres (article 1), as well as women's rights to "acquire, change or retain" their nationality (article 9), it fails to protect women's right to choose and exercise their own faith, on their own terms, free from violence, harm or coercion of any form.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing from CEDAW, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), a landmark resolution adopted in 2000 focused on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), revolutionized the understanding of gender-based violence as a weapon of war and the role of women in conflict mediation and resolution.<sup>12</sup> Little attention, however, has been paid to the significance and role of faith communities and religious leaders in this implementation process, but states are increasingly responding to this gap. For example, in 2021, the League of Arab States met to map out specific strategies and engagement plans placing faith communities at the forefront of WPS implementation, highlighting the critical role they can play in supporting the central pillars of WPS (protection, prevention, participation, relief, and recovery).<sup>13</sup> Apart from demonstrating the close relationship between women's empowerment and peaceful societies, this example highlights that promoting religious freedom is not only critical for women, but for the broader democratic progress of societies around the world.

## The Dialogue Evolves: Framing Gender Equality and Religious Freedom Based on Sustainable Development Goals

In 2018, another ground-breaking international conference – the Symposium on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Cultural Rights and Women – took place, this time with more planning, international coordination, and strategic support.<sup>14</sup> Held at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, the Symposium promoted gendered perspectives on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It was hosted by Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV), sponsored by diplomatic missions from Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the European Union Delegation to the United Nations, and attended by panelists and participants from countries like Tunisia, Poland, Bolivia, and the United States. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights were both present, as well as other panelists on issues pertaining to women's rights, symbolizing the need to come together to cross-examine the interconnectedness of gender equality and religious freedom.

Fueling new dialogues in support of women's religious freedom, Marie Juul Petersen, Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for Human Rights, reflected on the driving force behind the conference:

“For some, FoRB is an inherent obstacle to achieving gender equality; for others, the promotion of gender equality is a threat to the protection of religious freedom. But from a human rights perspective, it is about protecting individuals' and groups' right to have, adopt, change or leave a religion or belief; to manifest and practice this, and to be free from discrimination on the grounds of their religion or belief.”<sup>15</sup>

## Studies on the Impact of Religious Freedom for Women

To achieve comprehensive gender equality objectives that have a direct impact on women's lives, we must weave our communities together, by addressing the overlapping concerns of gender equality and FoRB. Religious freedom cannot be exercised at the cost of gender equality, and demands for gender equality are only effective if drawn from diverse experiences. To effectively build an evidence-based argument that supports intersectional analysis, we reference leading think tanks and research centers on religious freedom, including but not limited to the Pew Research Center (PRC). PRC findings lead us to believe that informed, targeted, and intersectional advocacy for women's religious freedom is more important than ever, as government restrictions on religion around the world reached a new record in 2018.<sup>16</sup>

*In The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*, former Senior Researcher at the Pew Research Center, Brian J. Grim, and Roger Finke, studied, monitored, and cross-compared various indicators in relation to the level of tolerance for religious freedom in different countries. Their data revealed that higher levels of religious tolerance corresponded to less conflict and higher levels of social well-being, including a positive relationship to women's empowerment in terms of higher health standards, incomes, and increased access to education.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, religious intolerance and the suppression of religious freedom contributes to greater levels of gender inequality.<sup>18</sup> Reviewing data on the international status of religious freedom and gender equality, it is clear that increased tolerance for religious freedom also supports broader human rights and gender equality objectives.

## Learning from the Experts

In 2020, Empower Women Media interviewed experts on FoRB and women's rights, including but not limited to ambassadors, human rights lawyers, business leaders, media professionals, scholars, and activists. Some of these FoRB experts were Dr. Brian Grim, Ed Brown, Robert Seiple, Katherine Cash, Paul Marshall, Jacqueline Isaac, Hussein Aboubakr, Kristina Arriaga, Nada Higuera, Mariya Dostzadah Goodbrake, and Lou Sabatier. Their accounts confirmed that to promote religious freedom and gender equality, we have to work in closer partnership, involve men in women's rights affairs, and engage with multiple actors and platforms in society for successful advocacy and educational efforts. More importantly, they demonstrate a need to pursue practical solutions that lead to reform and a paradigm shift about gender in faith communities and beyond. Here is what religious freedom and gender equality experts have to say on this topic:

Arab-American Jacqueline Isaac is a lawyer and the Vice President of Roads of Success (ROS), an NGO serving displaced refugees internationally. Isaac has spent over a decade advocating for persecuted Christians and religious minority women in the Middle East. Known for her work to support survivors of ISIL captivity, Isaac played a key role in the UK Government's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict (PSVI) initiative, co-drafting "the Declaration of Humanity by Leaders of Faith and Leaders of Belief," signed by global leaders to end the stigma for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. In an interview with Isaac, she shared the following:

*There's a common misperception that women's rights to equality and freedom of religion or belief are clashing rights. But actually, the two are inseparable and interrelated. Women and girls from religious minorities are often victims of double or even triple discrimination. They are often discriminated against not only by the majority culture but also by their own male-dominated community.*

Fighting against anti-Semitic attitudes and fundamental values that hinder religious tolerance, Hussein Aboubakr is an Egyptian activist dedicated to building bridges between Muslim and Jewish communities, lecturing about pluralism, and advocating for reconciliation in the Middle East. While Aboubakr was raised as a conservative Muslim, he exemplifies how men from an Islamic background can adhere to religious freedom. Through his advocacy, he aims to demonstrate that supporting gender equality does not require a compromise in faith; rather, Aboubakr believes that his faith strengthens his understanding of human rights and solidarity with women's struggles:

*Research shows a strong correlation between countries with high levels of religious oppression and low levels of gender equality. Freedom of religion or belief can never be used to justify violations of the human rights of women and girls. Religious Freedom means equal citizenship for men and women. Women have the equal right to practice their faith as they see fit.*

Nada Higuera, a Palestinian-American Christian convert and constitutional lawyer, litigating high-stake cases focused on the right to religious freedom, highlights the fears, stigma and shame women face when exploring who they are and what they believe:

*Many countries allow religion to discriminate and control, especially women. It's painful to be in a society that uses religion or an ideology to restrict how you act and dress, and limits the choices you can make, simply because you're a woman. Women often fear being punished or cut off from their family if they do something the family might disapprove of. In an open, multi-faith society, individuals are encouraged to practice their faith in harmony with the rights of others and not impose their religious beliefs on others. Freedom of belief is about being free to explore who you are. To realize you're no less than a man and you have the right to search and find answers without fear of violence or backlash from family or the government.*

Founder and Director of the non-profit organization Global FC, Afghan-American Mariya Dostzadah Goodbrake serves families and youth from countries like Sudan, Somalia, and Syria, in youth sports programs. Having witnessed her own sister being sent back to Afghanistan for an arranged marriage, women's rights and religious freedom are deeply personal driving forces in her community engagement and advocacy. In her account, she explores the connections between the two concepts and their value for democratic progress:

*Freedom of religion or belief gives a woman the right to choose for herself what she believes in and how she wants to live her life according to those beliefs. When that freedom is denied, there is a high chance her other human rights, such as freedom of speech and expression, will also be violated. In high school, my sister and I became captains of our basketball teams. Sports became an outlet of freedom for me, a space away from my father's cultural values and expectations. It helped form a pathway where I could think and dream outside the restrictions of my home. Freedom of belief and conscience is important because it gives individuals the right to form their own personal ideas and identities and express them. It's one of the foundations of a democratic society.*

Ed Brown, Secretary-General of the Stefanus Alliance International (SAI), a civil society leader who educates parliamentarians, civic groups, and individuals, refutes the idea that religious freedom and gender equality are two mutually exclusive goals for social change:

*There's often a misunderstanding that 'freedom of religion or belief' protects religion – and often conservative, patriarchal religions – so it can be seen as an obstacle to gender equality. But freedom of religion or belief protects the individual, not religion and can be a pathway for women's empowerment. Freedom of religion or belief can actually play a vital role in stopping harmful practices toward women.*

