

“How can religious literacy and freedom of religion or belief literacy inform partnerships, especially for promoting gender equality?”

Background:

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI)/Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI)'s Faith and Gender-based Violence (GBV) Hub organized on 27 May 2021 the first of four peer-to-peer learning webinars. This first webinar focused on the role of religious literacy and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) literacy in informing partnerships, especially for promoting gender equality. This is part of a series of webinars on “Gender-based Violence in the Context of COVID-19 and Beyond”, co-hosted by OHCHR, UNFPA, UNWOMEN, JLI/SVRI Faith and GBV Hub using the peer-to-peer learning methodology of the [#Faith4Rights Toolkit](#).

The webinar on 27 May 2021 ([video link](#)) had more than 60 participants, featuring the following panellists, who enriched the debate and underlined key issues as summarized below: **Nahla Haidar**, Vice Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; **Ahmed Shaheed**, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, **Dr Nora Khalaf-Elledge**, Post-doctoral Fellow at the Faiths & Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths, University of London; and **Dr Dicky Sofjan**, Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Graduate School, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia.

The webinar discussed challenges and opportunities, and the role of faith actors in preventing gender-based violence and in challenging social norms that condone it, as well as more generally in promoting gender equality and the human rights of women and girls, in the context of the pandemic and beyond.

Learning points based on practical experiences:

- ✚ **Misconceptions pertaining to the framework of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB):** One major misconception is that the FoRB framework protects religions, beliefs or ideas as such, while it actually protects individuals' right to hold one's ideas as long as their manifestation does not harm the rights of other people. This misconception manifest itself through anti-blasphemy laws and suppression of dissent. Furthermore, women's rights also get side-lined through patriarchal readings of religion. Another misconception is that the FoRB framework provided an isolated set of rights although in reality FoRB covers rights that are indivisibly part of a holistic and universal human rights framework. This is how, for example, freedom of expression is also central to FoRB and not at all in a dichotomy with it. Numerous areas of possible action can emanate from this relatively ignored and even at times contested fact.
- ✚ **Gender equality is part of FoRB:** Built into FoRB is the guarantee of gender equality; women and men, girls and boys, have equal rights to all the freedoms enshrined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and other interlinked rights. This is relevant to other gender characteristics. This liberating understanding of the FoRB framework requires the enhancement of freedom of expression within FoRB as well as devising methodologies for exchanges within and with the religious sphere that strengthen enlightened interpretations as per commitments 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12 and 17 of the “Faith for Rights” framework. This opens the pathway for enjoying the protection in practice and offering protection to everyone from within the religious sphere itself, defended by faith actors who realize the necessity of mutual reinforcement between faith and rights communities and movements. The missing buy-in by both communities can be remedied by a peer-to-peer learning approach that practically ameliorates any misperception of hierarchy or dichotomy between religious values and women's rights.

- ✚ **The limitation regimes:** The most frequent type of errors made in this domain is the limitations regime where national laws try to impose too broad limitations or on the contrary, they do not impose limitations, when actually needed. For example, incidents that indeed reach the threshold of incitement to violence (article 20(2) of the ICCPR) are not prosecuted, while on the other hand peaceful critics and minorities are persecuted, even though they only dared to criticize their government ([Rabat Plan of Action](#)). This fact is obviously related to the instrumentalisation of religions by political actors as tools of oppression and to achieve political and electoral gains (see [module 10](#) of the #Faith4Rights toolkit).
- ✚ **Internal contestation of religions or beliefs:** The FoRB framework has implications on religious and FoRB literacy as it means that ideas in and on religions and beliefs should be free since freedom of conscience is an absolute freedom (*forum internum*). The other side of the same coin is that such ideas are also open for criticism. Individuals should have space of interpretation/debate/dissent and each person can articulate the views she/he wants and contributes to the debate within free, safe and open space for such literacy. It is important to use arguments which are framed within religious discourses that enable individuals to argue from within tradition rather than asking to ditch all traditions to pave the way for human rights. *Traditions* develop over time. This is how they flourish, while remaining faithful to their origins and values. It is important, however, to first recognise, learn and practice the normative contours of human rights that permit individuals to challenge and contribute to the beliefs, and have their own interpretation without coercing others or being coerced by others. This will enable individuals to live a life to self-develop, while respecting rights of others and thus enjoy human rights to the full.
- ✚ **Religion, context and power:** Religious literacy is not about acquiring knowledge on any particular tradition but rather teaching about religions and beliefs at large. It is not a theological discourse but rather understanding the religious discourse, its diversity, the different approaches to interpretations of a religion, and its geographic contextualisation of its understanding and practices. It allows to understand how religion(s) and power/patriarchy intersect and therefore leads to better understanding gender and religion, including challenges such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage.
- ✚ **Religious literacy to promote human rights literacy:** Religious literacy reconstructs certain notions such as human rights and equality from within religion, beliefs and traditions. By this, it contributes to human rights literacy, especially among States and leaders that misuse religion, tradition and culture as an excuse to limit human rights, roll back on gender equality, or make reservations to CEDAW (which is the human rights treaty that has triggered the most reservations by States parties).
- ✚ **Religious Minorities:** In some contexts, there certain religious groups in society face politically-motivated marginalisation. Anti-blasphemy laws manifest the idea and practice of marginalisation, as well as some bylaws for building places of worship. Promoting FoRB helps reverse the process of marginalisation. The Rabat Plan of Action and 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” urge States that still have anti-blasphemy or anti-apostasy laws to repeal them, since such laws have a stifling impact on the enjoyment of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief as well as on healthy dialogue and debate about religious issues.
- ✚ **Choosing partners in the realm of development:** Partnering with organizations, including religious partners in the realm of development, may have wide-ranging impacts since it emboldens their ideology, including their gender ideology, legitimises them and improves their access to resources. Western development agencies are not automatically feminist, and some have a track record of prioritizing strategic partnerships over feminist partnership and this can be counterproductive in the long-run.

