

Local Perspectives on Religious Freedom in KAZAKHSTAN



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

Introduction

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

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

designed to inform interventions and drive greater accountability to the communities served by those interventions, and can be incorporated into monitoring and evaluation, project activities, and overall design. [Paperlab](#), a local organization, supported data collection by conducting focus group discussions with civil society members, experts, and researchers who are working in the field of promoting FoRB and representatives of religious minorities groups in Kazakhstan. The GAM process generates a list of co-created and localized indicators, and participants voted for the indicators that resonated most with them.

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

Country Background

Kazakhstan, the largest country in Central Asia, gained independence in 1991 and operates under a unitary state with a presidential form of government. With a population of approximately 18.87 million, the majority is Kazakhs, making up 68.51% of the population, while other ethnic groups such as Russians, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Ukrainians, and more contribute to the diverse ethnic structure. About 70% of the population identify as Muslim and a notable Christian minority, and nonbelievers or atheists account for 18.8% of the population. While the country's Constitution guarantees freedom and human rights, including religious freedom, there are laws and regulations that impose restrictions on religious activities and associations, falling short of meeting international legal obligations and standards.

Although violence against religious groups is not widely reported, instances of discrimination and persecution do exist. Christians from a Muslim background face pressure and occasional physical violence from their communities to force them to return to their former faith. Counterterrorism efforts in the country have primarily targeted radical Islamists influence, while interethnic tensions have occasionally led to clashes and violence. Structural violations of right to religious freedom in Kazakhstan encompass discriminatory norms, restrictions on worship and religious activities, limitations on proselytism, censorship of religious materials, and challenges in the registration processes for religious organizations. Registration issues particularly affect various religious communities, with a complex, burdensome, and arbitrary process. Non-Hanafi Muslim associations often encounter difficulties, and some minority groups have faced attempts to confiscate their property.

Locally developed indicators that emerged as a result of GAM focus groups speak to these realities, while also highlighting the challenges that are unique to religious minorities.

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

Local Understanding of Religious Freedom

Questions for the GAM discussions were constructed in such a way as to understand the various manifestations and understandings of freedom of religion and beliefs, i.e. when a person is alone by him/herself, reads the news or seeks information from the media, interacts with state bodies, relatives, neighbors or the community, desires access to education or work, encounters injustice, and finally, goes to military service or sends a close relative.

Freedom of Religion in Everyday Practice

Participants generally perceived the FORB dynamics in Kazakhstan as more positive than it was during Soviet times. They recognized FORB as the absence of barriers to belief and religious rites and highlighted the importance of being able to freely participate in any faith tradition without facing public condemnation or negative consequences. This encompasses not only freedom of conscience but also freedom of speech, the right to have an opinion, and the right to be respected. Compared to other Central Asian states, participants generally view Kazakhstani society as stable and tolerant, although religious leaders have expressed concerns about restrictive legislation and difficulties in compliance. Limitations in everyday practice include restrictions on preaching and

organizing events outside religious buildings, as well as challenges in initiating open dialogues on non-mainstream religions and holding public religious ceremonies, particularly funerals, especially when interacting with members of the ethnic majority who have converted to another religion.



FORB and Media

Responses from participants highlighted ongoing concerns regarding religious-related topics in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. They mentioned the perpetuation of stereotypes by the Kazakhstani media, which sometimes distorts information consciously or reproduces hate speech and misinformation from foreign sources. This contributes to an unequal perception of religious associations within society. Participants also discussed the inappropriate depiction of religious minorities in the media, with guidance from the government on how much and what to write about them. Some religious organizations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Evangelical churches, face difficulties in media representation and are often labeled as sects or "destructive religious movements." The participants suggested improving explanatory work in the religious sphere, emphasizing the values of tolerance and multiculturalism, and increasing public knowledge about the diverse religious landscape to combat xenophobia and intolerance.

FORB and State

Responses from the civil society participants emphasized the state's role in shaping the relationship between society and religious organizations. For instance, the state's labeling of certain religious movements as "non-traditional" or "destructive" influences societal attitudes towards these groups. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of legal mechanisms for religious organizations to defend themselves against state prejudices. Furthermore, disparities in the quality of religious education in schools contribute to the stigmatization of certain religious movements. Overall, participants noted the need for a more balanced religious policy that upholds freedom of religion and belief while maintaining a secular state and promoting tolerance and acceptance within Kazakhstani society.

Participants from the religious minority groups shared the complex challenges in their interactions with the state. The adoption of a law on religious activities in 2011 has resulted in difficulties related to registration, missionary activities, and the practice of religious rituals. While some understanding has been developed between state bodies and religious organizations, cooperation in areas like education and family affairs is still lacking. Participants emphasized the need for religious leaders to be more active in engaging with society and informing the public about their beliefs.

FORB and Community

According to participants, the notion of community is flexible in Kazakhstan, and individuals often try not to stand out based on their religious beliefs or affiliations. The ability to freely practice religion within a community depends on the level of difference between mainstream societal norms and religious practices, which can lead to separation and exclusion. While participants generally did not report facing negative attitudes or discrimination within their communities, they acknowledged that religious issues are often unaddressed or unrecognized in Kazakhstani society. They emphasized the importance of raising awareness at the state level and fostering cultural acceptance to build sustainable relationships between different religious groups.