## Religious Freedom: Voices from Women in Muslim-Majority States

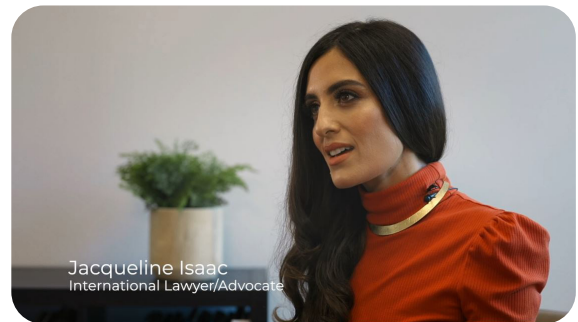
Empower Women Media regularly consults with women advocates, activists and students from the MENA and South Asian regions dedicated to religious freedom. Their community perspectives demonstrate the significant value of religious freedom for women's empowerment and help build Empower Women Media's approach:

- **Wissel/Tunisia:** *When women have the choice to act on their beliefs and faith, they have the choice to shape the life they want to live. Religious freedom gives way to other important rights that will enhance gender equality*
- **Temjeninla/India:** *With religious freedom in place, women and girls can choose on their own to adapt whichever religious practices they want to observe and reject harmful traditional practices that bring them to harm or oppress them*
- **Samah/Jordan:** *Women are the most affected and suppressed by religious and traditional restrictions, and that's why religious freedom can aid them in building a safer and brighter future... When it comes to extremist societies, women are the most affected group by religious suppression and traditional barriers. Freedom of religion will empower women to stand for what they believe in and achieve more in their societies*
- **Bhuvana/India:** *Religious freedom would allow a woman to choose what she wants to believe/ not believe, how she wants to practice or not, this belief. She is thus protected from oppression/ restriction by the state or family, in the name of religion. Once she is allowed and encouraged to make this choice, it starts a chain reaction -she would realize her inherent right to speech, expression and equality. Let her grow into freedom in other areas of life, too*
- **Navindu/Sri Lanka:** *[Through religious freedom], women are encouraged to look into different and innovative sources of interpretation of religion.*

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*Women and girls from religious minorities are often victims of double or even triple discrimination. They are often discriminated against not only by the majority culture but also by their own male-dominated community.*

*-Jacqueline Isaac, International Lawyer*



Jacqueline Isaac  
International Lawyer/Advocate



## Case Study: Tunisia

In early 2020, Empower Women Media arranged for 20 online surveys and 10 in-depth interviews with female human rights advocates from Tunisia (see Appendix A for interview and survey questions). Among the participants were Muslim women who lead or support women's empowerment initiatives. These Tunisian women are Ph.D. students and professionals (social entrepreneurs, NGO workers, human rights consultants, university professors, businesswomen, scientists, scholars, and environmentalists) who are well-connected with local governments and/or international non-profit networks and platforms.

While these accounts are highly important, most of them are products of middle to upper-class backgrounds, defined by high levels of access to education, employment opportunities, and family support to the causes of gender equality and religious pluralism. Considering issues of representation, this booklet stresses the importance of consulting with women across diverse backgrounds, especially in rural areas or among religiously conservative groups.

The interviews and survey responses outlined key themes related to gender equality and women's religious freedom. Participants expressed a positive correlation between the two rights claims, referencing the ban on marriages between Muslim and non-Muslim couples that was lifted in 2017. In regard to inheritance, another important topic for women in the MENA region, participants shared that steps toward equal inheritance increased female-led advocacy, as increased funds available to women to overcome poverty, cover their children's education, travel, and invest in charitable causes or business ideas help address structural disadvantages.

To learn how to strategically access key sectors in society to instill change, Tunisian women are asking for educational training on their rights as citizens. Their feedback recognized the value of international exposure through travel and exchanges for increased tolerance and new partnerships with international women's NGOs for increased empowerment. Participants also stressed the need for contextually relevant curricula and workshops, with new community-oriented methodologies, including role-playing, debates, and media, broadening strategies to include cultural exchanges, films, concerts, and discussion groups,

and shifting to documentary-style films that capture personal narratives, to reach audiences more effectively.

Finally, participants advised that apart from focusing singlehandedly on educational content, the underlying message needs to be made interesting and entertaining as well; "we need to help people relax with the subject". Here is what Tunisian women have to say about their needs for religious freedom training:

“*Tunisian women are wired to fight for gender equity... But we were not trained to accept religious diversity...We need to teach people that given our free will, we owe each other respect for our free choices, no matter how different they can be. The best way to change thinking is through education and schools...We need to put our rights in the school curriculum.*

*[Exposure to stories and examples of violations of religious freedom] from inside Tunisia and outside will bring a human element and create a sense of empathy and tolerance between different believers/ non-believers.*

*I think that women should be knowledgeable about legal issues in order to be able to fight for their rights in a patriarchal society. I think that not only women but also men need the education to support [religious freedom and gender equality].*

*The most important part of training [is] how to communicate with media press holders [to shift media narratives]... Media has played a big role in causing a rift between religions which in turn has caused fear amongst crowds. This begets violence and retaliation from both sides, and [we need] to mend this...interact with people directly, to advocate for the freedom to practice religion, without facing the law or hostility from the masses.*

## II. Women and Religion in the MENA Region

In this chapter, we have highlighted some of the most significant challenges faced by women in the MENA region, complementing our interview and survey responses.

### The Concept of Honor and Purity

While the concept of honor, often discussed in relation to honor crime or honor killing is not inherent to any single culture or religion, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is commonly identified as the “geographical and cultural epicenter” of honor-based violence and oppression.<sup>19</sup> In a March 2021 Press Release, Amnesty International raised concerns about the growing number of cases of honor killings in Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, and Palestinian communities in the region.<sup>20</sup> Recent surveys from Kuwait also alarmingly confirm societal support of honor-based violence and legislation that enforces honor codes, in relation to female adultery or “gender inappropriate” behavior.<sup>21</sup> A 2021 report from the Middle East Institute (MEI) shared similar findings; “every year, 400-500 women are killed brutally in Iran to protect men’s honor.”<sup>22</sup> Even though the total number of honor killings committed internationally per year is currently unknown, UN records from 2000, indicating 5,000 honor killings per year worldwide, are still widely referenced today.<sup>23</sup>

Fundamentally, the responsibility to uphold the honor and remaining “pure,” unable to “stain” the family’s honor, is a strongly gendered phenomenon. It originates from a religious world view, supported by “economic and legal systems that interpret women as the property of males through inheritance laws and by other means that encourage social policing of female behavior.”<sup>24</sup> For women in the Middle East, particularly women of faith who have to answer to religious leadership and cultural codes that dictate their honor, this burden can be heavy to carry. In some cases, such codes directly violate women’s human rights and may even lead to deadly outcomes.

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*Religious freedom means equal citizenship for men and women. Women have the equal right to practice their faith as they see fit.*  
-Hussein Aboubakr, Educator

## Challenges for Women's Empowerment in the MENA region

Apart from honor-based cultural expressions and violence, some of the key challenges women in the MENA region are confronted with on a daily basis include but are not limited to, inheritance, property and family laws, and discrimination at the workplace. Recognizing the real-life impact change would bring in the aforementioned areas, the promotion of religious freedom for women includes support for women in countering such challenges and achieving their full potential, as they seek to live freely according to their conscience and self-chosen faith.

While close to the heart, the role of the family and the status of women within the family is often discussed as a significant source of discrimination in the MENA context. Despite upholding the family structure, daughters, sisters, mothers, young girls, and women are not entitled to equal treatment before the law, as their male family members. Family law, personal status law, or the Personal Status Code (PSC) produce hierarchical relationships and dynamics of inequality between men and women and restrict women's agency in the private sphere or within the family.<sup>25</sup>

A well-known example of discriminatory laws for women is the guardian system. In countries like Saudi Arabia, male legal guardians, predominantly fathers or husbands, make major decisions on behalf of their wife, daughter, or another female family member. The male guardianship system ('wilayah') treats women as legal minors; hence, it requires women to request permission to make travel arrangements, seek medical care, employment, or influence any other significant part of life.<sup>26</sup> While some level of policy reform (renewal of passport, traveling rights, employment protections, etc.) has taken place in Saudi Arabia, the system itself is far from dismantled; women are still confronted with severe limitations when facing the most critical situations, including abuse by their male guardian, as they are often required to turn to their abuser for support or permission to attend to their needs.<sup>27</sup> Apart from upholding the guardian system, family law, personal status law, and/or PSC also serve to justify child marriages, rape, polygamy, and restrict inheritance, citizenship of children from non-national or ethnic minority parents, as well as divorce.



