

Local Perspectives on Religious Freedom in Bangladesh



This brief provides program designers, implementers and evaluators in the Religious and Ethnic Freedom space with practical insights and examples of locally developed indicators, aligned with the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM). It outlines the various ways representatives of local organizations and religious minorities perceive religious and ethnic freedom. The subsequent sections provide an action-oriented discussion of the indicators that emerged.

Introduction

The USAID approach to promoting sustainable development prioritizes local ownership, participation, and capacity strengthening. By applying this approach to the Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (REF) program, the significance of engaging and collaborating with local stakeholders, including religious leaders and communities, in the development of indicators for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) projects is emphasized. The process of localizing indicators aims to honor and recognize local cultural specificities, preferences, and practices; and understand the local context and the complexities of religious practices, beliefs, and dynamics in the region. It also can strengthen the capacity of local actors and institutions to take the lead in promoting FORB, ensure the relevance and effectiveness of projects, and promote sustainability.

In order to determine how local actors and final beneficiaries define “religious freedom”, Search facilitated a participatory process that engages community members to generate local indicators based on their everyday experiences of the concept, aligned with the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM). GAM is a participatory research approach designed to inform

interventions and drive greater accountability to the communities served by those interventions, and can be incorporated into monitoring and evaluation, project activities, and overall design. The data was collected with support of a local organization Films 4 Peace Foundation by conducting a workshop with civil society members, minority religious groups, and majority religious groups in Bangladesh. The process generated a list of co-created and localized indicators, and participants voted for the top indicators that resonated most with them.

Limitations: It should be recognized that the data presented below represent the experiences of a limited number of people. Although they are representatives of religious groups and local actors working in the field of religious freedom, they may not provide a detailed picture of every community in the country. Therefore, each intervention should ideally be preceded by a similar exercise with its beneficiaries. It is important to recognize that when dealing with religious groups, there may be risks of relativism. To avoid this, our team used several approaches. First, we were guided by a human rights and do no harm approach to ensure the results are aligned with these principles. The second was to create a comfortable space for participants. To do so, we invited the religious minority separately and listened to the majority opinion separately and recognized that there may be representatives of minorities in the majority. Third, during the discussion we did not touch upon doctrinal theological issues, only experience related to ‘secular’ life. Fourth, we cross-checked with other existing sources of data to enhance the validity and credibility of findings and mitigate the presence of any biases. In this case, triangulation of literature review, FGD with religious actors, and the workshop with civil society organizations working in the field were used.

Country Background

Bangladesh is a densely populated country in South Asia that gained independence in 1971 when Bengali East Pakistan seceded from the union with (West) Pakistan. The vast majority of its estimated 171 million people are ethnic Bengalis, whose mother tongue is Bengali. Smaller indigenous groups like the Chakma, Marma, Tanchangya, Tripuri, Kuki, and Khamar have their own languages. Islam is the dominant religion, with Sunni Muslims comprising 89% of the population and Hindus around 10%. There are also small Buddhist, Christian, and indigenous religious minorities.

Islam is constitutionally the state religion, but freedom of religion is guaranteed. Despite a largely secular legal framework, issues persist around religious speech restriction, discrimination against minorities, land disputes disproportionately affecting them, autonomy of religious institutions, and limited minority representation in state institutions. Bangladesh has a history of Islamist violence, including during the Liberation War and in recent decades by groups targeting minorities. Mob violence and communal tensions flare up sporadically, often incited by disinformation.

For more information, refer to [Bangladesh's Situational Analysis](#).

Local Understanding of Religious Freedom

In Bangladesh, local communities and CSOs have a multifaceted understanding of religious and ethnic freedom, shaped by their experiences and beliefs. For them, religious freedom encompasses the ability to practice one's religion without hindrance, respect for individual beliefs, and the balancing of individual rights without impinging on others. It involves the participation in and respect for diverse religious events and celebrations, such as Durga Puja and Eid ul-Fitr, as a symbol of harmonious coexistence. This understanding extends to the expectation of fair treatment regardless of religious identity and the challenge of labels like 'minority', advocating for equality and inclusion in society.

