



# WOMEN AT THE TABLE

## ACCELERATING FORB CAPACITY



A Study Conducted by FoRB Women's Alliance and Gender & Religious Freedom



Photo: Pexels: Tuur Tisseghem

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Over 100 leaders with expertise on freedom of religion or belief, human rights, and women's rights met in Washington, DC on June 21, 2019 to discuss the intersection of these issues. The group focused on how to improve understanding and advance an agenda that places women at the center of efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief, thought and expression.

Discussion focused on the quest for religious freedom internationally and that women – their treatment, voice, and agency – generally received inadequate attention within their communities and the communities advancing human rights. They posited that this inadequate attention is the case, despite the fact that women often experience compound persecution due to factors including their religion and gender while they also are among the leaders in their communities advocating for greater human rights protection for all. An additional complication they cited is the false schism that has been created between religious freedom, viewed largely as a conservative issue, and human rights, largely as a liberal issue, and that such differentiation disserves both. They also agreed that this discord partly is based on the mistaken view that religious freedom is less about freedom and more about religion, and that human rights protections for women are at odds with the freedom of religion or belief.

Together, we explored new ways of framing this narrative, working on these issues and proposing a way forward so that women are at the foreground in shaping the agenda. Emerging from the discussion about the current landscape of

actors and initiatives, participants expressed a desire to improve collaboration across multiple sectors. Although it would be four years later, this 2019 meeting set the stage to launch our accelerator, FoRB Women's Alliance.

Just as a business accelerator gives companies access to mentorship, training, investors and other support that help them become stable and self-sufficient, FoRB Women's Alliance identifies gaps and resources to help women and FoRB advocates at the local, national and global levels be more impactful. We convene, connect, collaborate, and when appropriate coordinate to advance pragmatic solutions for advancing the freedom of religion or belief for women.

To help FoRB Women's Alliance better understand how to bring our shared vision to life in a meaningful way, we partnered with Gender & Religious Freedom in 2022 to field a Fetzer Institute funded preliminary landscape study of women and FoRB.

The purpose of this preliminary research effort is to:

- Foster communication and relationships between actors in this space.
- Connect with civil society women led groups, other activists from different regions around the world with FoRB.
- Define the gaps and problems and identify inequalities in resourcing.
- Gather data and cascade results back through networks identified through this research.
- Prepare to field a global survey on the state of women following the completion of this project.

## FOREWARD






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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


## Key Finding #1



Both isolated networks and the siloing between FoRB rights and other sectors, especially women's rights, have disadvantaged women advocating for relief and redress and exacerbated their gendered experience of persecution on the basis of religion or belief.

Across cultures and geographies, women and girls of marginalized beliefs face significant discrimination and persecution by means which are linked to their gender status.<sup>1</sup> In many places, women additionally receive little or no education about their legal rights, and too often suffer from the effects of violent, complex and hidden attacks due to their chosen faith or belief.<sup>2</sup> Participants in this FoRB research study underscore these facts. Yet, being a female does not lessen a person's human right to freedom of religion or belief. The forms of FoRB related persecution which women and girls face are further buried within the isolated networks of those who would speak on their behalf in the courts, the political realm and even within their own religious community. In addition to this marginalization, the false division between freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and women's rights also impedes advocacy efforts.

## Key Finding #2




Exclusion from power structures additionally marginalizes, undermines, under-studies and under-resources efforts to address FoRB violations committed against women and girls and limits their capacity to effectively act.

Historically, efforts to address FoRB violations often have excluded women and their gender-specific concerns. While numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks and humanitarian groups focus on defending and advancing FoRB, male leadership of the FoRB movement, including in the West, often has dominated the space. Many NGOs and leaders of the FoRB movement fail to comprehensively integrate women at every level, in some cases due to a lack of awareness, research and collaboration.

Women often have not been equal participants in decision making, nor have they had equal access to receiving and/or disseminating information regarding FoRB violations. The result is that those women who advocate for their FoRB rights find their efforts often have been thwarted, undermined, under-resourced, or unacknowledged.

## Key Finding #3



Cultural and religious norms can be creatively and courageously challenged.

There are passionate, committed and gifted people working to build positive change alongside those women and girls most affected by FoRB violations and who are advocating against these violations by addressing belief systems and mindsets based upon patriarchal and religious norms. There are good examples of intentional grassroots projects and training curriculum which can be shared with others in this field. Participants called for support of outstanding innovations and creative and courageous programs – especially at the grassroots level, and a deep commitment from all actors willing to engage in these efforts, despite the challenges, cost, length of time - and commitment – needed for lasting change.



### Key Finding #4

Collaboration is a form of empowerment to increase capacity, influence and relief.

Communities facing FoRB violations can connect across locations, regions and nations to collaborate with significant effect. From the participants<sup>3</sup> in this study, there was a clear request to have a platform or collective whereby collaboration, partnership, access to training, support in advocacy, shared innovations and entry-points to resources could be facilitated and visible. The desire to work in collaboration was evident in both the examples given of current practices and future strategies.



### Key Finding #5

Structural change is the necessary accelerator for addressing Women's and FoRB Rights and requires an external catalyst. It is not within the agency of the unempowered to have the necessary resources or create a space for themselves at the table.

In order to accelerate FoRB across the globe, the vitality and capacity of women and their advocates must be brought to the “banquet” to ensure that they can speak and act for themselves and their communities and are represented, understood, resourced and activated. Their unmediated activities can only take place when they have the resources to fully enable their skills and ideas to flourish and access to places of power and decision-making regarding policies, laws, budgets and processes.



Photo: Shutterstock/Chomplearn

These findings encapsulate the experiences of research participants working to advance religious freedom or belief for women. While the project's qualitative research does not represent a statistical sample, it provides for the first time a vivid picture of the state and needs of the field, both the challenges and successes, and a roadmap forward.



Photo: Flickr/U.S. Dept. of State

## A FIELD OF ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM





# INTERSECTING HUMAN RIGHTS

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is an internationally protected human right.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this right is abused everyday across the globe in a myriad of different ways for all genders, religions and beliefs.<sup>5</sup> From targeted killings to the denial of citizenship rights, to imprisonment for conversion from a majority religion, risks are pervasive for individuals, families and communities who are marginalized for their beliefs.

Yet, persecution, discrimination and harassment on the basis of religion or belief is not experienced in the same way by everyone. Factors such as ethnicity, gender and age can all fundamentally shape the nature of FoRB violations. Consequently, women are particularly vulnerable to specific forms of violations of freedom of religion or belief, such as ideologically-motivated sexual violence.<sup>6</sup> Crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict, can exacerbate the risk of gender specific violations.<sup>7</sup> Given that research by the Pew Research Center reveals that across the globe women are more likely to be affiliated to a religion than men, it is vital that we understand the implication this difference has on their right to believe or have a religion and how this interacts with their gender and compounded vulnerabilities.<sup>8</sup>

For example, in Pakistan, economically disadvantaged Shia Hazara women face compounding layers of discrimination on the basis of “gender, religious-ethnic affiliation and class.” As a result, *“they face limited opportunities for education and jobs, restrictions on mobility, mental and psychological health issues, and gender-based discrimination.”*<sup>9</sup> These factors demonstrate the range of persecution that women face at the intersection of gender and FoRB.

Women also can face extreme levels of violence in the name of religious coercion, typically targeting perceptions of sexual purity. A case that made headlines around the world was that of the Yazidi women and girls, who faced an organized system of sexual slavery, forced marriage<sup>10</sup> and rape by ISIS in Iraq. While the threat of ISIS has diminished considerably, thousands of Yazidi women remain missing and the ramifications (legal, familial, social and psychological) continue to profoundly affect the Yazidi community.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, sexual violence ordinarily is hidden within a host of environments; within patriarchal societies, within the domestic sphere, within conflict zones and often within data collection itself.<sup>12</sup> Underpinning both gender-specific violence and discrimination are the systemic religious and cultural norms that create an environment in which such acts are normalized and are facilitated, encouraged and intensified.

## “Interdependent, intertwined and interrelated”<sup>13</sup>

The area of women and FoRB often is associated with efforts towards gender equality in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5.<sup>14</sup> There has been a common perception that freedom of religion or belief and gender equality generally are unrelated, or even fundamentally opposed. *“This antagonistic relationship often builds...on an understanding of FoRB as a right that protects religion – and often conservative, patriarchal religion. This is not in line with the conceptions of FoRB as outlined in international human rights standards.”*<sup>15</sup> This misconception can be further compounded by state reservations on international treaties that are “religiously phrased”, which amplifies “this misperception that FoRB serves to restrict women’s rights to equality.”<sup>16</sup>

While the relationship between FoRB and gender equality can be complicated, it is important to recognize that “human rights are interdependent, intertwined and interrelated”; frequently, human rights violations are too.<sup>17</sup> For example, there is a direct connection between the freedom of expression and FoRB<sup>18</sup> as well as the other core freedoms.

The UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB twice has addressed the interrelation between gender equality and FoRB through annual reports, identifying how non-discrimination and freedom of religion or belief are mutually reinforcing rights. Crucially, the Special Rapporteur’s 2013 report outlines how perceptions that gender equality and FoRB inherently are contradictory can have a detrimental impact, by causing “serious protection gaps.”<sup>19</sup>

**To pay attention to the relationship between women and FoRB is to recognize the critical interrelation of human rights and to embrace the intricacies inherent in this interaction.**

## FIVE YEARS OF EVIDENCE

Using the Christian community as a case study, it is possible to track the development of five years of research into the experiences of women and girls marginalized for their beliefs. Since 2018, Open Doors International has conducted research on the experiences of Christian men and women living in the most hostile countries for those with a Christian



Photo: UN Women

faith. In particular, this research has explored the differences between the nature of the persecution that men and women encounter and how gender particularly shapes vulnerability. In five years of research, Open Doors International has found that gender-specific religious persecution consistently targets Christian women and girls in ways that are violent, hidden and complex. Sexual violence frequently has been the form of persecution used against female Christians across the highest number of countries in which Christians are most marginalized for their faith.