Throughout the Middle East, the legal systems are often based on Islamic legal codes or Sharia law. Only a few states in the region have adopted more democratic models of governance, based on pluralism and diversity. While women's equal rights to acquire property are protected, to some extent, under Islamic law, women still inherit family property at disproportionate levels than men. For instance, in the case of deceased parents, sons inherit twice as much as their female sibling; "a share for a male equal to that of two females."<sup>28</sup> Misinterpretations of Islamic inheritance law, including the concept that women always inherit half of their male family members' inheritance, further perpetuate discriminatory legal practices in the Middle East.

Opportunities for women to independently manage land or property are also scarce. According to estimates from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), no more than 4 % of women in the MENA region are landowners.<sup>29</sup> Widening this gap even further, in the case of divorce or the death of a spouse (husband), women "lack formal proof of ownership – a growing problem for thousands of widows in conflicts in Iraq and Syria."<sup>30</sup> These examples, however, do not address the additional challenges faced by ethnic or religious minorities, when advocating for their rights.

## Women from Minority Groups Suffer the Most

According to Daniel Philpott, Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame and author of *Religious Freedom in Islam*, there are few religiously free Muslim-majority societies in the MENA region.<sup>31</sup> This helps explain the obstacles religious minority women face in Muslim-majority societies. In countries like Egypt, known as home for millions of Christians and religious minority groups in the Middle East, non-Muslims have little to no judicial power in comparison to their Muslim partners or family members. This translates directly into inequality in the areas of child custody, inheritance, and property matters; a non-Muslim cannot inherit from his or her Muslim partner or family member.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a child between a non-Muslim and Muslim will be automatically assigned a Muslim identity and hence fall under Muslim jurisdiction, leaving a non-Muslim mother without a say about her child's life or religious upbringing.<sup>33</sup>

As a result of a fundamental lack of respect for their rights and identity, religious minority women are exposed at higher rates to sexual violence and kidnapping for the purpose of forced conversion and/or marriage, as well as strategic, ideologically driven “grooming” processes to pressure them into abandoning their faith community.<sup>34</sup> In many ways, domestic and sexual violence are used as tools to control women of faith, and in the context of COVID-19, religious minority women, including female converts, have faced increasing levels of domestic violence. Further, their marginalized position places them at additional risk to lose their rights, possessions, and even their life; “females can be married without their consent, raped and beaten behind closed doors, and divorced and disinherited overnight.”<sup>35</sup> It should also be noted that for female converts who did not meaningfully consent to religious conversion but were required to convert due to marriage and family law, divorce may restrict them to their convert community even after the end of the marriage, “leaving the converted Muslim with no avenue to convert back to her religion.”<sup>36</sup> This clearly demonstrates the role of gender in religious persecution and discrimination.

## Nones, Non-Believers and Apostates

Along the same lines, women who abandon their religious identity are at significant risk for abuse within their communities. A recent study based on a sample of 228 individuals, led by Humanists UK, an organization that assists individuals who seek external support to explore their right to freedom of belief and choice, indicated that “apostates,” former believers who now identify as non-believers, or with a different belief, experience notably high levels of harmful violence within their former or new communities.<sup>37</sup> According to the study, apostates from Muslim backgrounds were disproportionately victimized, in comparison to the sample of Christian apostates.<sup>38</sup>

Adding gender analysis to this discussion, understandings of apostasy are not immune to gender bias, holding women at unfair and sexist standards, and more critically, justifying violence against women. For example, in 2014, a pregnant woman in Sudan was sentenced to death and 100 lashes for marrying a Christian man.<sup>39</sup> She was charged with the crime of apostasy, due to her choice of partner. In light of this background, women's rights to religious freedom in the Middle East are crucial for gender equality, for believers and non-believers alike.<sup>40</sup>

Before examining case studies in the next section, it is important to consider that in countries where men and women are segregated – in schools, places of worship, or workplaces – there is less understanding of women's lived experiences. More broadly, when men and women are denied equal opportunities to participate in and contribute to society, together, in integrated forums or spaces, men are more likely to hold higher degrees of power at decision-making levels than women. The same applies to participation in faith communities. By directly or indirectly denying women the agency to speak up about their experiences of gender-based violence, legal discrimination, employment-based discrimination, or other sources of discrimination that define their everyday life, the institutions that uphold such structures and norms remain protected.



## Case Studies: Gender Inequality in the MENA Region

Below are some of the stories that speak volumes about the atrocities and human rights violations committed against women by oppressive regimes in the region. Above all, these accounts add complexity and nuanced perspectives to the topic of religious freedom and gender equality.

### IS Captivity in Syria: Yazidi Women's Loss of Community

The Islamic State's seizure of Syria was followed by greater control over Middle Eastern women and their rights. Non-Muslim women and Yazidi women were particularly affected, taken hostage, kidnapped and raped – their dignity violated to the very core – to serve IS soldiers. Upon their release, many Yazidi women, including the children they bore during their captivity, were rejected by their families, completely disowned and abandoned by their community, seen as traitors to their very own culture and faith. Religious freedom, in this context, means more to women than ever. For Yazidi women, FoRB has become a space for women to challenge outdated, patriarchal interpretations of religion and re-define their own understandings. On this topic, human rights lawyer Jacqueline Isaac shared the following:

“

*Yazidi women started standing up for what matters to them. It was not okay that a person outside their religion had sex with them. Traditionally, they would become Muslim because a Muslim man had sex with them. The women went to their religious leader and protested, and the leader honored that. He declared them martyrs and heroes of their faith. This is because women had voices to rise up within the spheres of their religion and engage with their leaders. Today, in the Yazidi faith, women are standing for their entire community. Women are the backbone of family – of how children look at life. What does it truly mean to be a woman of faith, to have your own calling in your faith? Because they have space to believe what they want to believe, they create a new space of what the future looks like to them. They're not forced into traditional roles. FoRB allows them to start thinking for themselves.*

### Afghanistan: The Invisibility of Women on the Margins

Improving the living conditions of women in Afghanistan has long been on the international human rights agenda. Afghan women are often referred to as ‘the most oppressed women in the Middle East.’ Today, considering the tragedy of the recent Taliban seizure of the country, this topic is more relevant than ever. In the “Truth about Afghan Women,” author Cheryl Benard claims that the social welfare of the country has been neglected, and young girls and women failed, through the misguided concept of security behind the last two decades of foreign interventions.<sup>41</sup> Only a third of Afghan girls are enrolled in schools, a large number of skilled workers that sustain the country's overall welfare – social workers, civil society advocates, and business professionals – have left the country, and the most pressing challenges faced by rural Afghan women still remain ignored by the international community: lack of food, health care, and physical safety.<sup>42</sup> While Islamic legal codes indeed constitute restrictions on women, according to Benard, the most critical source of opposition to women and gender equality is found in tribal traditions, and Pashtunawali, the so-called Pashtun honor code, “a strongly patriarchal, hierarchical system which held that male prestige required the total submission and absolute virtue of their women.”<sup>43</sup>

### Algeria: Child and Marital Rape Continues

In Algeria, young girls are legally sexually exploited through the protection of marriage and family law. Rapists are able to escape any form of punishment by marrying their teenage victims on the basis that marital rape is not illegal. According to the 2020 Department of State Country Report on human rights practices in Algeria, perpetrators of such sexual violence can only be legally prosecuted if there is evidence of intentional harm; under these provisions, many cases lead to no more than a 1-year sentence, comparably lower than the penalty of non-spousal rape, which corresponds to a sentence of 5-10 years of prison.<sup>44</sup> Finally, it is important to note that “sex crimes are rarely reported due to cultural norms.”<sup>45</sup> Given the silencing and shaming culture that prevails in the country around reporting, while heart-breaking, it is not surprising that approximately 100-200 women die as a result of domestic violence, every year.<sup>46</sup>

### Iran: The Violent Silencing of Women’s Rights Activists

In 2021, startling news broke out about a kidnapping plot against Iranian women’s rights activist and journalist, Masih Alinejad, known for her significant contributions and leadership in the feminist campaign to boycott the hijab in Iran. Even though Alinejad was able to escape from Iran in 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran was able to spy on her from close proximity, arrange for plans to kidnap her, and lure her out of US borders, allegedly with the intention to kill her.<sup>47</sup>

Fortunately, these plans were stopped by the FBI, but this is the grave reality that Iranian women face when demanding their rights. For example, in August 2020, women’s rights activists and sisters Maryam and Matin Amiri, who had participated in Alinejad’s boycott campaign, were coerced into confession statements before the Iranian public in a regime-supported documentary, calling themselves “naive, dumb, passive and weak”<sup>48</sup> for joining the movement. A few days thereafter, the sisters were both sentenced to 15 years in prison, and allegedly held in solitary confinement.<sup>49</sup> These examples demonstrate the close links between gender equality and religious freedom, and that steps toward women’s empowerment support women’s diverse struggles, including religious

minority women and non-believers who have to abide by discriminatory religious laws they never consented to.