Moreover, these communities emphasize the importance of separating religion from politics to ensure unbiased decision-making. They face internal challenges, such as integrating diverse perspectives within organizations, including those related to gender and sexuality. There is a strong belief that robust legislative frameworks are crucial for safeguarding religious and ethnic freedoms. This includes preventing and penalizing acts of intolerance, such as temple vandalism and encroachment on religious properties. For them, religious freedom also means the freedom to speak out against unfair treatment based on religion and to practice one's faith while treating others with respect, regardless of their religious beliefs. These perspectives highlight a nuanced understanding of religious and ethnic freedom, underlining its importance in fostering an inclusive and harmonious society.

"Religious freedom, to me, means being able to follow my beliefs without any problems and standing up when I see something wrong. It also includes enjoying religious celebrations with friends from various faiths and having the ability to speak out against unfair treatment based on religion."

–Focus Group Discussion Participant

FORB and State

Participants from CSOs, minority religious groups, and the majority religious groups revealed both common concerns and distinct viewpoints. The CSOs advocated for constitutional laws to prevent discrimination, emphasizing the importance of equal civil laws for all citizens. They expressed deep concerns about violence targeting religious minorities and stressed the need for effective implementation of constitutional principles to safeguard minority rights. Additionally, the CSOs called for government support for individuals without a specific religious affiliation, promoting inclusivity. They also emphasized the separation of politics and religion for unbiased decision-making.

The minority perspective highlighted challenges in cultural integration due to the influence of foreign cultures on traditional values. Participants stressed the importance of peaceful coexistence and called for government action in promoting societal changes. The participants emphasized the state's role in safeguarding religious practices, rejecting compulsion in matters of religion. They underscored the necessity of robust legislation to ensure religious and ethnic freedom, emphasizing the crucial role of legal frameworks in protecting the diverse fabric of the community.

Meanwhile, the majority perspective criticized the local government's handling of religious matters and highlighted incidents like the Ramu attack. Participants proposed a collaborative approach involving religious leaders to foster coexistence and a more peaceful society. The majority also acknowledged the impact of political influences on public discourse, expressing concerns about the challenges of freely expressing opinions. They called for thorough investigations into religious attacks, urging the government to treat everyone fairly and assign due importance to religious matters. There was a shared sentiment regarding the interconnected responsibilities of individuals and the local government in shaping societal responses, with criticism directed at the government for not addressing religious matters effectively.

FORB in Community

The CSO participants emphasized the joy of participating in diverse cultural events as symbolizing the freedom to practice religions peacefully. True religious freedom, according to CSO members, involved openly following one's faith without fear, standing against wrongdoing, and enjoying religious celebrations with friends from various faiths. The essence lay in the ability to speak out against unfair treatment based on religion. A participant from the minority perspective highlighted the dual impact of religion, fostering peaceful coexistence while potentially creating differences. True peaceful coexistence, they argued, required honoring and respecting the beliefs of other religions, exemplified by harmonious living in a village where Hindus and Muslims shared reciprocal religious practices. The absence of human values was identified as a disruptor of religious coexistence, emphasizing the necessity of fostering human values for a conducive environment.

"In our village, our temple conducts the morning puja (worship) at 4 am, which coincides with the call to prayer, azan, at the mosques. This overlap has led to conflicts, resulting in the temple being set on fire. To ensure peaceful coexistence, it's essential that all religions are permitted to carry out their rituals without hindrance."

-Focus Group Discussion Participant

The majority perspective expressed concerns about societal responsibilities. The aftermath of specific incidents triggered heightened awareness and a collective effort to avoid confrontations. The discussion extended to the family domain, highlighting the crucial role families played in shaping children's perceptions. Despite challenges stemming from political influences and self-imposed restrictions hindering interfaith interactions among children, participants stressed the importance of families teaching children about coexistence. Drawing from historical context, participants noted a decline in religious harmony, contrasting the present with a past where Bangladesh experienced more robust religious coexistence. They shared anecdotes of neighbors peacefully coexisting, enjoying ceremonial music from various religions, and celebrated the cultural richness of their region as catalysts for harmonious living.

"In our village, Hindus and Muslims live together harmoniously. During Hindu religious ceremonies, offerings like khai, moa, and naru are shared. Similarly, on Eid, the community comes together to collect money and presents it to a Hindu neighbor, as some Hindus may be uncomfortable eating at a Muslim household. This arrangement exemplifies peaceful coexistence, a result of cultural development that bridges religious differences. We maintain harmony here due to our mutual respect for each other's religions."