Alongside sexual violence, forced marriage, house arrest and psychological and physical violence are the highest-ranking

forms of religious persecution that Christian women and girls experience. This ranking illustrates how often female Christians are targeted as “sexual objects and vehicles of shame.”<sup>20</sup>

While research across other faith and belief communities varies in form and geographical focus, there are likely to be some core similarities to the findings from the research on Christian communities. Such similarities are evident, for example, in the reports of attempted forced marriage and conversion of Hindu girls in Pakistan<sup>21</sup> and the sexual violence committed in Myanmar by the military and security forces against Rohingya Muslim women (which the UN has described as an act of ethnic cleansing.)<sup>22</sup>

### 2019-2023 Top 10 Pressure Points Table for Top 50 Countries: Female<sup>23</sup>

The scores at right refer to the percentage of the Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) top 50 countries where the Pressure Point is recorded as characteristic of the experience of religious persecution for women or men. Pressure Points are a tool to capture specific forms of pressure or violence that are used to target areas of sensitivity or vulnerability of men and women belonging to a religious community.

(Diagram 1)

2023 Rank	Pressure Point	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019 Augmented
1	Violence – sexual	86%	90%	86%	84%	88%
2	Forced marriage	84%	88%	90%	84%	76%
3	Violence – physical	76%	78%	84%	64%	62%
4	Incarceration by family (house arrest)	68%	66%	70%	60%	62%
5	Violence – psychological	62%	78%	74%	40%	38%
6	Violence – verbal	58%	54%	56%	46%	52%
7	Abduction	54%	62%	58%	50%	34%
8	Enforced religious dress code	52%	42%	40%	30%	28%
9	Denied access to social community/networks	48%	52%	52%	36%	58%
10	Denied custody of children	40%	44%	42%	34%	46%

# GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE OF WOMEN AND FoRB

Given the weight of research which has identified the dynamics of gender-specific religious persecution and the damage it causes, it may seem that no further research is needed. This is far from the case, because identification of the problem has not spontaneously produced actions that address and resolve the root causes. It begs the question: are these marginalized women and girls so despised, or such a threat, that the otherwise moral forces of justice or religion will not take a stand to defend them?

Or is violence against women and girls simply so normalized that it does not strike the chord of outrage which it ought to? Or perhaps, is there another form of research which would enable concrete action to systematically address the root causes from a combined and collaborative women's rights and a FoRB perspective?

There is a lack of research on the solutions that currently are being carried out to address this situation. This knowledge gap means that while the violence and discrimination that women and girls face may become increasingly illuminated, the challenging landscape of women and FoRB activity largely is left in the dark.

Until this report was initiated, there was no global landscape analysis of women and FoRB. While significant and at times coordinated activities emerged in both the UK, Europe and North America, there was a lack of intentional mapping or coordinated strategy. Progress lay in that evidence universally

revealed consistent issues and themes. Yet, many needs remained unmet and connections with the Global South, for example, generally were effective but limited.

Without documenting and understanding this landscape, those trying practically to make a difference in contexts around the world will run into the same roadblocks again and again. This research begins to show not only the gaps of knowledge and understanding, but also largely the absence of collaborative opportunities.

In the collaborative spirit that shapes much work in the women and FoRB space, it also is vital to hear from actors who successfully have navigated some of these challenges. Understanding both the roadblocks to effective action and the opportunities to overcome and eliminate these roadblocks is essential to creating sustainable change in the communities around the world where women and girls are marginalized for their beliefs. Only by collaborating with actors who already are making a difference in a range of contexts and communities can the challenges that recur be identified and their successes in overcoming them be spotlighted.



Photo: Sydney Morning Herald/Wayne Taylor

## VISUALIZING BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

The interaction between FoRB violations and specific demographic or life circumstances highlights for advocates and practitioners the need to address specialized concerns that often are hidden or minimized. Once a strong light is thrown on the issue and the gaps, the obvious question is: how best to address these concerns?

The first step is to know who is already at work in this area and is addressed by asking: What are the existing organizations and their relationships? The preliminary “mapping of the landscape” begins to answer these questions.

Secondarily, during the focus groups and in-depth interviews participants were probed about the issues they had encountered and for which they sought change. This probe went beyond identifying actors within the landscape, it gives insight into the barriers and opportunities which participants encounter as they seek to work within this landscape. This line of questioning produced a wide range of responses encompassing the breadth of action required in order to alleviate the injustices and suffering which result from violations in the space of women’s and FoRB rights. This report anonymously references selected participant comments to emphasize important findings.

## MINDSET, SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURE

It can be overwhelming to see where to take action in such a large set of responses, and creating a framework for further mapping is the next step. Visualizing distinctions and relationships between each barrier and opportunity can be done through the useful construct of mindset, systems and structures (MSS):<sup>24</sup>

- “Mindset” refers to the “set of attitudes or beliefs that we hold. Mindset is crucially important because our attitudes and beliefs affect everything we do, feel, think, and experience.”<sup>25</sup>
- “Systems” refers to the processes or methods by which things work together as a part of a network or a mechanism.<sup>26</sup>
- “Structure” refers to “the arrangement of and [relationships] between the parts or elements of something complex.”<sup>27</sup>

Mindset, systems and structure can be analogized to a house or other building.

- Mindset dictates why a design exists and what its goals are. Why does this house exist? What should it be in order to fulfill its purpose? What would look beautiful? What would be a measure of its proper functionality?
- Systems control how things work, and allow for effective flow and functionality. Does the wiring provide light? Is the plumbing properly routed through the structure?
- Structure allows access to the systems of the building, and provides support for those systems and the purpose that takes place within it. Does the structure have a front and back door? Does it allow access to all rooms, and to the functions that take place in each room (kitchen, bathroom, laundry)? Are the walls in the right places? Do the beams fully support the systems and activities within?

The effectiveness of efforts to address FoRB violations for women and girls has been hampered by a range of roadblocks. These barriers, along with opportunities, can be categorized according to mindset, systems and structures:

- Mindsets can normalize the violence and discrimination women and girls experience because of their faith or belief. *“The challenge is that harm done to women is supported by the community, which some of the women agree with.”* In addition, mindset-related barriers can create inaccurate narratives that block action to provide relief or redress.
- Systems can underpin gender-specific persecution on the basis of faith or belief, and gender-blind processes can inhibit the ability to address it. *“... a lot of times when I’m working in Muslim societies, I can’t use the term women’s rights or human rights...”*
- Structure can block access to the means of addressing the violence and discrimination experienced by women and girls because of their faith or belief. While structure can seem like quite a passive, or even a fixed thing, it controls access to systems and relationships. *“One of the biggest threats is having a fundamentalist government in our country. The government is also shrinking civil space; voices of dissent are immediately shut down or put in jail.”*

The MSS construct becomes an analysis tool, making possible the preliminary conclusions derived from the exercise of listening to participants who are practitioners and advocates in this field.



Photo: Religion News Service

## FINDINGS



# MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE OF GLOBAL ACTORS

The landscape of those working on women and FoRB rights is composed of organizations and individuals across a broad spectrum of sectors and nationalities.

The initial mapping exercise produced a database of 179 individuals who were categorized according to areas of interest or expertise. Some identified with more than one area. The chart below shows the highest to the lowest areas of expertise or field associated with FoRB and Women.

While six categories of expertise are identified above, twenty-four participants (13%) also identified or belonged to legal and human rights bodies. It is evident that

those working in the area of FoRB and women often have an alternative role or identity. Expertise or interest in women from minority religious communities has emerged as a result of their own interest or through connecting with others who have introduced them to the FoRB and women space.

Forty-one participants (23%) out of the database of 179 individuals chose to engage with the study. They worked in twenty-two countries or, if not a country, indicated their reach was global (See Appendix 1). A dominant feature among the participants was the interdisciplinary nature of areas of interest and expertise. There appeared to be few that set out to initially forge a role in FoRB and women’s rights.

*“...I didn’t study human rights. I have a degree in economics and then went on to do a masters in business... but in my head, I always wanted to do human rights and so, after 10 years of working in the sales and marketing team, my heart led me to human rights...I consciously made that decision, but also worked on the intersectionality or marginalization as we say.”*

**(Diagram 2) Categorizing the Field of Participants**

Area of expertise or field of work	No. of participants identifying with that area of interest (some identified with more than one)	Percentage of participants identifying with area of interest from database
Not for Profit (including advocacy)	78	43%
Academia	34	19%
Government	30	17%
Faith or Belief Leaders	27	15%
Business	10	5%
Media	2	1%



**(Diagram 3) Summary of Study Participant Categories**

Category	# organizations or actors (Some organizations are present in multiple categories)
Academia and Research	32
Business	10
Government	23
Media	14
Non-profit (Humanitarian and Advocacy)	93
Legal	9
Faith or belief-based leaders	46
Think Tank (NGO research/policy)	19

Anecdotally, some participants shared that their entry point into this field was triggered by their own experience of sexual harassment and discrimination or because they became aware of the gap in engagement or response to women suffering violence of all kinds as a result of breaches of FoRB. The participants included lawyers, academics (of whom many had become advocates), humanitarians, theologians, members of government departments, faith or belief leaders and human rights activists who originated from either the area of women’s rights or FoRB. They were affiliated with 10 different religions or belief groups.

Participants were asked to add data to a list of eight categories of organizations or entities active in the area of FoRB and women. A summary of the categories and number of actors allocated are noted above in Diagram 3.

A total of 246 entities were recorded. There are no trusts, funding organizations or donors explicitly recorded although

other categories of organizations would have included a funding capacity. Neither were any philanthropists included. When designing the research instrument, it was intentional to leave this category for a future research effort. Understandably, funding sources are often considered proprietary.

The greatest sector representation was in non-profit, faith-based leaders and academia and research. Typically, these entities would be presenting the issues, researching the field and calling for action. Lower representation was found in other areas, such as legal, business and media. The intersection of FoRB and women’s rights has emerged as part of the FoRB arena only in the last five years, supported by some robust mixed-methods research following decades of anecdotal evidence. Yet, there still needs to be greater engagement with and from all sectors, but most especially with business, media, law and funders to move beyond presenting “the problem” to accelerating change.

### Geographical Distribution

The geographical region where participants currently are active in the field of FoRB and women also was analyzed. Most were based in North America (78) and then Europe (55). These are areas in which violations of FoRB and women’s rights, while impactful to the women and girls targeted, usually are not as visible or recorded, and often more subtly expressed, than they are in other regions represented in the study: Asia (26), Africa (18) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (9). While a research team primarily based in the USA and Europe more easily is able to reach out to participants in closer geographic proximity, does this outreach reveal an

additional gap in analysis? It is possible that the issues of FoRB and women being represented through collaborative partnerships more commonly are from the regions affected most by FoRB violations, but that we are unaware of this fact, given the geographical distribution of participants. This issue raises a further set of questions regarding the ability to accelerate change in the area. Does it create a lack of responsiveness or connectedness that limits the application of innovations and informed advocacy initiatives? Conversely, are international linkages and relationships necessary to accelerate the effectiveness of those working in FoRB and women? A participant reflected this view:

*“...Because we are based in the United States, we have the advantage of highlighting our partner organizations at the international level, and in spaces such as with you and others in the United Nations. I can fly anywhere as an American*

*citizen for example, whereas to highlight these issues, I can sit at the table at the EU development fund and be an advocate for them in the field. So, the strength of sitting in the United States is being able to highlight the good work that we do in partnership.”*

However, given the lack of representation of those more directly affected by FoRB breaches, there is also a risk of a gap in learning, listening and influence that simply perpetuates western structures and interventions.