### Success Stories and Opportunities for Policy Reform

While women in the MENA region face substantial roadblocks to gender equality, they are not disadvantaged relative to men in every respect. As seen in the cases of Iran and Tunisia, young girls and women in the MENA region enjoy high education and literacy rates; protections and support for mothers and childbearing are often prioritized on national levels, and since 2002, governments are increasingly moving towards the implementation of parliamentary gender quotas and increasing female participation and representation in politics. Countries like Tunisia and Morocco are actively fighting against gender-based and sexual violence, the gender-wage gap and unequal labor rights, and for Saudi women, social conditions have improved over just a few years.

### Tunisia: Leaders of Change in the Region

As a result of the Arab Spring, Tunisia has witnessed progressive policy reform and new openings for activism against sexual violence and harassment. In 2018, ground-breaking policy victories took place in the country. Several provisions were added to the law on gender-based violence, adult-minor relations, and the gender-based wage gap. Following the prohibition of marriages between adult perpetrators and their victims of minor age, secured under the new legal provisions, more than 20 rehabilitation centers responded with new, targeted programs to serve victims of gender-based and sexual violence. Such steps help victims gather strength to speak out, seek support, and counter a culture of stigma, shaming and silencing.<sup>50</sup>

Alongside this success, the law enabled salary protection for female public sector workers who have children under the age of 16 or with special needs; qualifying women are now granted two-thirds of their full-time salary for half-time work.<sup>51</sup> As a result, this provision greatly benefits working mothers, and single mothers, supporting female economic empowerment and opportunities for

women to leave abusive relationships due to financial dependency. Tunisian women can now also marry non-Muslims, resulting in increased protection of women's rights in the private and public sphere. Finally, and more recently, the country made great victories in the name of gender equality as the country elected its first female Prime Minister, an act of progress inspiring its neighbors and the rest of the world.

### **Iraq: Religious Freedom in Law**

Alongside Tunisia's achievements for gender equality, Iraq is another regional leader that is increasingly supporting progressive policy. In 2004, the state implemented Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), securing protection for Iraqi nationals' freedom of religion and belief, for the first time.<sup>52</sup> For women who identify with minority faith communities, or a religion that is different from their husbands', this policy was ground-breaking. In essence, this provision hinders state actors and religious clergy from interpreting women's legal rights; protects converts, including dissidents and reformers from prosecution of blasphemy or apostasy crimes; and finally, grants non-Muslim minorities the right to practice their beliefs in the public sphere, no longer strictly "within church confines."<sup>53</sup> The 2004 TAL, however, has been replaced by the 2005 constitution, which protects religious freedom under Articles 42 and 43.<sup>54</sup>

### **Women's Advocacy: Solidarity in the Israel-Palestinian Context**

The Israel-Palestinian conflict is more complex than history books allow us to grasp. Marked by identity politics and strong historic, ethnic, cultural, and religious bonds to the holy land among Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike, the region holds substantial value to millions of people. Today, the tension between Muslims and Jews in this area is unmistakably high, prompting violence from both sides. Despite a painful relationship, Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Muslim women find ways to advocate for one another and develop solidarity based on shared values of justice and the agenda to counter the violence that kills their families, neighbors and friends. Feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn claims that women in the region have found "common ground in the disadvantage experienced by women in both communities."<sup>55</sup>

Her study of local interreligious women's networks explored the values that enabled dialogues and solidarity in conflict settings. Among these networks was Bat Shalom of the North, a Jewish women advocacy group, which highlighted the need to "give away a bit of [themselves] in order for others to live." This is an important message for advocacy leaders and civil society actors, as they continue to promote women's religious freedom.

### **Changing the Narrative**

Research points to a sharp decline in the level of support for patriarchal values among women in the MENA region.<sup>56</sup> This shows that when women's identities evolve in an increasingly globalized world, unconscious attitudes, ideals, and gender norms are challenged. This booklet aims to equip women with critical tools to fulfill their potential, achieve their individual goals, and, simultaneously, transform their societies. While women in the region indeed fall victims to human rights violations on the basis of gender; they are not just victims. They have a say about the world they live in and the change they wish to see. Changing the narrative about women and social change means moving from passive to active, and from negative to positive, to transform attitudes in society and inform practical solutions.

### III. Developing Religious Freedom Strategies

#### Linking Gender Equality and Religious Freedom in the MENA Region: Who is Doing the Work?

Change and adaptation are a part of the human experience. This echoes the words of Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, as he rejects the notion that faith communities are homogeneous and immune to change. He claims that in many religions, “a plurality of self-understandings exists, some of which may be more committed than others to advancing gender equality and non-discrimination.”<sup>57</sup> Along these lines, faith-based organizations, as representations of their communities, reflect a multitude of perspectives; those that are less susceptible to change require even more engagement, support, and resilient efforts. The overall aim is to adopt “a holistic conception of rights grounded in the universality, indivisibility, interdependence, and inalienability of all human rights.”<sup>58</sup> To support positive transitions in advocacy, we spotlight leading organizations that employ relevant training strategies to promote gender equality and religious freedom:

##### FoRB Learning Platform

Launched in 2018 as a result of partnerships with a wide range of secular and faith-based organizations, the FoRB Learning Platform is an initiative of the Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief (NORFORB).<sup>59</sup> The Platform offers online courses and practical resources developed in dialogue with specialists from diverse religious/non-religious backgrounds, to train leaders to effectively promote religious freedom, with inclusion as a starting point.<sup>60</sup> Apart from films, publications, international declarations, charters, and targeted material for legislators and the media, the Platform also provides Biblical, Quranic, and Hindu teachings on religious freedom, including instructions for faith leaders on how to facilitate productive dialogue on evangelism and religious differences.<sup>61</sup>

##### Musawah

As an intra-religious freedom organization and the face of a global movement, Musawah was founded in 2009 by Muslim feminists who sought social justice in family law.<sup>62</sup> Promoting gender equality in religious laws and practices, they train communities to apply progressive interpretations of sacred texts, usually referred to as feminist tafsir.<sup>63</sup> More broadly, they build awareness within Muslim communities around ‘traditional’ and ‘patriarchal’ aspects of the Islamic law that serve to hinder women’s empowerment and develop arguments and strategies to advance intersectional claims through a rights-based approach. Through their Islam & Gender Equality and Justice (I-nGEJ) course, designed for women and human rights activists working in Muslim communities worldwide, participants gain new skills and knowledge to understand the diversity of Quranic interpretations, challenge gender bias, and support access to new advocacy tools for reform in the Muslim world.<sup>64</sup>



## Institute for Global Engagement

The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) was founded in 2000 by Robert and Margaret Ann Seiple to train government and faith leaders in countries with high restrictions on religion about the merits of religious freedom for sustainable and peaceful societies.<sup>65</sup> So far, IGE has provided religious freedom training to over 23,000 church members, 9,000 government members, scholars, and religious leaders, and over 40 women faith leaders from 18 countries to advocate for FoRB and peacebuilding.<sup>66</sup> Strongly relevant to the links between gender equality and religious freedom, IGE runs the Center for Women, Faith & Leadership (CWFL), which offers annual fellowships to advance the leadership and skills of women of faith working in advocacy for the protection of marginalized communities.<sup>67</sup>

## Religious Freedom and Business Foundation

The Religious Freedom and Business Foundation (RFBF) was founded in 2014 by Dr. Brian Grim.<sup>68</sup> According to Dr. Grim, many leaders receive little to no education about the significance of religious liberty, religious diversity, and religious inclusion to leverage good business practices and prosperous economies, which in turn hinders the development of new strategies that accommodate diverse needs and promote tolerant perspectives and policies. To support business professionals toward a greater understanding of the value religious liberty and religious inclusion play in business strategy, corporate policy, and economic growth, RFBF offers religious freedom training to women CEOs and business leaders around the world.<sup>69</sup> These training and/or convening events have taken place at high-level conferences in Turkey, Abu Dhabi, Baku, Bahrain, the Vatican, at Harvard University, the World Economic Forum, the United Nations, and in collaboration with the U.S. State Department.<sup>70</sup> Since 2018, Religious Freedom & Business Foundation has also partnered with Empower Women Media to host an annual women's film festival.