-Focus Group Discussion Participant

FORB and Education

In the majority religious group, one participant stressed the importance of early education in promoting harmony among different religions. The discussion started with concerns about the lack of emphasis on mutual respect within families and schools, questioning the values instilled in educational institutions and the discouragement of interfaith interactions among children by parents. Additionally, participants expressed worries about the limited knowledge provided in religious institutions, emphasizing deficiencies in the education of teachers. Overall, the discussion highlighted a shared concern for fostering a more inclusive and respectful educational environment, addressing issues of prejudice and promoting harmony among diverse religious communities.

Civil society members emphasized issues in schools, advocating for fair treatment and the creation of safe avenues for students to share their problems without fear of reprisal. They highlighted instances of unfair treatment of some children by teachers, emphasizing the need for a supportive environment where every child can go to school without facing discrimination. The CSO participants also shared an example of prejudice in a particular classroom, where Hindu children were isolated by their peers based on differences in ethnicity. They condemned these mindsets and called for values that promote unity, inclusivity, and respect for diversity, aiming to eliminate hurtful behaviors from society.

FORB and Media

The CSOs, minority, and majority groups all acknowledged the influential role of media, especially social media, in shaping public opinion and societal dynamics around FORB. In their discussion, the CSO group focused more on the lack of emphasis on religious freedom by government and youth leaders on social media and in policies, while the minority view centered on personal experiences of violence triggered by media reports and the importance of speaking freely. Challenges like the prohibition of the term "Adibashi" for the indigenous community and criticism faced by a musician singing in an indigenous language underscored the negative influence of the media on religious freedom and cultural recognition.

The majority group provided a more general perspective on the potential benefits and risks of media platforms, considering both its ability to shape public opinion and the prevalence of bias and dishonesty. All groups expressed concerns about the spread of misinformation and unverified content on social media, which can escalate tensions. The lack of guidelines and unrestricted sharing on social media was identified as an issue by both CSO and majority groups. Additionally, the CSO group highlighted the need for collaboration with youth and promoting positive content.

"In mainstream media, there are guidelines, but in social media, there are no guidelines, and anyone can spread anything. People trust mainstream media, although they also trust that it is controlled by the state. On the other hand, people tend to believe what they see on social media. Therefore, we have to use social media cautiously."

-Focus Group Discussion Participant

FORB and Gender

The discussions showed that the relationship between religious freedom and gender is complex and multifaceted, deeply intertwined with societal dynamics and religious norms. A notable example is the resistance within certain Muslim communities to include transgender issues in organizational dialogues, reflecting the difficulties in navigating religious sensitivities while promoting gender diversity. Government and CSO initiatives promote women's participation but also highlight significant challenges like victimization, limited accessibility due to social and religious norms, safety concerns, and negative societal perceptions influenced by religious leaders.

Opportunities for empowerment through education and role models are identified, yet risks like political interference, election-related setbacks, and harassment of successful women are substantial barriers. However, there is a notable achievement like increased women's representation in workplaces and heightened awareness of women's rights. For instance, a participant noted a significant increase in women's workforce participation, highlighting a shift from traditional norms where women's visibility was minimal. This progress signifies a move towards gender equality, which is seen as essential for peace and equitable society. This landscape suggests that achieving religious freedom and gender equality in Bangladesh requires addressing both the empowering opportunities and the deep-rooted challenges influenced by religious and societal norms.

Indicators

Overall, the representatives from civil society, minority religious groups, and majority religious groups co-created 175 everyday indicators of religious freedom. These are the **top positive and negative localized indicators**, co-generated, voted, and selected from this discussion:

Civil society representatives shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom in their communities:

When people from diverse castes, creeds, religions, and identities have freedom to express themselves, respect each other, and live together in harmony and contentment.

When youth are mobilized and empowered to play a vital role in the positive use of social media and create counter narratives to promote messages on peace and religious tolerance.

When decision making is inclusive of religion, ethnicities, and gender.

When students are not discriminated against or separated in school based on their identity, race, religion, or ethnicity.

When the state becomes more responsible for promoting equality and equity through proper legal framework, policies, and mechanisms.

When I can freely express my identity without fear and I am still safe in my society.

When the state will not discriminate against any person based on their religion or identity.

When the state can protect each religion and works to promote rights of marginalized groups.

When people are not labeled based on their religious or ethnic identities.

When religious sentiments of people are not wrongly exploited for political gain or political manipulation by all political stakeholders.

Religious minorities shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom:

When people are looked at as humans or citizens rather than focussing on identities of Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, and Buddhist etc.

When there is tolerance between communities, freedom of culture, basic needs, and religious practices.