### Focus Group and Interview Participants

This project was a listening exercise surveying high-level experts and practitioners in the areas of Women and FoRB. Two focus group sessions with two separate groups and a series of in-depth one-to-one interviews facilitated by

(Diagram 4) Geographical Distribution of Study Participants

Asia	Europe	Middle East & North Africa	North America	Sub-Saharan Africa
China	Belgium	Iran	US	Cameroon
India	Norway	Iraq	Canada	Kenya
Indonesia	Poland	Israel		Nigeria
Japan	Russia			
Myanmar	Sweden			
Pakistan	UK			
Sri Lanka				
Thailand				

the research team were used to collect data related to organizational mapping, goals and challenges, SWOT analysis, detailed discussions about focus group questions and the role of the FWA. For more information, see Methodology on page 45.

Given that the needs of women marginalized for their beliefs are vast, all participants expressed both the opportunities that are emerging in the field and frustrations with the limitations that they face. However, tenacity and drive were the overwhelming characteristics of all the participants. They were often people who worked in this field despite significant physical, emotional and mental costs to themselves. Many had faced discrimination. Others had been ostracized, had papers refused to be published, and been slandered on social media. Yet they continued to work in areas that pose a risk to their lives alongside those for whom they advocate and offer support.

While this report highlights overwhelming opportunities yet to be fulfilled and the limitations of working in this area, there also is good news. Participants were indefatigable and knowledgeable and strategic thinkers who offered insight into the roadblocks to advancing change and greater effectiveness, and the opportunities that were emerging out of the field of women and FoRB.



Photo: Reuters/Jacob Garcia

# ROADBLOCKS

## Key Finding #1

Both isolated networks and the siloing between FoRB rights and other sectors, especially women's rights, have disadvantaged women advocating for relief and redress and exacerbated their gendered experience of persecution on the basis of religion or belief.



## Key Finding #2

Exclusion from power structures additionally marginalizes, undermines, under-studies and under-resources efforts to address FoRB violations committed against women and girls and limits their capacity to effectively act.



The effectiveness of efforts to address FoRB violations for women and girls has been hampered by the themes presented in [Diagram 5](#). During a listening exercise, researchers recorded participants identifying a range of roadblocks to work effectively in the area of women and FoRB. Each theme has been categorized according to the mindset, system and structure (MSS) construct (see Categorization on the next page).



Photo: Open Doors International

(Diagram 5) Themes that Hamper Efforts to Address FoRB Violations for Women and Girls

Theme category	Example sub-themes	Creates barriers associated with
Awareness	Gender awareness; Media narratives	Mindset
Religion & culture	Cultural norms; Religious knowledge	Mindset
Context	Covid-19; Forced marriage	System
Government & legal	Advocacy; Legal	System
Collaboration	Silos; Collaboration	Structure
Power structures	Access to power; Survivor focus	Structure
Resourcing	Funding; Capacity building/training	Structure
Youth	Youth engagement; Youth unemployment	Structure
Organizational activity	Economic empowerment; Education	System; Structure; Mindset

Study participants completed a SWOT analysis through the lens of women and FoRB. Collectively, their responses reveal a close correlation with these five areas: Religion & Culture, Context, Power Structures, Awareness and Resourcing.

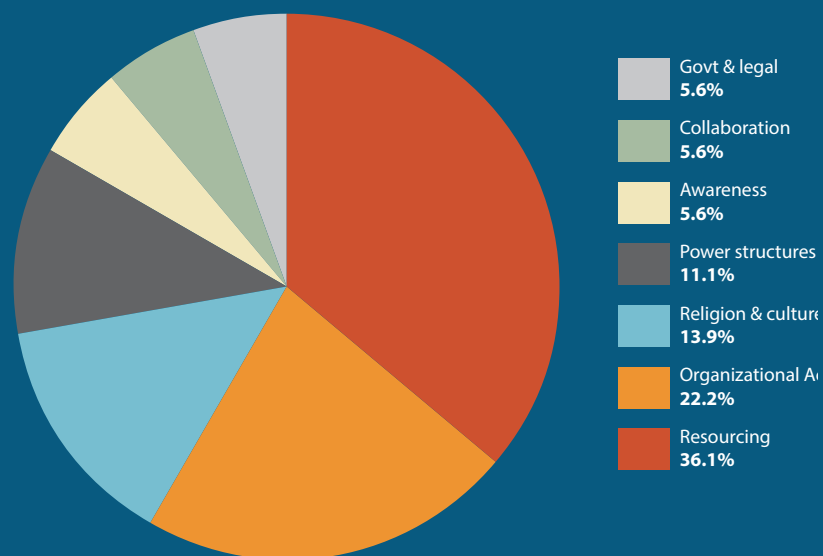
Of these, “Resourcing” was by far the most significant weakness identified by participants who are attempting to work in the area, followed by “Organizational activity” and “Religion & culture.” These responses reflect their organizations’ internal struggles when addressing the issues. Participants rated these five areas almost equally

as threats, which is the logical inclusion of external elements related to Context and Power structures.

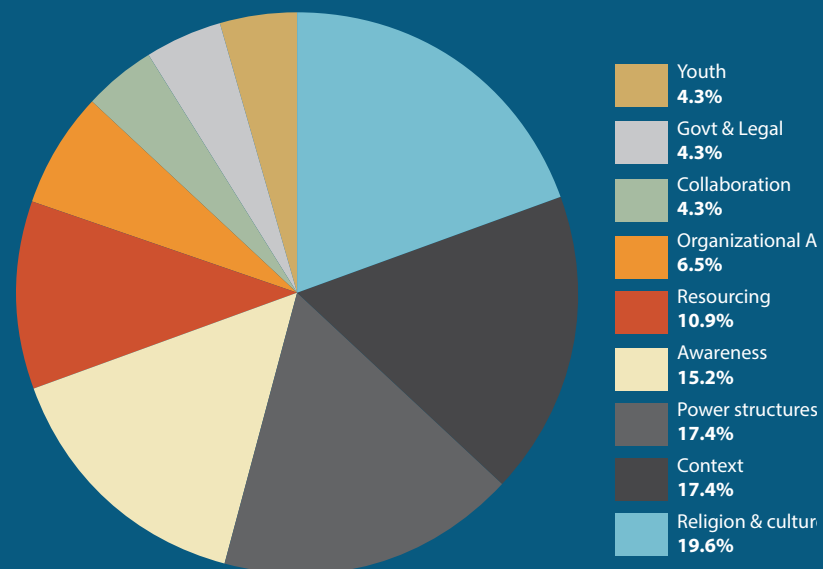
These results were then overlaid with the results from coding participant input from focus group discussions and interviews in which “Collaboration” and “Lack of Awareness” figured most frequently in terms of barriers to action.

The discussion below will focus on these top-ranking areas according to the type of barrier created; it will be framed according to Mindset, System and Structure (MSS), as discussed above.

**(Diagram 6) Weaknesses Identified by Participants Working on Women and FoRB**



**(Diagram 7) Threats Identified by Participants Working on Women and FoRB**



## MINDSET BARRIERS

Mindsets can normalize the violence and discrimination women and girls experience because of their faith or belief. In addition, mindset-related barriers can create inaccurate and dangerous narratives that block action that could provide relief or redress and even incite violence.

- **Religious and cultural norms**

Participants identified harmful religious and cultural norms as a key issue underlying gender-specific violence and discrimination. These norms primarily relate to perceptions around the role of women where cultural assumptions and religious beliefs can become

enmeshed. While sometimes this enmeshment can be an organic process related to ambient norms passed unknowingly down through the generations, it can also occur deliberately, whereby powerful actors use religious platforms as opportunities to further their own agendas.

It is crucial to recognize that the challenges existing at the intersection of FoRB and women's rights "persist beyond singular episodes of persecution."<sup>28</sup> Embedded beliefs that support patriarchal systems and norms play a fundamental role in perpetuating male privilege and undermining the position of women. These beliefs, in turn, infiltrate politics, economics, society and family life, which can further facilitate, justify, and even encourage, gender specific violations in every sector and aspect of life.

Religious and cultural norms most commonly were identified as a threat to addressing work in the area of women and FoRB; just ahead of "Context" and "Power structures." This view may seem paradoxical, given that one of the areas under threat is religion itself, but participant references pointed to beliefs within the religious community regarding behavioral norms. These norms are based upon rules or expectations within a given socio-religious group regarding what is acceptable behavior, which therefore has the potential to facilitate or deny membership in a community. Expectations that normalize FoRB violations of women and girls most frequently took one of three forms: socio-religious beliefs silencing women, weaponized religious beliefs, and religious illiteracy.

- **Socio-religious beliefs silencing women**

Socio-religious beliefs about the role of women often

create a mindset that dictates that women should not have a voice to speak up about certain issues, or a belief that women should not speak up at all. One participant commented that being known as being part of a women's organization was an explicit disadvantage. This disadvantage was the result of the perception that women's groups may be perceived as being good for women and bad for men, an inherent mistrust of women's words and a sense that they should not be allowed to have any authority. *"There's also some barriers...with religious leaders who are willing and happy to embrace religious freedom but not happy to embrace gender equality. Certainly not in the same space."*

- **Weaponized religious beliefs**

Religious beliefs can be "weaponized"<sup>29</sup> to support cultural beliefs. *"Cultural [mores] that we see that are mixed with religion - they assume it is religious when it is not and is cultural."* Commonly, cultural perceptions of women's roles were identified as having become assimilated into religious doctrine. One participant noted how false teaching of their sacred text enabled some men to justify domestic violence. Another participant explained how this view was hard to counter, as people with such beliefs consider God to be on their side. Patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts "can lead survivors to isolation, self-blame, emotional abuse, coercion, intimidation and fear."<sup>30</sup>

The weaponization of religious beliefs also was identified as a broader political threat when it took the form of religious nationalism, with the enhanced potential to either create a hostile environment for women and FoRB work

or itself be a driver of FoRB violations. One such example is in India, where Hindutva, Hindu nationalism provides impunity for perpetrators of FoRB violations.<sup>31</sup> One participant reported on hostilities towards religious leaders who support women's issues in a violent context in which FoRB is being challenged. *"...I have had Imams that have been poisoned, that have endured assassination attempts. These Imams are in really close contact with members of their community. They can really see the suffering of the women and the girls and society in general."*

- **Religious illiteracy**

A lack of religious literacy was identified as a roadblock to understanding other people's beliefs, and therefore limiting the potential for collaborative work, especially with non-religious humanitarians. Underpinning this roadblock are local, regional and global manifestations of embedded patriarchal structures and beliefs.