## Muslims for Progressive Values

Headquartered in Los Angeles, Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) was founded in 2007 with the mission to build an inclusive community based on Quranic ideals of human dignity.<sup>71</sup> In our interview with the Director, Zuriana Zonneveld shared that “MPV came together to establish safe and free spaces for Muslim women who felt unwelcome at mainstream mosques.” Challenging harmful bias within Muslim communities, MPV promotes values such as human rights, freedom of expression, and separation of religion and state, as well as fruitful, gender-sensitive, and empowering understandings of Islam. Collaborating with religious communities for gender equality, MPV has led several influential advocacy campaigns such as #ImamsForShe and #ClubsForShe, mobilizing religious leaders internationally.<sup>72</sup> In addition to disseminating a wide range of targeted resources through diverse channels for training and awareness-building purposes, they engage in human rights documentation and monitor violations in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>73</sup>

## Adyan Foundation

In 2006, the Adyan Foundation was founded by an interreligious group from Lebanon in response to the conflicts that divided the country.<sup>74</sup> Adyan offers consultancy in policymaking, trains advocates to address multi-faith challenges in their communities, and promotes pluralism, inclusive citizenship, community resilience, peaceful coexistence, and spiritual solidarity through their educational institute.<sup>75</sup> The organization also supports promising local, regional, and international initiatives, including but not limited to the development of participatory media and documentary strategies.<sup>76</sup> To address the needs of women, Adyan is now implementing a three-year program called “Women, Religion and Human Rights in Lebanon” to challenge the Lebanese personal status law and legal provisions that hinder women's empowerment.<sup>77</sup>

## Lessons Learned

Based on our assessment of NGO-led training or advocacy strategies that directly or indirectly promote religious freedom and gender equality, it is clear that there is willpower and a capacity to instill change in civil society. Our results illustrate that effective organizations successfully shift culture and excel in the following areas:

- Communications, coordination, and collaboration with a wide range of partners, including top venues like the United Nations, various state departments, and government agencies
- Targeted training and online education based on collaborative curriculum design, informed by best practices, policy recommendations, and feedback from women on their unique needs for religious freedom and demands for religiously free societies
- Advocacy-based dialogue and networking activities specifically for women to support women's increased participation in society as agents of social change
- Resilience, action, and powerful statements against religion-based discrimination and violence toward women, through online messaging, programs, and tools.

Despite these promising findings, some gaps still remain, as organizations fail to articulate specific objectives and design programming that directly address the links between gender equality and religious freedom, while simultaneously targeting a larger audience:

- Lack of specific capacity-building strategies designed for women long-term
- Lack of gatherings, training, and special projects to attract, equip and mobilize women as FoRB advocates
- Lack of resources and funding for women-led initiatives or summits
- Lack of “safe spaces,” female-only workshops or fellowships where female-led dialogues that centralize women's religious freedom needs, stories, and violations take place
- Lack of extracurricular activities offered such as exchanges, festivals, and service projects to attract, convene and mobilize women.

In summary, the most significant gap we have found in researching these organizations is that they are not investing enough in creating safe spaces to educate, equip and empower movements of women to reach a greater number of people. While their work is important, they fail to reach larger portions of the population, and we believe this is mainly because they are working with small cohorts of females, rather than developing digital media strategies to reach thousands and millions of potential supporters and advocates. If we are serious about FoRB and gender equality, we need to implement new outreach strategies and create more training pathways for women to share their religious freedom message directly with the world.

## Empower Women Media's Approach

In response to gaps in training strategies (forums, courses and workshops), Empower Women Media produces targeted programming designed for and by women. Apart from developing several digital platforms, resources and tools for women, our work includes film competitions, eCourses, and religious freedom media training fellowships. Since we first launched our organization in 2013, we have learned that the development of digital media strategies to communicate the stories of women impacted by restrictions on religious expression are effective for cultural change.

Through our media trainings and events, we have convened leaders from over 50 organizations. We explore important trends, exchange expertise, and encourage innovation. Together with our network participants, we produce TV, films, audio, print, and social media projects. The combination of training and mentoring opportunities helps our participants develop a practical plan and launch digital media strategies.

We provide an ongoing media initiative to showcase the benefits of freedom of belief at top venues such as the International Religious Freedom Summits, United Nations, U.S. State Department, and parliamentary events, and among NGOs, businesses, universities, faith organizations, and peacebuilding forums.

*Stories can open hearts and minds to different ways of living, regardless of cultural, economic, and religious barriers. We have found that stories, through their focus on building trust and empathy, help introduce FoRB in non-threatening ways. Storytelling is therefore one of the most effective ways to shift culture and address difficult or taboo subjects like religious freedom.*

*Women's stories and narratives on religious freedom are vital in creating a culture of dignity, inclusion, and mutual respect, equipping a new generation of FoRB advocates. Through short films, directed by and for women, these positive effects increase even further.*

*- Shirin Taber, Director of Empower Women Media*

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*The people who need to be influenced in their views of women and girls' rights need training in which other women and girls are involved.*



## Phase 1: Religious Freedom Film Competitions

Focused on media as a medium for change, Empower Women Media recognizes the power of art and storytelling. Together with the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (RFBF), every year, we host the Religious Freedom Film Competition, to challenge filmmakers around the world to produce short films that showcase how inclusivity and multi-faith living in the workplace leads to innovation and thriving communities.<sup>78</sup>

The filmmakers originate from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. As part of the selection process, 10 experts judge the films for storytelling and advocacy impact. Each year the film competition award ceremonies correspond to annual International Religious Freedom summits and round tables. Since its launch in 2018, we have had the opportunity to follow and support numerous women's careers and journeys toward social change in the Middle East and South Asia.

In 2021, Pakistani Wagma Feroz' film, "She Makes Everything Beautiful," won first prize in our competition.<sup>79</sup> Her contribution highlights a salon in Swat Valley, Pakistan, where women of various religious backgrounds make a living in a workplace free of discrimination. The female employer hires a multi-faith group of women, including Christians and Muslims, to support peace building and religious freedom in Southeast Asia.



A "Taste of Freedom" is Meshair Jirdeh's personal story of leaving Saudi Arabia to find religious freedom in a new land. On her journey, she meets the love of her life, a chef, and together they build a restaurant business.<sup>80</sup>

"Switch On", an animated film by Yamini Ravindran and her team at the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, features a Muslim woman hesitant to "switch on" her computer camera during an online meeting because she wears a hijab. Capitalizing on the social constructs of the all-too-familiar Zoom meeting, the film exposes the ramifications of restrictions on religious expression in the workplace.<sup>81</sup>

*It is particularly impressive that people of one faith focused on empowering people of other faiths. Indeed, a hallmark of true religious freedom is when people stand for the right of all to enjoy the same freedoms.*

*-Dr. Brian Grim, president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation.*



## Phase 2: Live What You Believe E-Course

Launched on November 19, 2020, during the International Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, LIVE WHAT YOU BELIEVE is an interactive film-based training series to equip professionals and influencers to support freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) around the globe.<sup>82</sup> The certificate eCourse training is a direct outcome of worldwide declarations to counter religious-based violence and discrimination. Created in partnership with advocacy organizations, the training explores how freedom of belief is good for peaceful, prosperous, and thriving societies. Demonstrating an impressive track record, the e-course has had more than 1,200 registrants from more than 30 countries internationally. This interactive course, available in multiple languages, explores how freedom of belief contributes to peaceful and stable societies, empowers women, encourages business innovation, and targets stakeholders, policymakers, lawyers, educators, students, businesspeople, faith leaders, and human rights advocates.