When more and more youth are mobilized or positively use digital media in Bangladesh.

When people respect each other's opinions and do not use religious and ethnic relations for political gain.

When states take the responsibility of protecting minority groups' rights and security.

When media, social media, and influencers start to develop counter narratives to communal violence through respective platforms.

When people consider all religions as five fingers and feel the pain of each other since they are part of the same society.

When the State promotes ethnic and religious practices through arts and culture.

When politicians do not patronize specific religions to establish their political power and political agenda.

When people reform their religious practice with the evolution of global context and adapt accordingly.

Religious majorities shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom:

When parents teach their children in the family about respecting people from other religions.

When people from all religions can practice their religion without any obstruction and restriction.

When people believe that they can live together with dignity and mutual respect.

When the government maintains rule of law and applies it equally to all people.

When judicial institutions do not delay justice delivery and deprive innocent people of their right to freedom so that there is social and judicial justice for people.

When people from different religions share the same compound or live together in the same locality without any problem and feel safe and secure in the society they live in.

When religions are not politicized or manipulated for electoral political gain or establishing power of one section of society.

When Muslim religious leaders become fully responsible to promote religious harmony and teach the meaning of the actual message from the Quran.

When the government and academic institutions carry out research to understand what causes young people to be inclined to radicalism.

When one practices their own religion by respecting other religions.

Conclusion & Recommendations

These indicators reflect a shared vision for a respectful, harmonious society, alongside unique perspectives shaped by each group's experiences and roles. Civil society representatives, religious minorities, and majorities collectively emphasize mutual respect, harmony among diverse groups, and the non-politicization of religion as key indicators of religious freedom and peace. They agree on the state's role in promoting equality and protecting rights, and the importance of positive youth and media engagement in fostering religious tolerance. However, they differ in their specific concerns: religious majorities focus on judicial justice and family-led religious education, minorities highlight their unique challenges and the need for state protection and cultural adaptation, while civil society emphasizes inclusive decision-making and avoiding identity-based labels. These indicators reflect a shared vision for a respectful, harmonious society, alongside unique perspectives shaped by each group's experiences and roles.

Taken together, these indicators reflect the local Bangladesh perspectives on the meaning of religious freedom. Locally developed indicators are a great source for guiding actions and promoting accountability to local communities. Stakeholders such as civil society organizations, program developers, policymakers, government agencies, and local communities themselves can all act on localized indicators. While these indicators may appear broad, they both measure specific outcomes and capture shifts in people's attitudes and practices within communities. For instance, when youth are mobilized to share positive messages around religious freedom and empowered to create counter-narratives promoting peace and religious tolerance, it showcases a proactive engagement of the younger generation in building a harmonious society. This also signifies a shift towards harnessing the potential of digital platforms to promote constructive dialogue, understanding, and collaboration among diverse religious communities.



These indicators not only reveal the existing challenges related to religious freedom, but they also offer insight into potential programmatic interventions in the Bangladeshi context. For instance, the indicators show people are divided or manipulated politically along religious divides. They also demonstrate how the state can do more to protect people of all religions, especially minorities and the marginalized. These mean that there could be a variety of program interventions, including:

- Support initiatives that lobby for legal reforms ensuring equal treatment of all citizens, irrespective of their religious affiliations. This includes pushing for a constitutional framework that minimizes the dominance of any particular faith and enacting laws that bridge the gap between constitutional principles and effective implementation, particularly for the protection of minority rights.
- Facilitate dialogues and partnerships between civil society organizations and the government to encourage a more inclusive approach by the government in their social media communications and broader policies regarding religious and minority groups.
- Support youth-led social media projects that promote peace, understanding, and collaboration with the government. Invest in strengthening media verification mechanisms and regulatory oversight, ensuring a media landscape that positively contributes to societal harmony.
- Fund initiatives to educate media on critical social issues, shifting the focus from trending topics to societal matters of importance. Support the development and implementation of tools for monitoring and managing misinformation on social media platforms. Advocate for the establishment of guidelines and regulatory measures to ensure responsible information dissemination on social media, including government regulatory interventions to control the spread of harmful news.
- Invest in projects that support the inclusive social infrastructure and needs of minority religious groups, uphold and protect the rights and cultural identities of indigenous and minority communities. Support educational initiatives focused on instilling respect for all religions in children and train religious leaders and teachers to emphasize peaceful coexistence and a broad understanding of religious values in their teachings.