- **Lack of awareness and siloes**

One of the most frequently communicated roadblocks was a lack of awareness in two areas: the general intersection of women and FoRB, and the specific contextual issues and interconnectedness of different aspects of the many violations of religious freedom. Unknown intersectional vulnerabilities and mutually reinforcing rights of women and FoRB.

FoRB and women's rights commonly are misperceived as being mutually exclusive rather than mutually reinforcing. Unfortunately, advocates and practitioners in either FoRB or women's rights often hold this misperception. It is perhaps one of the single largest hurdles to action that participants often alluded to in the interviews. They

described the tension between actors involved in either women's rights or and FoRB which include the following:

*"...That was really the issue. I ran into the person working on the advancement of women who didn't want to work on the issue of freedom of religion or I had to wait for the person working on freedom of religion or belief who didn't work on the advancement of women. So, when we brought the two together, the organization kind of went, 'we can't deal with that.'"*

Some participants mentioned that the awareness that the two rights mutually reinforce each other has started to grow, but simultaneously acknowledged that there was a long way to go.

*"...One of the interesting perspectives we've gained is connecting to...organizations working for women's equality who do not have a particular interest or perspective on...the importance of religious identity for many women and...you talk about the inclusion and participation and peace building initiatives in conflict prevention studies in restorative work, humanitarian effort, and they just again and again fail to have this strong link to how you can use religious actors and religious communities as a key for including women in the dialogue?"*

This view is reflective of the broader tendency to silo FoRB from all other human rights, as if there is no interaction or interrelatedness between them. A quick study of many freedom indexes reveals a high recurrence of the same countries in the list of top offenders, suggesting that advocates of each of these freedoms



are ultimately engaged in a similar and parallel endeavor against common foes.

- **Inaccurate understanding of contextual issues and interconnectedness**

In the international FoRB sphere in which collaboration across countries is common, participants identified as a roadblock a lack of consideration of local contexts. One participant was clear on this, saying, *“We shouldn’t export our expertise without a deep understanding of people’s culture, traditions and their context.”* Another participant based in East Africa felt isolated and said, *“We need more support and connectivity with advocacy.”*

The lack of awareness surrounding the contextual issues which participants were trying to address in their work in support of women and FoRB means that issues can escalate from seemingly minor violations to the loss of a whole generation of a marginalized faith group.

*“...I think the hate speech that goes out to women and the..., attacking, criticizing and attacking women, and not supporting women is a weakness. Or a threat...I’m just looking out for women and religious freedom in the refugee camps, so many, too many IDPs and refugee camps and the lack of safety security they are at significant risk for more than just being sexually assaulted. They are at risk of an entire generation lost. Because they are just forgotten about [in] the IDP camps.”*

Participants explained why the lack of awareness of the intersection of women and FoRB was problematic

in a practical sense. Their experience was that the lack of understanding of the dynamics surrounding this intersection and the latent, and sometimes manifest, antagonism mentioned above limited their ability to gain access to funding or even raise awareness about the work they are doing.

A growing awareness of FoRB more generally was mentioned as a positive step. However, participants acknowledged that within the FoRB movement itself, there often also is a lack of awareness about the intersection with women’s rights, along with other rights, which limits their ability to collaborate with other FoRB actors and actors from other sectors. **FoRB movements thus may be missing out on key insights to address the FoRB issues the female members of their communities’ face.**

*“...I’d say there’s also some barriers, ironically, with religious leaders who are willing and happy to embrace religious freedom but not happy to embrace gender equality. Certainly not in the same space.”*

Participants also raised how global crises can distract international attention and push critical women and FoRB issues out of sight. One participant said that *“the biggest threat that perhaps any of us would face would be that there would be a global crisis of such dimensions that it would push all other issues off the table temporarily, but that temporarily could last for years.”* This fear of unreliable and inadequate attention can have a negative impact on their local work; work which frequently demands a long-term approach beyond the interest of a media cycle.

## SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Systems can underpin gender-specific persecution on the basis of faith or belief, and gender-blind processes can inhibit the ability to address this persecution.

- **Organizational activity**

Participants identified specific areas of “Organizational activity” in which a lack of attention has become a roadblock to greater effectiveness of work. In addition, the above discussion on the socio-religious and community behavioral norms contributed to difficulties actors experienced navigating local contexts. While the challenges associated with contextualization and adaptation go beyond the areas noted below, unless they are addressed, they can represent serious barriers to effective work. The two most commonly named areas were language and trauma training.

- **Language as a gatekeeper**

Since all work with vulnerable individuals is conducted through the medium of language, language barriers constitute one of the key roadblocks. Participants noted the many forms language barriers could take. They also discussed how to address this barrier including increased professional and skill capacity related to language, such as the availability of good translations, training in English speaking and female interpreters. The need for these language skills to truly hear and understand female victims of FoRB persecution reflects the international nature of the work in women and FoRB and the diversity of contexts in which individuals and organizations work.

Recognition of language barriers is an acknowledgement that much of the aid comes from outside of a local context and is mediated via third parties who may not know how to adapt to local contexts nor, quite literally, speak their language. Another participant described peer learning as significant for their own practice but critiqued the dominant style as being too western. This statement challenges how collaboration and partnerships have emerged to date and raises the importance of recognizing and avoiding unhelpful styles or power balances that do not always benefit actors in the Global South. Identifying the need for greater English-speaking skills reinforces the source of much international aid and action, which primarily operates using English. Language becomes one of the elements that can inhibit access to those in positions of power. In the absence of staff who are fluent in both the local language and culture, international work will continue to be mediated through a foreign language and relationships through translation.

- **Trauma training**

The violence committed against women and girls who hold marginalized beliefs is a key area of work for many participants. This work focus underscores the prevalence of violence against women and girls that is ideologically motivated.<sup>32</sup>

Examples of violence that participants cited included sexual violence, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and domestic violence. While violence against women and girls is a common form of gender specific religious persecution, it is also important to acknowledge the factors that can shape

the nature and outcome of the violence, such as location, age and religion or belief. For example, one participant raised the issue of “young Masai girls running away from female circumcision and early marriages.”

Violence can be facilitated by a lack of legal rights and protections for women. For example, 58% of countries do not have legislation that criminalizes marital rape<sup>33</sup> and 45 countries have no laws that specifically protect women from domestic abuse.<sup>34</sup>

In the face of the forms of exclusion from power and resources, including those noted above, participants and their organizations have sought to find agency where they can. It could even be argued that adversity has forced creativity and an investment in discovering less obvious forms of influence than those normally wielded by agents holding power in traditional structures. Multiple participants commented on the importance of work that addresses the trauma that comes with FoRB violations against women since sexual violence can be strategically used against women holding or associated with marginalized beliefs. Mental health interventions for those who have experienced sexual assault or provided support for victims of assault are important due to consequences such as post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>35</sup> Participants identified the need for more psychosocial support and better education for medical teams treating trauma due to FoRB violations. *“Medical teams treating trauma could be better educated to help effectively.”*

One participant spoke of the need for “psychological trauma training in local languages,” reflecting the importance of both trauma training and language capacity.

This statement highlights both the need to understand English in order to be trained, and for sensitive and confidential translation during trauma care sessions as well as the need for work being undertaken in local languages.

## STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Structure can block access to the means of addressing the violence and discrimination women and girls experience because of their faith or belief. While structure can seem like a passive, or even a fixed concept, it is anything but: it controls access to systems and relationships.

- **Exclusion, not collaboration**

Collaboration was the second most frequently mentioned theme during interviews and the absence of which was closely linked to lack of awareness. Collaboration was mentioned by respondents in both the negative and the positive senses: lack of collaboration was viewed as an impediment that creates exclusion, and good collaboration was deemed essential for success. Such collaboration was mentioned in several cases as a strength particularly within the FoRB space. Examples included the Women’s Working Group of the IRF Roundtable and strategic partnerships between FoRB organizations.<sup>36</sup>

Participants recognized the limitations of working within silos or echo chambers. Multiple participants labeled the FoRB arena as a silo outside of which it was important to work. Women human rights advocates and mainstream media explicitly were mentioned as potential collaborators



Photo: AP/ Maria Danilova

outside of the FoRB space. The siloing of FoRB may be partly due to a historic distrust between “so-called secular and religious sectors” in areas such as international development.<sup>37</sup> Distrust between faith and secular actors already has been recognized as a barrier to effective collaboration in gender-based violence prevention and response.<sup>38</sup>

Participants also acknowledged the different sectors in which some women and FoRB interactive work take place: the academic, business, government, media, non-profit and legal sectors, in religious and belief organizations and think tanks (Appendix C.) While participants were primarily from the non-profit, human rights, and academic sectors, they recognized the work that is needed particularly with government and media actors. *“We’re always looking for*

*collaborative efforts from different quarters, whether it’s academia, whether it be media, and so on for our work.”*

Some participants also highlighted the lack of collaboration across different power levels as a roadblock, particularly identifying challenges in accessing decision and policy makers. One participant explained how lack of access impacts their work: *“Gatekeepers prevent women from being active in their community - this also affects funding and gaining a seat at the table.”* This barrier is explored more below.

- **Exclusion from power structures and institutions**

Participants spontaneously confirmed the discrimination<sup>39</sup> impacting the intersection of women’s and FoRB rights in the areas of legal protection rights for women, FoRB rights, economic equality, equal access to education and discrimination within religion. Across focus groups and interviews, participants raised discrimination in education as significant. The status of girls’ education was cited as a particular concern: It is a global issue, with 129 million girls out of school across the world, and only 49% of countries having achieved gender parity in primary education.<sup>40</sup>

Each of these areas of discrimination represents an exclusion from opportunity to access power structures. The most foundational gatekeeper is education, after which each power structure has its own portal.