Action oriented recommendations:

- ✦ **State responsibility:** States have the duty to protect the rights of someone from harm caused by manifestations or manipulations of FoRB by other stakeholders, whether governmental or non-state actors. At the same time, States should ensure that their restrictions are the least restrictive ones, and the test of legality, legitimacy, necessity and proportionality applies. This delicate balancing requires States to promote the use by relevant state agencies and non-state actors of relevant human rights standards.
- ✦ **The role of faith-based actors:** It is important to engage – in a peer-to-peer mode rather than in a top-down manner – with faith-based actors and scholars with religious literacy in discussions related to human rights and gender equality. They can provide counter arguments, comparative data and best practices, which is constructive for engaging with member States and community leaders. In this regard it is vital to continue using the [“Faith for Rights” framework](#), including its corresponding 18 commitments, and share best practices that can be duplicated to yield concrete results related to gender equality, using the peer-to-peer learning methodology of the [#Faith4Rights toolkit](#). States should therefore be encouraged to grant priority to empowering faith actors to assume their human rights responsibilities by providing them a conducive environment and necessary assistance to use these standards in a structured sustainable manner. Religious studies institutions provide a natural entry point in this respect.
- ✦ **Interfaith engagement:** Interfaith dialogues should not be photo-sessions or occasional reactions to tensions. States and faith-based actors are rather encouraged to apply the “principle of dialogue in action” by way of infusing religious understandings and interfaith interactions on issues of women’s rights, environmental awareness, ecological conservation, cyberspace and religion, access to justice and anti-corruption. Bringing on board faith communities is important to also address the increased domestic violence against women and children in the context of COVID-19, especially since these communities put family values as one of the core teachings of their religions.
- ✦ **Policies and legal frameworks:** It is important to focus on the societal level but also review existing policies and legal frameworks, including constitutions, regulations and policies at provisional or state level in federal states to identify and address the problems and gaps.
- ✦ **Choosing the “right partner”:** Any partner that development organisations select must have a solid track record on women’s rights and have a commitment to achieving gender equality. Moreover, women’s rights organisations naturally know the local and religious context, and understand how religion interacts with gender in a specific context; therefore, it is vital to collaborate with them. In the long term, it is important to also formulate and adopt guidelines for engaging with religious communities and faith-based actors. In addition, human rights and gender equality should be taken into consideration at the early stages of the cycle, including through the recruitment process of staff working on this project, who should be gender-sensitive.
- ✦ **Thorough and strong gender analysis:** Every development institution is mandated to have a solid gender programme, therefore, it is imperative to have a thorough and strong gender analysis that would look at all the social influences of gender, including the interplay of gender and religion.
- ✦ **Engage with existing fora:** The G20 Interfaith Forum is influential and presents a lot of opportunities since religious literacy is one of main themes. In its previous recommendations in Buenos Aires and Osaka, the [G20 Interfaith Forum](#) called on States to support UN based initiatives to reduce incitement and hatred by supporting faith-based actors in fulfilling the human rights responsibilities as summarized in the Beirut Declaration and the 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights”. The Istanbul process on implementing [Human Rights Council resolution 16/18](#) is also an important avenue to combat hate speech and stigmatization and it is worth joining efforts in this process.