The eCourse consists of a 4-film docudrama training series, including:

- Discussion questionnaires
- Engagement with the material and curriculum through reflection activities
- Evaluation of the course material
- Certificates of completion

To prepare for and deliver the eCourse training, the producers, Nancy Sawyer Schraeder and Shirin Taber, conducted over a dozen interviews with some of the top religious freedom experts in the world. They filmed ambassadors, lawyers, advocates, and scholars as they shared their research and experience. They then interwove, throughout the interviews, the story of a young woman and her immigrant family experiencing the benefits of religious freedom in their workplace and community, linking women's unique stories and experiences, in a shared message, to engage the audience toward advocacy.



“Many organizations already put in significant efforts in documenting and publicizing the tragic cases of religious discrimination of women around the world. While our e-course acknowledges these human rights violations, our focus is to draw attention to what is not being talked about enough – the many positive benefits of the universal right of freedom of religion, belief and conscience.  
-Shirin Taber, Director, EWM

### Phase 3: Religious Freedom Media Training Fellowship

In September 2021, Empower Women Media initiated its 9-month religious freedom media training fellowship, offered to 30 Pakistani women and religious freedom media advocates who were carefully vetted through trusted partners and organizations.<sup>83</sup> The training includes the following:

- Synchronous online workshops (2 hours per month)
- Curricula and homework assignments (10 hours a month)
- Development of media goals and plans of action
- Training in scriptwriting, production, editing, social marketing, and distribution
- Communication with mentors and trainers
- Networking with strategic leaders and organizations
- Production of a media project by June 1, 2022
- Film Competition with cash prizes and international press releases

As a result of the training, participants produce contextualized media to share the benefits of religious freedom with their communities. Their stories not only address taboo subjects like blasphemy laws or child marriage but the benefits of religious freedom for thriving economic societies.



Beyond this fellowship, Empower Women Media had the honor of training women not only as media producers but as spokespeople for religious freedom on a national level. In November 2021, four women from our Women's Media Training Fellowship helped coordinate the International Religious Freedom Round Table Summit in Karachi, Pakistan.<sup>84</sup> The purpose of the summit was to convene top stakeholders, NGOs, businesses, and faith leaders in joint advocacy efforts to support religious freedom for everyone, with a special focus on women's and minority rights. This groundbreaking summit also allowed our leaders to facilitate a workshop about the unique needs of women in Muslim-majority contexts. Alongside these efforts, our eCourse, Live What You Believe, and our short films educating people about the benefits of pluralistic societies were showcased. Finally, Empower Women Media strengthens already existing training platforms and actors to link women's intersectional struggles for gender equality and religious freedom by developing evaluation criteria.

## Evaluation of FoRB Initiatives

Moving in the direction of progress, we encourage organizations and advocates to highlight specific ways in which women are discriminated against as members of faith communities and, consequently, adopt a targeted approach with specific digital literacy and media training strategies that directly respond to women's unique needs and lived experiences. Through awareness-raising campaigns, education, training, exchanges, and consultation, organizations can positively impact leadership and policy on issues that are critical to gender equality in faith communities and for women around the globe.

Through our evaluation criteria comprised of practical questions and guidelines to amplify women's demands for religious freedom, we support organizations to better identify and address the needs, gaps and areas of development that exist within their unique contexts. Here are some of the evaluations:

- **Clarifying the need:** Does the organization clarify the need to support FoRB and gender equality? Does the organization communicate a desire to help women overcome religious discrimination by dedicating resources, reporting, or a platform for women?
- **Encouraging dialogue:** Does the organization encourage dialogue between advocates across organizational and transnational lines for FoRB and women's rights? Do they communicate with other organizations or actors about FoRB and gender equality, whether through social media, reports, or events?
- **Gathering & convening:** Does the organization convene advocates to collaborate together on initiatives related to FoRB and gender equality? Do they include a wide range of actors and nationalities, including the media, politicians, educators, faith leaders, and others who contribute to shaping social norms and practices around FoRB and gender equality?
- **Dedicated space & platform:** Does the organization have a dedicated space for women? Does the organization create platforms for women to share their perspectives, stories, or solutions, whether through events, courses, or media?
- **Training & tools:** Does the organization offer training and/or tools, specially designed to support FoRB and gender equality? Is there training and/or tools easily accessible through their websites, social media, videos, articles, or events?
- **Extra-curricular activities:** Does the organization provide extra-curricular activities that can support the awareness-raising and capacity-building of women? Do activities include exchanges, tours, panels, debates, film festivals, and service projects?

“

*Research shows a strong correlation between countries with high levels of religious oppression and low levels of gender equality.*

*-Hussein Aboubakr, Educator*

## Challenges to Women's FoRB Advocacy

### Lack of Funding

Apart from the lack of designated platforms for women, the Director of the FoRB Learning Platform, Katherine Cash, points to the practical, financial challenges of building new platforms. Funding is a prerequisite to drive the innovation and longevity that training initiatives depend on. Without finances, even the greatest of ideas can extinguish overnight. The Director shared her organization's own struggles to secure their funding:

*There is very little financing for communications work (social media) and staffing. Everything we do for the learning platform, including writing and delivering courses, keeping the learning platform up-to-date and working with translation and dubbing of our films, trying to develop partnerships to have our courses offered in languages other than English is done with one full-time post (divided between 3 people) and a couple of student assistants who help us for a few hours a week.*

### Lack of Confidence and Support

In the absence of female leadership, role models, and structural, social, economic, and cultural support for women to exercise agency and make their own choices, it cannot be assumed that women will eagerly accept any opportunity offered to them. To begin discussing women's empowerment, it is important to consider that the starting point differs for different women. Some might have come far in their journey, developing new skills, a sense of independence and mental capacity to engage in critical reflections and speak up. Others may still be focused on their physical security, unable to move forward or meaningfully engage with their surroundings, issues or topics that are relevant to them. Ani Zonneveld, the President and Founder of the organization Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) shared the following:

*It's not easy to challenge your identity, to help women to make their own religious freedom decisions." On top of individual and structural barriers, there are also divides between secular and*

*religious women's rights advocates that hinder women's solidarity on religious freedom.*

### Prioritizing Immediate Needs

Aligned with Maslow's "hierarchy of need," a well-known theory in the field of psychology, the last few examples demonstrate that meaningful engagement with FoRB or gender equality is only possible if basic needs are met. Expanding on this matter further, Olfa, a Tunisian gender rights advisor, shared the following with us:

*As long as people feel economic scarcity and the need for survival, they will not have much capacity to develop values that support women's rights and pluralism. These are values that develop when people feel safe and cared for. They are associated with more affluent societies.*

### Resistance to the West

As a result of Western-led military interventions and occupations in the region, to some degree, there is a cultural reluctance to accept international human rights concepts or mechanisms, including the concepts of religious freedom and gender equality, in the Middle East. This form of skepticism or inaction often serves as a political statement, or more broadly, resistance. In response to this, Lindsay Benstead, an expert on the MENA region, shared the following:

*We must remember there may always be some level of aversion toward the discussion of religious freedom in the Muslim world because it is perceived as Western. Some Muslim leaders and communities will see freedom of religion as a challenge to their power. On the other hand, some opposition will also come from individuals and groups within the MENA region, who will see such efforts as examples of 'colonial' powers that threaten the very fabric of Islamic society.*

## IV. The Path to Reconciliation Between Gender Equality and Religious Freedom

In this chapter, we have included recommendations from top religious freedom organizations on practical advocacy strategies that civil society, human rights activists, faith leaders, social workers, business networks, entrepreneurs, and state actors can adopt to support women's rights to religious freedom. To adopt these recommendations, the first step is to recognize the value of solidarity on gender equality and religious freedom in promoting religiously free and peaceful societies with women at the forefront and learning how to challenge gender bias from multiple directions.