Some of these power structures relate directly to religion. Participants mentioned more general FoRB discrimination which underpins the compounding of

vulnerabilities. *“Christians cannot have a night of prayer but Muslims can have a call to prayer at 4 am.”* In addition to discrimination against minorities, participants added that members of their own religion increasingly discriminated against women and even the participants themselves. *“...The Christian agenda is interrupting important work...I think that if we don’t have more women in leadership, it continues to be exploited exclusively by white males in Western countries.”*

These discriminatory actions taken against women and girls, combined with discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, further exacerbate their vulnerability.

- **Inadequate resources**

Lack of resourcing was most frequently identified as a Weakness to work effectively in the area of women and FoRB by participants.

### **Funding**

Participants cited economic inequality that took the form of financial exclusion and, more specifically, exclusion from economic empowerment programs undertaken to address economic inequalities. Multiple participants linked economic empowerment to female activism in the intersecting area of FoRB and women’s rights.

Difficulties in accessing funding was one of the most commonly mentioned resource limitations. Participants referenced a range of challenges including: a general lack of access to funds, a lack of capacity and experience

to apply for funding, the attachment of certain conditions to funding, availability of funding only at a higher level that does not trickle down to local groups and activists; and a prioritization of short-term projects and deliverables (despite a need for long term project support). One participant labeled it as a weakness. *“Short term funding - so projects are not able to be effective as there’s not enough time.”* Additionally, *“being connected or finding ways to connect with donors who are interested in supporting these causes is also extremely important to be able to keep doing the work.”*

Participants from local/regional organizations and international organizations reported different experiences. Most participants raised lack of funding as an issue. However, one participant from a large international organization shared that their organization had not found funding to be an issue, saying that *“there is a lot of funding available for religious freedom, for promotion of gender issues.”* Notably, this participant also explained that their organization had a good reputation, had received much funding over the years, and had many years of experience applying for funding, all of which enabled them to know about and take advantage of funding opportunities. These comments then correlated with those of participants who identified a lack of capacity to apply for funding as a weakness.

### **Research**

Good research was another resource that participants identified being crucial to support their work on women and FoRB. For example, one participant identified the importance of having a “key statistic” which helped them gain attention and influence. Another participant specified “deconstructing patriarchy” as a particular area where more research is

required. *“It is a challenge to challenge these cultural harmful practices without data and hence the need for research.”* In order to address some of the mindset-related barriers, more research is needed to identify issues and effective solutions.

### **Capacity building**

The final key area of resourcing that was identified as a roadblock was a lack of training. Multiple participants highlighted the need to build the capacity and skills of those working on women and FoRB. Skill based training in areas such as writing and applying for funding were mentioned, along with training in areas such as media and development.

*“I know that I can understand the topic by going to the internet, like maybe I can Google search a topic, but sometimes for these skills you need training or retraining.”*

Given the varied capacities of organizations, one participant shared some caution in how activities and capacity are grown or accelerated.

*“...I see that there might be different levels of different stages of women’s organizations, activists that come into this network. So, there will be some that will be very new, or experienced or some mid-level.”*

Another participant touched on the need for leadership skills training. *“A lot of people really don’t feel comfortable or know how to lead effectively. And there’s cultural obstacles too that I’ve realized after being around people for a while. Women, especially if they’ve come from a*

*context internationally, particularly a country like Turkey or China, when they’re now operating in the international advocacy space, and they need to be advocating for their cause don’t know how to do it. They’re crippled by these habits or fears that are not applicable to the West.”*

Such different skill levels requires a carefully tailored approach to addressing the need for growth in capacity that considers the starting point of each actor, rather than assuming a homogeneous group.

Despite the number of roadblocks identified, participants focused on the future and saw an abundance of opportunities to address FoRB by building the capacity of women and enabling them to share “the table” and protect the universal rights to adhere to a religion or belief.



Photo: Flickr/U.S. Dept. of State

# CURRENT INNOVATIONS AND INITIATIVES

## Key Finding #3

Cultural and religious norms can be creatively and courageously challenged.

## Key Finding #4

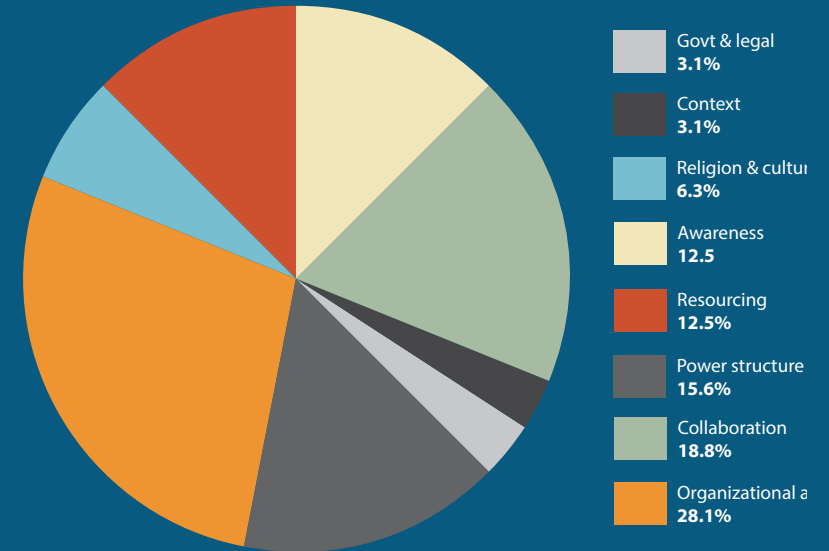
Collaboration is a form of empowerment to increase capacity, influence and relief.

Listening to participants revealed the strengths and areas of success highlighted below. These areas indicate the degree to which a range of actors have access and agency to address the many needs on which they work that fall within the intersectional field of women and FoRB.

## MINDSET INITIATIVES

- **Organizational activity which tackles cultural and religious mindsets**

(Diagram 8) Strengths Identified by Participants Working on Women and FoRB



Because religious and cultural norms were identified as one of the most significant hurdles to effectively address the structural vulnerabilities of women of marginalized faiths and beliefs, it is no surprise that this is a strong area of activism for those seeking to effect change.

Participants understood that effective organizational activity uses education and training to address different ways of interpreting religious texts and explaining how they affect and influence culture. Education for young men and women in basic literacy and greater access to

education more generally for women was seen as an area of significant potential.

Moreover, participants also wanted to learn about their own religion and sacred texts to make themselves more knowledgeable and therefore gain agency to affect change. *“Religion is still very important to women; they are not to give it up but find their voice and place in society and religion. This is very exciting to see especially with Muslim women. They have little religious knowledge and when they learn about their religion it makes a big difference.”* This is not unique to the Muslim community. Another participant noted that: *“The religious organizing principle of equality of women and men through the Baha’i lens makes it possible for the issue of women and FoRB to be supported by the Baha’i.”*

Sometimes, an effective method is to honor the sacred text, while also applying it to inspire changes in assumptions about the sphere in which women can exist.

*“I can’t use the term women’s rights or human rights, but how can we promote the right for women to go to work outside the home? A lot of times religious leaders are perpetuating and preaching at Friday prayers that a woman’s place is at home. So...a counter narrative, we say, the Prophet’s wife, she was a businesswoman. She was a trader, and as a matter of fact, she worked outside the home and she was very successful and so how can you then say that [our religion] said we only belong in the home? So, your narrative contradicts the real tradition. So that is a way for us to use storytelling to counter an abusive human rights narrative.”*

One participant noted the significant increase in the number of women starting businesses and being involved in politics. Another participant discussed how they worked carefully to address discrimination through the use of sacred texts, and developed a curriculum on FoRB in schools that seeks to address cultural traditions at a young age. They teach values using their sacred text that support the Sustainable Development Goals, which creates dialogue and addresses mindset without using human rights-based language. The success of this project will need to be evaluated in years ahead but it is an initiative that could be replicated.

- **Organizational activities which increase awareness of our human rights**

The impact of human rights awareness training can be quite dramatic, especially when violations occur in a community that did not previously understand their own human rights, according to a participant. A number of agencies now run seminars and workshops in order for marginalized communities to be aware of their rights.

For example, initiatives are developing in India for Christians, a significant minority there, that provide training in the knowledge of legal rights according to the Indian constitution (that allows religious minorities the freedom to worship and gather). In addition, training on the Domestic Violence Act (2005) informs women that they have the right to report acts of violence in the home by a husband from another religion.

One international organization has developed a set of training materials (a booklet and digital course) on the



intersection of women and FoRB so that groups can explore both the question of whether the two human rights are “enemies or allies” and how to become more effective advocates in this area.<sup>41</sup>

- **Organizational activities which focus on digital innovations and youth**

A few participants referenced the use of digital technology which transcends all innovations in this field and is especially relevant for future efforts. One participant reported on a particularly impressive innovation which they described below.

*“...We recently launched an initiative using apps to track femicide in the country. Many acts of femicide are justified by religious explanations. For us to be able to do educational work about countering religious narratives regarding honor and honor killings regarding respect for women, [honoring the] value of a woman’s life, I think that their conversations or just resources, would be very, very helpful [in] changing mindsets that justifies murder of women.”*

It is valuable to note how this tracking app enables participants to interact with a mindset based upon prejudicial views of women. Digital innovations cross all themes and create huge potential for replication and development in other contexts and languages.

Digital innovations links to participants’ conversations about increasing youth involvement in FoRB and women programs. Social media was highlighted as a tool for promotion and programming. Advocating for a much

greater voice for youth was highlighted by the example of India, which holds one of the largest populations of children and adolescents in the world. Currently 444 million out of a population of 1.4 billion are adolescents or children in India.<sup>42</sup>

## SYSTEMIC INNOVATIONS

- **Organizational activity which empowers the next generation to make systemic change**

Participants reported that youth and children can become victims of violence as witnesses, even without directly suffering such violence. Participants undertake outreach to youth, including them in dialogues between different faith communities, with the goal of including them in conflict reduction measures and raising up young leaders.

One participant spoke about an innovative workshop begun as an annual event to train future young parliamentarians to be equipped as future policy and law makers who are competent in FoRB issues.

*“We train them in international methods and communication and stuff like that. [T]his is one of the most difficult areas of political conversation to have... So basically, what we do is different; instead of going to lawmakers from the outside, we [want to] have people already on the inside.”*

Methods included the use of twitter and other social media platforms alongside more traditional workshops and face-to-face activities. Participants spoke of activities designed to respond to locally specific instances of

violence, and included educating girls who have had to drop out of school after FGM and early marriage advocacy campaigns directed to national and international leaders to raise awareness of the situation of women and girls from marginalized religious communities.