FORB and Access to Education and Employment

In terms of employment, while some employers may seek recommendations from religious leaders, certain positions and organizations may be unavailable for individuals from religious minorities, and fulfilling job responsibilities may sometimes conflict with religious beliefs. There are also restrictions on civil servants openly displaying their religious affiliation. Participants noted that religious practices can be tolerated in workplaces, especially if they do not interfere with job duties, but refusal to participate in common activities due to religious reasons can lead to rejection and bullying. Women, in particular, may face difficulties in practicing Islam at work, as certain jobs may prohibit wearing hijab or religious attire. In the education sector, the issue of wearing scarves (hijab) is a central concern, with some schools not accommodating girls who wish to wear scarves as part of their school uniforms. Teaching religious studies and involvement in government activities on countering extremism and terrorism were also seen as problematic, potentially increasing suspicion and alarmism instead of promoting tolerance.

FORB and Gender

Participants noted that the role of women in religion is influenced by the level of patriarchy within communities and families. While women have the same level of freedom of thought and belief, it is generally preferred for them to refrain from expressing their views publicly. The influence of fathers in a girl's religious self-identification was highlighted, with fathers' decisions often carrying significant weight. Participants acknowledged that career development within Abrahamic religions is limited for women but did not view these patriarchal norms as problematic, stating that women can exist within these boundaries. Discrimination on religious grounds can be compounded by gender discrimination, placing additional pressure on women. Examples were given of women facing conflict within their families due to their professional success and interactions with secular society. The unequal status of women is inherent in many religious traditions, both majority and minority, where women are unable to become formal religious leaders.



Overall, the representatives of the civil society and religious minority groups co-created 110 everyday indicators of religious freedom. These are the **top positive and negative localized indicators**, co-generated, voted, and selected from this discussion:

Civil society representatives shared that they would take the following 9 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom in their communities:

When the believers of a specific religion/faith are allowed to establish a religious organization regardless of the number of followers.

When women are free to choose and practice religion without pressure from family and community.

When believers are not required to secretly practice their religion because their [religious] organization is not legally registered in the country.

When media coverage on counter-terrorism measures does not negatively impact peaceful Muslims and other believers in my community.

When people in my community believe what they want and practice their religion in the way they want ("If I want, then believe and believe as I want").

When people from all religious and belief identities feel/believe that the state has equal respect for all religions, regardless of their status and size.

When believers, including civil servants, can freely carry out their practice and wear religious attributes in their workplace.

When students are allowed to wear religious clothing and religious paraphernalia to secondary school without any restrictions.

When people in my community say that they are able to differentiate genuine news and hate speech or fake news against specific religion/ethnicity in the media/social media.

Religious minorities shared that they would take the following 8 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom:

When people in my communities believe that religious freedom is guaranteed by the state and international standards to all citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation.

When people believe that they can freely talk about their religion or beliefs [beyond their religious places] outside in public places without any fear of consequences or threat.

When believers are able to express their opinion without fearing the consequences for not adhering to existing trends of political correctness.

When people from religious minorities feel that all religions are treated equally by the state without a certain hierarchy of importance.

When in a community followers of minority religions are treated with respect by individuals, communities, and government institutions.

When in society nobody insists that only a certain religion is correct.

When there is no fear of being fined or punished/attacked for posting [in social media] religious content based on their viewpoint.

When registration of a religious organization is not required to submit a minimum threshold number of followers by State authorities.

Taken together, these indicators reflect the local Kazakh perspectives on the meaning of religious freedom. Locally developed indicators are a great source for guiding actions and promoting accountability to local communities. Stakeholders such as civil society organizations, program developers, policymakers, government agencies and local communities themselves can all act on localized indicators. Although the indicators seem general, they do not only measure the output of a specific action, but also changes in the attitudes and practices of people in communities. For example, when women have the freedom to choose and practice their religion without facing pressures or restrictions from their family or community, it reflects a society that promotes individual autonomy and equal rights for women in matters of faith and belief. Or, when media coverage of counter-terrorism issues avoids negative generalizations or stigmatization of peaceful Muslims, it reflects a responsible and inclusive media environment that respects religious diversity and promotes understanding rather than perpetuating stereotypes or biases.

These indicators show existing challenges of religious freedom from the perspective of religious minorities and local actors. They also provide food for thought about possible programmatic interventions in the country. For instance, the indicator also demonstrates how Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred infringes upon freedom of religion or belief, how national security and counter-terrorism measures have disproportionately and discriminatorily targeted Muslims in Kazakhstan and have been implemented with poor oversight.¹ These mean that there could be variety of program interventions, including:

- Media literacy programs that educate journalists, media professionals, and the general public about religious diversity, cultural sensitivity, and combating biases.
- Advocacy for policy reforms that ensure national security and counter-terrorism measures are implemented in a non-discriminatory manner, with appropriate oversight mechanisms.
- Facilitate interfaith dialogues to encourage understanding, cooperation, and joint efforts to combat Islamophobia, promote tolerance, and address discrimination.
- Establish mechanisms to monitor and report human rights violations, including instances of religious discrimination or targeting of specific religious communities.
- Provide capacity strengthening programs for law enforcement officials, security personnel, and relevant authorities on human rights, religious diversity, and non-discriminatory practices. This would help ensure that counter-terrorism measures are carried out with respect for religious freedom and in compliance with international human rights standards.

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¹ Countering Islamophobia/Anti-Muslim Hatred to Eliminate Discrimination and Intolerance Based on Religion or Belief. Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed. A/HRC/46/30 - <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F46%2F30&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>