### Solidarity on Gender Equality and Religious Freedom

*There are no initiatives inside Tunisia to include 'women of faith' to promote reform and women's empowerment. The women's movement is led by secular feminists who have been informed by the French model which is atheistic. That doesn't work for me! Therefore, the country remains divided on issues of religion and women's rights.*  
- Fatimah/Tunisia

Lessons learned based on the advocacy challenges that organizations report to us, including the gender gaps that widen because of the lack of coordination between advocates within and outside of their platforms, convey a central message: the importance of solidarity. To meaningfully address issues of gender inequality in faith communities and the lack of respect for women's religious freedom, diverse sectors of society need to come together and coordinate support and resources for one another. As highlighted in this booklet, increased positive impact is made possible through partnerships and access to a wide variety of support.

“Freedom of religion or belief is good for peace building because of the simple fact that religious intolerance breeds violence.”  
- Nada Higuera, Constitutional Lawyer



## Fostering Religiously Free and Peaceful Societies in the MENA Region

The MENA region is a culturally diverse, historically significant yet deeply complex and contested area marked by conflicting local, regional, and international forces, and divides between ethnic and religious communities. In a territory where diverse communities have historically lived alongside each other as neighbors, in longer periods of peaceful co-existence and religious tolerance, societal relations have been disrupted by critical events, and new cycles of violence and conflict have evolved in the region over the last two centuries. Research shows that conflict-related violence increases the prevalence of violence at home, making young girls and women particularly vulnerable.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, it also demonstrates the critical role(s) women play in peace and reconciliation efforts, as active agents, rather than passive victims. Reconciliation in the Middle East is therefore a topic that cannot be discussed without considering the intersectionality of gender equality and religious freedom, and women's diverse experiences and voices.

Reconciliation in the Middle East is a complex matter.<sup>86</sup> However, the Hölderlin perspective offers fruitful guidance. Instead of taking action near the end of the conflict, or at the 'post-conflict' stage, when the level of harm has peaked, it is important to recognize that we are constantly observing and living ongoing conflicts. Hence, this requires ongoing reconciliation work, even in the midst of conflict. Conflicts can be transformed, and societies can reach peaceful resolutions based on a shared concept of justice. This work, however, is not linear.

The Hölderlin perspective on reconciliation emphasizes that the process itself does not necessarily require immediate acceptance from the majority.<sup>87</sup> Rather, reconciliation is possible even with a minority "by gradually turning the minority into the majority." More importantly, when parties in conflict are equipped with "the knowledge, know-how, and how-to regarding the reconciliation process," they are more likely to strive toward overcoming violence and respecting human rights for themselves and their opponent, at the early stages of the conflict, which then sets the tone for lasting peace and social change at both ends of the conflict.<sup>88</sup>

Closely linked to peace, reconciliation efforts, and gender equality objectives, religious pluralism for all is a key prerequisite for thriving societies. Based on the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) consisting of 20 questions that seek to evaluate the presence or absence of religious pluralism, recent data indicate that Kosovo, Lebanon, and Djibouti rate the highest in terms of levels of tolerance among Muslim-majority societies.<sup>89</sup> To learn from role models in the international community, examples of features of religiously free Muslim-majority societies include the following:

- The protection of religious freedom for all, including the right to convert or abandon religious affiliation, as a constitutional right
- Religious communities are free from state control or strict regulations on their place of worship, practices, and teachings
- Freedom of speech, expression, and choice, including, for instance, the right to choose their dress, free from coercion
- Minority religions and their holidays are recognized; religious groups are not required to publicly register their minority status to secure their right to religious freedom
- No personal status law or status law courts; legal protection for non-Muslims from provisions associated with Muslim affiliation and/or open interpretations of the Sharia law
- Leadership and authority are not assigned based on religious tests associated with the dominant religion (Islam)
- Religious Studies in public schools includes perspectives and concepts from diverse religious communities, as opposed to focusing on one single religion; private religious institutes are allowed
- Moderate to high levels of support for women in areas of education and employment.<sup>90</sup>

## Challenging Gender Bias

To challenge gender bias in religiously conservative groups and among hard-won audiences, effective advocacy for women's religious freedom requires a culturally sensitive, targeted approach with a unique message tailored to local community needs. This approach has been proven successful when communicating with religious leaders and advancing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in the MENA region:

A religious framing of the goals of the WPS agenda provides an intimate, localized approach that may appeal to communities who would otherwise not be exposed to, or convinced by, the agenda. Using religion as a narrative for gender equality provides a unique form of legitimacy to the messaging. Given religious leaders' expertise in relation to their own communities, they have a greater understanding of how best to present the WPS agenda and its values to their constituents.<sup>91</sup>

Given the importance of religion for shifts in the cultural and moral fabric of society, at state, community, and individual levels, meaningful engagement with religious leaders constitutes a key prerequisite to achieving gender equality and addressing the challenges imposed on women's rights to religious freedom. This also includes a meeting-half-way approach and building new dialogues around difficult or taboo subjects, including but not limited to the concept of honor, gender, and sexual-based violence targeting community women.

Further, supporting religious leaders toward gender equality in the MENA region, it is important to recognize the need for religiously free communities and advocate for a hermeneutical approach to religious-based laws and human rights. Religious freedom is made possible by supporting women's needs in their communities and amplifying their voices and interpretations of their religious scriptures. Journalist and author Carla Power, passionate about the fight against intolerance, radicalism, and gender-based violence, expresses this well:

“From Cambridge to Cairo to Jakarta, women are going back to classical texts and questioning the way men have read them for centuries. Women's rights advocates are challenging outdated family laws and jurisprudence, which give men exclusive power in marriages, divorces, and custody issues.”<sup>92</sup>

When leaders and advocates are well-informed and prepared to promote tolerant and peaceful societies, include women in advocacy efforts, support solidarity networks, and address gender bias across societal levels or within their communities, the next step is targeted action. Below is a list of recommendations uniquely tailored to civil society, faith and business communities, international leadership, and individual advocates, to build bridges between gender equality and religious freedom.

## Guidelines for Civil Society

### Designing the Message

- Use the power of storytelling and explore appealing digital media strategies, developing best practices that can be adopted for religious freedom and gender equality training purposes in the future
- Use locally appealing concepts and language; help leaders address FoRB challenges, especially women's unique needs for religious freedom, in their own unique contexts; think of new strategies to help people of faith break out of their deadlocks
- Establish an inclusive, easy-to-understand concept of religious freedom that is relevant to people's personal lives and which challenges the idea that religious freedom is a Westernized concept or only relevant to non-Western cultures
- Tap into the potential of hermeneutics to support gender equality objectives
- Attend convening forums and events to deliver the message; based on safety considerations, tailor the message accordingly.

### Delivering the Message

- Urge government, other civil society, faith, and business leaders to support FoRB and gender equality; introduce the intersectionality of the two concepts
- Engage religious leaders in local faith communities to establish new partnerships to address women's unique needs for religious freedom; introduce new potential partners
- Encourage FoRB cooperation between different faith communities to promote respect and empowerment for their female community members
- Foster social movements to encourage empathy and best practices across multiple sectors, agencies, and institutions
- Execute a social media plan and social media strategy that fosters engagement and dialogue with women worldwide
- Considering the prevalence of funding gaps in the non-profit sector, challenge interns and students to play a critical role in supporting organizations toward reaching women globally with FoRB messages and digital training tools.

### Taking Action

- Partner with FoRB experts across organizational lines to share resources, expand outreach and create awareness
- Provide leadership training for advocates to stand up against religious-based discrimination and violence
- Engage in educational campaigns to foster a national culture of respect for women's FoRB and human rights. This includes demanding laws prohibiting religious-based discrimination and unequal practices in marriage, divorce, custody, and heritage
- Collaborate with government and legislative committees to hold hearings on the links between religious freedom and gender equality
- Press state leaders to prioritize religious freedom and share publicly available funding opportunities that specifically address religious freedom and gender equality objectives with other civil society actors
- Share digital storytelling platforms or content with the media to inspire people to support FoRB and gender equality
- Coordinate to provide gender-specific resources for women who must flee dangerous familial situations, such as protection orders, safe houses, and long-term shelters.

## Guidelines for Faith Communities

- Openly acknowledge gender bias, religious-based discrimination, and violence disproportionately affecting women of faith
- Advocate on behalf of women who are facing double or triple discrimination due to their gender, faith, and ethnic background
- Empower community women to study, teach and transform the interpretation of religious scripture, including its application in practice
- Pray for the health and well-being of young girls and women.