- **Collaboration to influence legal protections**

Other participants spoke of taking small practical steps to empower women in direct political engagement.

*“... What I would like to see more is women involved on a national level. For example, in Iraq, they understand their political stance. What do they understand about politics? What do they understand about their rights and how to advocate for it, etc. We’ve done it on a very small scale, but hopefully that will expand.”*

Furthermore, as their collective voice has grown, participants have benefitted from greater collaboration and increased visibility of the issues of FoRB and women. “Because of my advocacy and the advocacy of many other people speaking and writing, every and all levels from Parliaments to village councils to all kinds of groups...women have become at least acknowledged as a part of the human rights agenda and women are a huge part of this conversation.”

## Structural Innovations

- **The power of collaboration to innovate**

Participants mentioned collaboration directly or indirectly twenty-five times during interviews, noting that it affords

significant opportunities for both women and men to work together on issues related to FoRB. One participant reported successfully influencing the Nigerian Bar Association to speak out on their behalf. “Being able to see others and their work and how they are doing things” inspires and enables ideas through collaboration. It also enables engagement with other professionals who need to be “enlightened” to engage in these issues.

Participants also mentioned the importance of targeting and engaging with both mature adults and younger men/youth to increase their collaboration on projects, and the need to include men in broader issues to be “champions for the cause.” Such collaborations have the potential to challenge perceptions about women and FoRB as being a topic that only women themselves address.



“...peace and reconciliation [as part of FoRB] has to include everybody... men and women are victims of those violations. So, they need to be at the forefront.”

Consultations such as the IRF Summit were cited as an example where collaborations began, and a participant noted how collaborations occur in surprising ways. Coalitions and sharing platforms also were cited as examples of effective collaboration. *“It’s called the Uyghur Wellness Initiative. Several individuals from various organizations banded together as volunteers to recruit pro*

*bono counselors who could be matched with people in the community that needed mental health support. That's been quite a challenging project. It's been underway for about two years now and had slow progress but the things that have come out of it have been good."*

- **Breaking down silos to enhance effectiveness**

Most participants reported that working across sectors rather than remaining within the FoRB and women arena was important to enhance the effectiveness of organizational activity. One participant noted how their work with a contemporary arts organization attracted media attention due to the use of a visual medium, raising a higher profile for their religious freedom campaign than would have a more traditional advocacy campaign.

Many participants are leading or belong to an existing structure or religious institution which can bring increased attention and influence on those outside their work on women and FoRB. Their efforts can "normalize" the innovations and activities around FoRB and women and contribute to wider messaging when linkages occur.

*"...So, there is already a leadership infrastructure and they're equipped with women who can help be part of this...that is a strength in that we have an infrastructure that has women across each of our continents. Their expertise, their experiences, and their routines help women work together."*

While participants highlighted challenges that the pandemic had brought, it also facilitated greater adaptability, reaching out for new partnerships and coalitions and the creation of a collective voice that brings greater visibility:




Photo: 21Wilberforce/Elijah Brown Elijah Brown

*"...Our voices were absent from panels and media narratives. Now it's different; there's more interest and there's finally a level of awakening that there are other struggles in Iran that have remained unheard. I would say that we're getting a lot more play and participation".*

One participant saw opportunities to work across sectors with the migration of refugees from Ukraine to countries in Europe and their displacement within Ukraine, given violations of their religious freedom or belief that have taken place. They believed that their work now could be better received and supported in structures and communities that supported refugees in the last year.

# CATALYSTS TO ACCELERATE FoRB AND BRING CAPACITY TO THE TABLE

## Key Finding #5



Structural change is the necessary accelerator for addressing Women's and FoRB Rights and requires an external catalyst. It is not within the agency of the unempowered to have the necessary resources or create a space for themselves at the table.

Ensuring that a solid foundation is in place is central to accelerating commitment to action and action to impact. The preceding section amply describes the extent to which there are highly competent and creative actors in all sectors, across every global region, making inroads, often with very limited resources, to combat the damaging effects of gender specific religious persecution on women and girls, and thus entire communities, of marginalized faith groups.

Discussions on roadblocks and innovations have also brought to light the underlying themes common to these efforts to bring about change in mindset, structure and systems.



“Gatekeepers prevent women being active in their community - this also affects funding and gaining a seat at the table”

Participants consistently raised two key elements for progress: the need for resourcing and the importance of access. To move beyond these roadblocks requires an external catalyst. It is not within the agency of participants themselves to overcome or work around these barriers themselves.

If these two areas could be addressed, participants saw an abundance of opportunities to advance FoRB. Women want to collaborate with men; they want to share “the table” in order to protect everyone’s universal right to choose one’s religion or belief.

- **Access to resourcing - fuel for acceleration**

Overwhelmingly, resourcing in terms of funding, training and staffing was the key need participants mentioned repeatedly. As already explored, they expressed a desire to learn how to raise funds to cover projects and basic operational costs. Those who do have this skill set wanted to learn how to improve their efforts by making evidence-based cases and better reporting on the impact of their efforts.

Resourcing is the first catalyst for acceleration as it was the most commonly identified category in the interview

data, mentioned 23 times by participants. Below is a breakdown of the different sub-themes referenced, with funding the most frequently mentioned sub-theme.

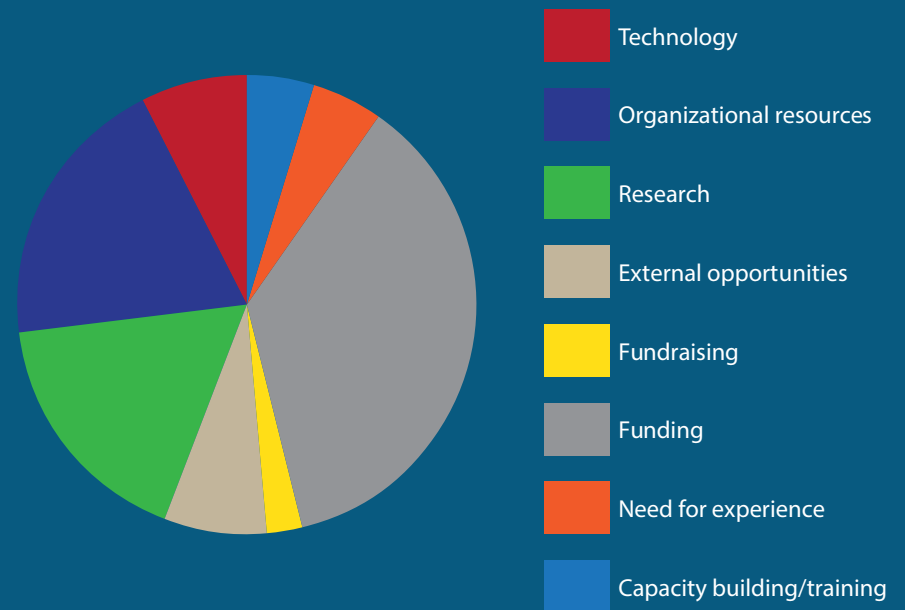
The lack of resources impacts the ability of participants to work to address barriers created by certain religious and cultural norms. Further, it deters their ability to undertake awareness training in legal rights or the interconnection between women rights and FoRB which underpins so much of their work. Resources are also necessary to address some of the practical concerns created by violations of these rights such as medical expertise and care, shelter, trauma care and livelihood skills training.

Having adequate resources was not a minor issue for participants. Indeed, the research team noted that most leaders in this field assumed several roles in order to be able to pursue issues of FoRB and women. Some were unpaid and working in a voluntary role while others were poorly paid and needed to find ways to supplement their income. It is important to emphasize that these women are very experienced and in leadership positions.

One participant did say that there was funding available and they were easily able to secure it. However, they belonged to a large organization with a considerable reputation that had been long-established and was a minority voice.

Resourcing needs were not limited to financial support for projects and personnel. Participants requested resourcing in terms of information and data and how to best utilize both. This was coded as resources for research, the second most frequently mentioned topic.

**(Diagram 9) Participant References to Resources Needed**



*“I don’t know any organization, not more than one... that has all of the funding that they need.”*

## The difference that funding makes

In Nigeria and the Middle East, a new project was launched addressing gender equality for minorities. Women applied for funding to create new initiatives addressing FoRB. Because of the training they received from a single donation, the women were able to secure capital to reach out to other donors to create further projects. This participant communicated their excitement about this initiative.

*“...Resources of data and information. Another challenge we have is how to make all our information, data and stories relevant to people who know nothing or don't seem to care.”*

Despite the lack of resources, participants had an enormous propensity to be resourceful in terms of initiative, motivation and ability to influence and inspire.

**What could be achieved if such effective leaders, who are willing to collaborate, were fully funded with staff who can deliver outcomes that effectively change the**

### landscape on FoRB and women?

In the course of discussions, participants were asked what FoRB Women's Alliance, as an accelerator, could do in this respect. There were some clear requests that add insight into existing needs, one of which was how funding tends to be granted and monitored. Due to the nature of donor communication and organizational narratives, the funding that is available largely focuses on short-term projects during which time success should be achieved and demonstrated to donors, foundations and government aid agencies. Yet, the issues which must be tackled to bring change to mindset, system and structures, as well as caring for the most vulnerable victims whose social and financial situation is precarious, requires support for

long-term projects that address both individual needs and community dynamics.

“

“Partners who understand our vision and would stand with us in the long term. Financial support is a serious issue.”

The third most frequently mentioned aspect of funding, organizational resources, highlights once again the need for structural change. Some funders have been slow to support women and FoRB initiatives. However, this lack of support is most likely because NGOs do not have the contacts, grant writing skills or even the time to pursue funding. This can be a frustrating cycle wherein the advocates are spending their time (often beyond a day job) doing the advocacy and there is no time to find funding.

Participants see this dilemma closely tied to the need for an external catalyst:

*“...FoRB Women's Alliance can provide practical help by sharing potential funding sources, making introductions to people and/or organizations that can pursue funding together. To cooperate, collaborate, create, that would be the most incredible support that the Alliance can offer I would imagine.”*

It was interesting to the research team how often the need for connection was tied to funding, reflecting the desire to no longer be excluded from more holistic and collaborative

work to address the intersection area of FoRB and women’s needs to which the participants have dedicated themselves.

- **Access to decision-making at the table**

The second catalyst for acceleration is not completely unrelated to resourcing (noted above), but focuses far more on the structures and systems within which FoRB and women violations either take place or for which actors take mitigating action.

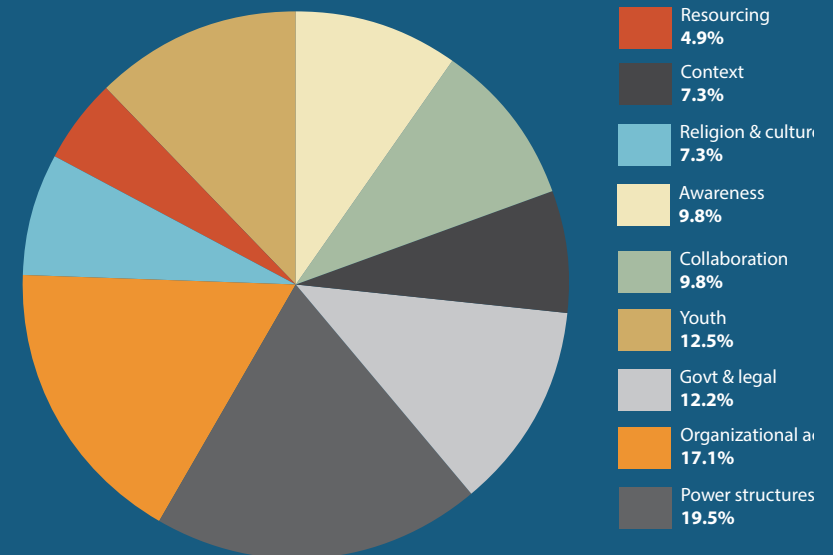
The focus group discussion on opportunities placed the first three elements that fall into the structure/system category: organizational activity, power structures and government and legal. When combined, they account for nearly half of the remarks.

Each of these elements represents an opportunity to modify the power-holding frameworks of protection, aid and empowerment so that women and girls of marginalized faith and belief groups will be systematically, systemically and regularly included within operational processes. These processes may be at the government level, within legal systems, at regional or local levels, or within organizations which run programs.

In addition to discussions of the need for seats at the decision-making table, participants discussed the interconnectedness of resources, access to roundtables and the element of policies as a means of accomplishing their goals.

*“...Funding this work and connecting us to partnerships is really critical. Also, we need guidance, helping support*

**(Diagram 10) Opportunities Identified by Participants Working on Women and FoRB**



*“...FoRB Women’s Alliance can provide practical help by sharing potential funding sources, making introductions to people and/or organizations that can pursue funding together.”*

## The difference that access makes

A participant in Nigeria saw increased capacity to channel workshops for stakeholders and for gatekeepers. The creation of national movements to build leaders in the communities reportedly strengthens their effectiveness. However, a contributor noted that in their context, bringing government into the process meant success was more likely.

A new innovation in Pakistan aims to move upwards to work with the government and link back to networks of women who belong to a religious minority. In turn, they expect this effort will lead to increased economic development, with skills development and innovative enterprises led by women.

A similar initiative is taking place in Iraq, where they want to expand on what they have already begun.

*women and policies through roundtables and other initiatives.”*

Sometimes the access referred to by participants was of a “softer” kind, recognizing that there are informal networks which, through the power of the collective, become in and of themselves a power base which they need, but do not have access.

*“...It would be great to have access to a network of people working in this field, and being able to work with them, you can be very helpful to establish more confidence. Then secondly, be able to build capacity to come from the network, the ability to build capacity to do this kind of work. And of course, also the network will help to be able to raise the profile.”*

Raising the profile to the highest level of the system - that is to say government - was identified as a key access point for effecting real and lasting change.

Bringing to the table the creative competence of women who are advocating for the protection and empowerment of women of marginalized religions, beliefs or non-beliefs ultimately requires change to the table itself: a bigger table, more seats. These are structural changes within systems so that the inclusion of one voice does not preclude another. It cannot be done only by those asking for access to the table. It must be intentionally prioritized and implemented by those who are already at the table. However, it ought not to be done by them alone. The table needs to be reset to include both current power holders and those, especially women, who have clearly demonstrated their competence and value-added insights and actions.





Photo: eastasiaforum.org

This introductory study set out to investigate the work currently being done by advocates and practitioners, largely women and girls – many of whom are active at the grassroots level, in the arena of protecting and advancing FoRB for women and girls. The goal was to create a preliminary mapping of advocates and practitioners, the challenges of working in this area and the opportunities to further empower and accelerate such work.

The four focus groups and in-depth one-to-one interviews revealed recurring themes related to the existing difficulties women and FoRB advocates and practitioners encounter, as well as hopeful avenues for future action. Both the roadblocks and innovations needed to overcome these roadblocks speak to the systemic nature of the existing challenge. These challenges are faced, not by one or another religious group, or a particularly disadvantaged group of women, but globally, impacting women and girls and their communities worldwide.

The study found that exclusion from power and resources was one of the major barriers to effective and lasting change. Such exclusion resulted from factors including gender status and the isolated networks within which most women and girls work, as well as the often crushing cultural and religious norms that masquerade as religious dictum. To address these injustices inherent in gender-specific religious persecution, many practitioners and advocates around the world have already taken steps and made some headway, largely due to

## CONCLUSION

their energy, creativity, and indefatigability. Yet, identifying and seeking to address these injustices have had, to date, limited impact, with the root causes largely remaining.



*“We have a number of networks woven together. When networks are isolated, there is a limitation on what can be accomplished. Examples include better information and data, pooling of resources outside of our normal channels, making new connections, greater financial resources.”*

These efforts can only achieve their full potential when the women and girls doing the work are adequately resourced, including being granted more funding for research, capacity building and advocacy. The table also needs to be reset with an expanded number of seats that reflect the many who are working to protect the rights of all members of marginalized faith groups.

This preliminary study began mapping the actors around the globe within a first circumference of network contact. The mapping exercise (Appendix B) by which participants identified additional circles of actors in the field reveals the extent to which the work of connection and enabling can be extended. In order to fully benefit from the work being done in more remote and less well-connected regions and countries, an even more complete landscape study is needed to accelerate FoRB women’s capacity in the regions in which there is great need.

*“...if there’s a platform such as FoRB Women’s Alliance that can map some of the challenges, some of the resources, some of the actors working in this intersection, that is a tremendous help for those of us working to catalyze and accelerate our work by learning what is existing out there, who we can collaborate with and what funding opportunities exist.”*

Due to the necessity for advocates and practitioners defending the intersectional space of women’s and FoRB rights to have equal access to power structures, a follow-on study and mapping is called for. This research effort should identify impactful change makers, key laws that provide protections and opportunities, and the advocacy and other initiatives that advance the protections and empowerment of women and girls of marginalized faith or belief groups. The good news? Identifying and supporting structural changes can make significant differences by expanding opportunities to include more women at the table, an essential step to accelerate FoRB for all.



Photo: The Abrahamic Reunion

## RECOMMENDATIONS



These recommendations are key to accelerate FoRB capacity by having women at the table:

**1. Provide Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) training and education to:**

- Identify the core underlying issues and the challenging circumstances surrounding women and FoRB
- Identify and model the positive impact, innovation and successes of women and FoRB
- Highlight that FoRB is a human right with the same standing as other human rights and explore how one human right cannot be used to extinguish another human right.
- Probe the connections between FoRB and other human rights, especially women's rights. Also to document these connections, the importance of cross-sector collaboration, and the resulting benefits that can accrue to individuals, communities and societies as a whole.
- Unmask the misuse of religious dictum that in reality are cultural norms that serve political, economic and other interests, especially the patriarchy, to reinforce the status quo and its allocation and assertion of power and control.

**2. Activists should be trained to conduct qualitative and quantitative research, including data collection and other initiatives to capture information.** There is insufficient information available about the FoRB-related activities women and girls undertake at the local, regional, national and global levels, the challenges they face and their accomplishments.

**3. There should be more collaboration between individuals and organizations working on women and FoRB issues and other sectors.** Essential to collaboration is providing safe space and platforms.

**4. Explore opportunities to further dimension existing projects or research by including issues relevant to women and FoRB.** For example, there are global surveys conducted by organizations on FoRB or human rights that could include questions on women and FoRB.

**5. Funders and other leaders should recognize that the future vitality and health of the movement depends on their support for individuals and organizations working on women and fund accordingly.** Women and girls working on FoRB-related activities, especially at the grassroots level, provide much of the movement's energy, yet their activities are inadequately resourced.

**6. FoRB civil society groups and organizations, individuals, alliances and networks led by women and girls, especially those working at the grassroots, have earned the right to be heard.** These women leaders should be equal partners and participants in FoRB programs, policy making and implementation.

## Project background

The research was initiated by FoRB Women's Alliance which invited the Gender and Religious Freedom (GRF) network to partner on the project. FoRB Women's Alliance is an accelerator which incubates an emerging ecosystem of current institutional efforts seeking to improve understanding and advance an agenda that places women at the center of efforts to advance FoRB.

The research core team consisted of experts in FoRB and women across this field and represented three religious affiliations. The project was funded by The Fetzer Institute. A mixed methodology was applied to this research project.

## Recruitment of participants

The project began with a desk evaluation of organizations and actors involved in FoRB. Not all were prioritizing and intersecting with women's rights, but they were expressing an interest and commitment to this area. In addition, during the IRF Summit in June 2022 and the FoRB Ministerial in London in July 2022, fliers were distributed with an invitation to join the research study by signing up using a QR code link. This had limited success. Overall, a database of 179 total people and organizations was created. All database participants were invited to take part in two online Focus Group discussions

and/or a one-to-one semi-structured interview with questions designed by the research team. Forty-one participants responded positively to join the research. Participants were working across 22 countries or globally, affiliated with ten different religions and worked in thirty-five organizations.

## Data gathering

The focus group (FG) discussions were organized with two groups meeting twice each, totaling four focus groups discussions across two months. The rationale was to capture a range of global participants.

Focus group discussion guides were developed by the research team and followed by the facilitators to ensure consistency with the questioning during the listening exercise. Data was captured through transcribed recordings and a "whiteboard" software called GroupMap which was accessible by facilitators and participants. Participants were encouraged to return to the GroupMap "whiteboards" up to a week after the focus group discussions if further information or reflections emerged. Each participant consented ([Appendix C](#)) to the project as they entered the research activity and informed about what that entailed via a consent form.