## Guidelines for Business Communities

- Train staff members, colleagues, business partners or other entrepreneurs in the value of tolerance for religious freedom and pluralism at the workplace, including gender and security considerations, as part of or in addition to anti-discrimination training at the workplace or during business conferences
- Develop or invest in new innovative ideas or creative social entrepreneurship models designed to support women's empowerment
- Support civil society initiatives or charity funds that specifically support gender equality and FoRB
- Invest in political campaigns for religious freedom and lobby against increased restrictions that hinder women's empowerment.

“Freedom of religion is a pillar for peacemaking because when your beliefs are respected, then you're better able to respect the beliefs of others.  
- Jaqueline Isaac

## Guidelines for International Leadership

In 2020, the Danish Institute for Human Rights, in collaboration with governments around the world, released a report with international recommendations on the need to adopt intersectional models toward gender equality and FoRB to support Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of goals defined by the UN, to be achieved across member states before 2030. Inspiring this booklet and new advocacy efforts, some of the recommendations include the following:

- Clarify the relationship between FoRB and gender equality
- Include FoRB and gender equality in broader efforts for human rights, development, and democratization
- Foster dialogue and cooperation between advocates of FoRB and gender equality
- Engage with local religious actors, raise awareness, and support inclusive social norms
- Conduct more data and analysis on discrimination and inequalities, to support effective programming based on women's lived experiences and unique needs
- Mobilize for increased access to justice, a justice system free from stereotypes and bias, and legal reform for gender equality
- Advocate on health rights for women across diverse backgrounds
- Use education as a vehicle for change, promote equality of access, and support curriculum reform and textbook development.<sup>93</sup>

### Other international recommendations include:

- Support sustainable economic development that trickles down to marginalized communities, including long-term humanitarian aid programming for female leadership and local civil society projects dedicated to FoRB and gender equality
- Protect vulnerable religious minorities in Muslim-majority societies and support humanitarian interventions for religiously-free democracies in the MENA region and beyond
- Transform peace building by enforcing the WPS agenda and adopting the Hölderlin perspective to promote reconciliation efforts that centralize the role and participation of women, to create thriving, peaceful societies
- Demand that the CEDAW Committee or the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief reports or issues specific policy recommendations based on the synergies between religious freedom and gender equality that recognize 1) the interconnectedness of women's rights and religious freedom as mutually reinforcing rather than separate, isolated issues; and 2) the additional vulnerabilities faced by women and girls from religious minorities
- Propose measures to address intersectional discrimination, encouraging coordination between institutions and actors mobilizing on women's rights and FoRB
- Take action by developing and supporting other governments in their development of policy framework or National Action Plans (NAPs), starting with prohibiting harmful legislation that disproportionately affects women of faith, especially from minority communities
- Develop enforcement mechanisms, tribunals and advance human rights concerns and cases built on the violations of religious freedom and gender equality, to the International Criminal Court (ICC), when possible.



## Guidelines for Individual Advocates

While we understand the need for structural change, and the power in numbers, it is important to recognize the value of individual action to bring unity, as we have learnt, not only from the Hölderlin perspective but through the historically significant role of individual leaders in social movements around the world, that diverse actors in society can come together based on a shared understanding of human rights. If you, as an individual, believer or non-believer, regardless of background, are interested in opportunities for advocacy to support women's agency and religious freedom, these are some of the steps that you can take:

- Build convincing, effective arguments based on records, reports, and data to win over audiences who are unfamiliar with FoRB and the role and needs of women in FoRB spaces
- Share a short film and presentation at your local church, college or community gathering showcasing effective advocacy campaigns and movements led by female advocates of religious freedom
- Write an op-ed for the local paper about the merits of religious freedom for women internationally
- Tweet, blog or speak up in any platform available to you about the value of FoRB for women and share inspiring campaign success stories of legal victories or milestones achieved internationally
- Identify and connect with FoRB advocates with influential social media platforms, and share their work with your own networks
- Practice your diplomacy and networking skills by personally connecting potential advocates, and challenge gender bias in your own faith community by referencing relevant passages from your religious scripture, including alternative, potential interpretations that foster gender equality
- Reach out to the educational institution you affiliate with either as a student or alumna/alumnus, to explore and encourage options for coordination between the Departments of Theology/Religious Studies and Women's Studies
- Vote in state and local elections for increased respect for pluralism, including human rights, religious freedom, and gender equality
- Support politicians that specifically advocate for religious freedom and gender equality as a part of their campaigns and volunteer to help engage new voters
- Engage in intercultural exchanges; travel to the Middle East, familiarize with different local cultures, languages and the challenges faced by women in the MENA region; take steps to personally foster new friendships, networks and dialogues for gender equality and religious freedom.

## V. Conclusion and Call to Action

The point of this booklet is not only to establish the interconnectedness of gender equality and religious freedom, and the value of bridging the gender gap for women in the MENA region, but also how societies around the world can benefit from inclusion-based models in their communities, social movements, and business sectors. By developing media strategies and empowering women to lead social change, this advocacy work becomes increasingly effective.

We have found that training women as religious freedom advocates, through digital media strategies, is critical for reconciliation, conflict resolution, and stabilizing peace in the MENA region and Muslim societies. Research shows that when women thrive, societies progress. This is the central idea behind UNSCR 1325, as discussed in chapter 1 of this booklet. The participation of women in peace and conflict resolution processes and across diverse sectors of society can help address the prevalence of violence, conflict, and war, and bring positive outcomes such as disarmament, demilitarization, and ending gender-based violence as a tactic of war.

Through our training, new advocates and perspectives on social change are born. For many of our female community stakeholders, our interviews for this booklet meant the opportunity to critically reflect on ideas that are important to them as women, and relevant to their lives and faith, for the very first time. By amplifying diverse voices and connecting communities, we strive to build solidarity and continue to learn and advocate together with women in the region.

Finally, in this booklet, we have defined the gender gap that manifests when religious freedom and gender equality are treated as separate struggles and highlighted narratives

on the needs for religious freedom from women in the MENA region. We have also outlined the work of Empower Women Media and other key non-profit actors that aim to bridge such gaps through digital media training and diverse advocacy strategies, and proposed practical solutions that advocates, leaders, networks, and individuals can adopt to strengthen their intersectional advocacy tools.

Now that you have had the chance to follow our journey and learn new strategies to advocate for religious freedom for women, will you be our next advocate?

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Shirin Taber's work has been featured in the Los Angeles Times, Detroit Free Press, Christianity Today and the NYTimes.com. She is the author of *Muslims Next Door* and co-author of the book *Islam and North America*. She has assisted the International Religious Freedom Round Table, Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, George Bush Institute Women's Leadership Initiative, Peacemakers Network, and the United Nations Office for Genocide Prevention with projects focused on women, peace, and multi-faith collaboration. Building on her experience in the nonprofit sector, Taber's two Master's degrees are dedicated to developing religious freedom and gender equality strategies for the Middle East and North Africa.

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## **Appendix A: Religious Freedom and Gender Equality Questionnaire:**

1. How do you interpret Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
2. In your experience, is “freedom of belief, religion and conscience” respected for all people living in Tunisia? (Muslims, Jews, Christians, Atheists...). Can you share an example?
3. How do you feel about Islam being the state religion in your country? Is there a conflict of interest as a constitutional democracy? As a constitutional democracy, is having a state religion a conflict of interest? Why or why not?
4. In your country, are women united or divided on women's rights? Do they prefer a secular or Islamic interpretation of women's rights?
5. Do you feel the state respects conversion from one religion to another? Or non-believers?
6. Do you feel “religious freedom and gender equality” are conflicting rights or inseparable rights? Mutually supporting? Why or why not?
7. Do feel that women need education and training to support the Constitution's commitment to “freedom of belief and conscience”? What is the best approach?
8. How do you feel about women having equal inheritance? Do you feel the inheritance bill submitted to parliament in November 2018 should be passed?
9. Do believe the government should require a Muslim president? Why or why not?
10. Are there laws or norms that limit women's full participation in business or society? Can you share an example?
11. What is the best approach to train women in Tunisia about religious freedom and gender equality? Can you share some examples?
12. Would you like to share any additional comments?