**Topics investigated during the data gathering events were focused on as follows:**

# METHODOLOGY

<b>FG1</b>	Organizational mapping Key goals and challenges
<b>FG2</b>	SWOT analysis
<b>Interviews</b>	Deeper dive into FG questions Role of FWA

**Focus group discussions included questions such as:**

1. Are there any projects/initiatives in your sector or country that bring FoRB and women’s rights actors together?
2. Any best practices or learning from successful projects that you would like to share?
3. What are your goals and challenges?
4. Who are the actors (including impact, linkages and collaborations)?

Following the two sets of focus groups, the research core team arranged one-to-one interviews. Each interviewer adhered to a discussion guide in which questions were visible on GroupMap. Each listening exercise was conducted on Zoom and included unstructured questions and took at least an hour to complete. Transcripts were created from the recordings.

**Data analysis**

To create a structured coding framework, the written data from GroupMap was closely read to produce an inductive thematic analysis. This was supplemented by transcript data. The themes were drawn from verbatim answers as contributed by participants, using keyword analysis. A keyword or key phrase was identified for every data point

and was assigned a theme, either drawn directly from the keyword from that data point, or a keyword from a data point with a similar theme. GroupMap data from the focus groups and the interviews was analyzed within this framework, supplemented by additional qualitative information from the transcripts which added an extra layer of detail.

A second phase of analysis was carried out to group the coding themes identified in the framework into categories. This phase was undertaken due to the high number of themes drawn from keyword analysis and the fact that themes often were related to similar topics. The assignment of themes to categories was a subjective process carried out by the research team; categories were not balanced with equal numbers of sub-themes, but instead prioritized the relevance of the sub-theme to the category. Categories could then be compared at a macro scale to identify overarching trends and patterns in the data, while retaining detailed qualitative descriptions and direct quotes from participants, as associated with the sub-themes.

Data analysis: Sample					
Interviewer	Question	Comment	Key word/phrases	Theme	Theme category
L.S.	1.4. SWOT analysis	We need to do a better job bringing women human rights advocates into FoRB discussions.	bringing women human rights advocates into FoRB discussions.	Silos	Collaboration



**Diagram 11) Categories for Participant Research Coding Framework**

Theme category	Example sub-themes	Creates barriers associated with
Awareness	Gender awareness; Media narratives	Mindset
Religion & culture	Cultural norms; Religious knowledge	Mindset
Context	Covid-19; Forced marriage	System
Government & legal	Advocacy; Legal	System
Collaboration	Silos; Collaboration	Structure
Power structures	Access to power; Survivor focus	Structure
Resourcing	Funding; Capacity building/training	Structure
Youth	Youth engagement; Youth unemployment	Structure
Organizational activity	Economic empowerment; Education	System; Structure; Mindset

## Limitations of the study

### Participant selection and representation:

Recruitment of most participants came from existing networks known to the research team which, by nature, were limited. Some participants were referred by leaders in the field. Although participants were working across 22 countries or working globally, the contexts where they were based or originated was not as representative as the research team had hoped, particularly in Latin America and Asia. There were no countries specifically represented in Latin America and only two countries in Southeast Asia were so represented. The majority of the participants occupied senior executive level roles or were advocating at the international level. This meant that leaders or members of grassroots organizations were lacking, although

many of the participants partnered with grassroots organizations. Due to the method of recruitment, there was an element of self-selection whereby participants interested in the area of FoRB and women chose to make time to join and contribute towards the study. A clear omission is that no participants representing humanist or atheist beliefs joined the study. This needs to be a priority for further research. Only four men joined the study which reflects the gendered focus of interest in this area and yet is essential to address in the field of FoRB and women.

### Structure of focus groups:

There were unequal numbers of attendees in focus groups, with smaller numbers in two of the focus group discussions. This allowed for a more detailed discussion with all participants present in the smaller focus groups, but did not always facilitate full participation by some actors in the larger groups.

<b>Civil Society</b>	Individuals, groups and organizations in a society, which are independent of the government	<b>Persecution</b>	Violence or the threat of violence against a person or his/her family because of that person's religion or belief. Other factors are race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.
<b>Discrimination</b>	Unfair treatment of people based on religion, language, ethnicity, gender, etc.	<b>Religious coercion</b>	Pressure to endorse or embrace a religious belief or practice
<b>FGM</b>	Female genital mutilation	<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>FoRB</b>	Freedom of Religion or Belief	<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and gender-based Violence
<b>FWA</b>	FoRB Women's Alliance	<b>SWOT</b>	A framework used to evaluate an organization's position and to develop strategic planning. This analysis assesses external and internal factors, as well as current as well as current and future potential.
<b>GRF</b>	Gender & Religious Freedom	<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>Hostilities</b>	Unfriendly or aggressive behavior	<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>IRF</b>	International Religious Freedom	<b>USCIRF</b>	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria	<b>VAWG</b>	Violence against women and girls
<b>Legislation</b>	The preparation and enactment of laws by a legislative body through its lawmaking process		
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East North Africa		
<b>NGO</b>	Nongovernmental organization		
<b>Peacekeeping</b>	Actively working to stop or prevent conflict between nations or communities		

## GLOSSARY



## Endnotes

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**FoRBWOMEN.ORG**



# STRONGER TOGETHER



**FoRB Women's Alliance** is a global community of religious freedom and human rights advocates and future leaders with a shared vision: advancing freedom of religion or belief for women.

Efforts to address international religious freedom too often inadequately focus on women, and often exclude them – their treatment, voice, and agency – from decision making, adhere to cultural norms that silence them, and make it difficult for them to receive adequate information. Women have been on the periphery of the debate on international religious freedom, despite often facing double persecution because of their religion and gender.

As a global human rights accelerator, we work across countries, sectors and regions, to increase the impact of stakeholders working on these issues and encourage a focus on the intersection of FoRB (both the vulnerabilities and opportunities) and women's rights.

## WHAT WE BELIEVE

- Freedom of religion or belief is a universal and fundamental right that incorporates religious beliefs, practices and advocacy. It is essential to achieving other core freedoms, including that of assembly, association, and expression.
- Women, especially members of minority religious communities, are often the most adversely affected by violations of freedom of religion or belief.
- Freedom of religion or belief and women's rights are complementary and mutually reinforcing in a world where neither can be taken for granted, and one cannot be used to extinguish the other.
- Women, with their vital, productive and creative voices, both enrich the agenda and help shape better solutions.

## WHAT WE DO

FoRB Women's Alliance strives to increase the impact of stakeholders working to:

**Promote freedom of religion or belief:** Research indicates that women often are especially adversely affected by religious freedom violations, with their less powerful positions in many traditional societies underscored by obstacles to their full enjoyment of FoRB.

**Support women and peacemaking:** Women, members of both majority and minority religious communities, are too often not recognized being key to peace and security worldwide as effective agents of change to help prevent and resolve conflicts, counter terrorism and violent extremism, and build conditions for post conflict peace and stability.

**Increase access to Information:** While access to information is a fundamental right, women, especially members of minority religious communities, often have limited or no access. Without such access, women often cannot exercise the full range of their political, cultural and socio- economic rights, and participate fully in public life.

**Increase access to education:** Religious scripture – often inaccurately interpreted, and prohibitions against more modern interpretations, are used to justify denying women access to education, with non-state actors prohibiting, often through violent means, their being educated. Women and girls also face government supported discrimination in education, with textbooks and curriculums needing to be reformed and teacher training revamped.

**Increase access to justice:** Justice systems often discriminate against women who are members of both majority and minority communities. Because of their gender, women do not receive the health care they need, and face forced conversions, honor killings, and limitations on their rights to property.

## HOW CAN FORB WOMEN'S ALLIANCE HELP YOU?

[CLICK TO GO TO FORBWOMEN.ORG](https://forbwomen.org)

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Regional distribution of participants

Below is a table that represents the regional distribution of participants and the countries they represented. Several participants had a global focus, which is not represented here.

Asia	Europe	Middle East & North Africa	North America	Sub-Saharan Africa
China	Belgium (Greece)	Iran	US	Cameroon
India	Norway	Iraq	Canada	Kenya
Indonesia	Poland	Israel		Nigeria
Japan	Russia			
Myanmar	Sweden			
Pakistan	UK			
Sri Lanka				
Thailand				





## APPENDICES

### Appendix C: Consent Form to Participate in Study

FoRB Women's Alliance (FWA) in partnership with Gender and Religious Freedom (GRF) present this consent form to clarify the rights of FETZER research interview participants and protect them.

You acknowledge that your participation in this project is voluntary. We kindly ask you to sign this informed consent form. If you have agreed to participate but change your mind, you can withdraw at any point (including during the focus group discussions). We would ask you kindly to inform us if this is the case.

The findings from our interview will be analyzed, published, and made publicly available. The project report detailing the findings of the study will be sent to you and all participants when the report is published. No personal identifiable information will be mentioned or disclosed at any point without your express written permission as a participant. You will have the opportunity to view, and if relevant, comment on quotations.

The interview will be audio recorded and the subsequent interview transcriptions will be made fully anonymous. All names and other identifiers (information on the country, university, etc.) will be removed to ensure full anonymity.

Full name\*

Preferred contact email\*

Please check all the boxes below\*

I confirm that I have read, or had read to me, and understand the project description which was sent on [Date] with the invitation to join the focus group in the Concept note .

I have had the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered fully.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time (including during the focus group discussions), without giving any reason and without my legal rights being affected. However, It is really appreciated if you inform us if this is the case.

I understand the study is being conducted by researchers from FoRB Women's Alliance FWA and Gender and Religious Freedom GRF and that my

personal information will be held securely by FWA and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 2018 (UK) for at least five years.

I understand that data collected as part of this study may be looked at by authorized individuals from FWA and GRF where it is relevant. I give permission for these individuals to have access to this information.

I agree to take part in the above study and I understand that there is no fee paid for this participation.

I understand that the information I provide may be published as part of a report or other publication. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications unless otherwise agreed with the researchers.

I understand the focus group discussions will be recorded and there is a possibility of direct quotation being used in publications. In terms of identification and reproduction of my interview, I agree to the use of such content, and note that my participation will be fully anonymized, such that my name or identifying markers will not be shared, except with my express permission, which will be requested separately by the researcher.

I understand that Participants are not allowed to repeat what is said in the focus group interview to others.

I agree to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the information discussed by all participants and researchers during the focus group session including their names.

Please sign your name as a signature to agree to the above.\*

Your answer

SUBMIT

## APPENDICES

### Appendix D: Analysis of interview data

Below is the overall categorization of participant's responses, as captured in the GroupMap data at the interview stage. Resourcing, collaboration and references to the context were the most frequently mentioned theme categories. The interview stage had the highest number of participants engaged.

