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Regional challenges in the intersection of
Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality

West Asia (Middle East) & North Africa



**REPORT ON REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE INTERSECTION OF
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND GENDER EQUALITY
FOR WEST ASIA (MIDDLE EAST) AND NORTH AFRICA**

PART OF A SERIES OF REPORTS FROM THE PROJECT *REGIONAL WORKSHOPS ON
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 5 ON
ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS*

Author: Ana Maria Daou

Editor: Elisa Chavez

Cover design: Kristine Tveit Jordet

Donor: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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[Table of contents](#)

Introduction 3

Background Information 4

 Methodology 4

 Key Human Rights Standards 5

 Contextual Analysis 5

Key issues in the intersection of FoRB and Gender Equality in WANA 8

 Legal Structures and Personal Status Laws 8

 Discriminatory Religious and Social Structures 11

 Women in Religious Leadership and Places of Worship 12

 Guardianship over Women 14

 Gender-based violence 16

Recommendations & Way Forward 16

Introduction

In October 2023, 34 people met for a workshop in Beirut, Lebanon, to discuss regional challenges in the intersection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and gender equality across West Asia and North Africa (WANA). The WANA region is also known by many as the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). The workshop brought together a diverse group of participants from eight countries: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia. Confirmed participants from Libya and Palestine were also scheduled to join this workshop, but were unfortunately hindered from embarking on their journey to Beirut.

While a range of stakeholders from multiple sectors, including governments, religious institutions, and civil society organizations around the world have issued statements, documents, policy papers, and plans of action acknowledging the intersectionality between FoRB and gender equality, it still remains an intersection with limited awareness and tools for maximizing the two rights together. While FoRB protects the right of every person to have, manifest, and change their religion or belief; gender equality advocates for the unequivocal idea that all individuals, regardless of their gender, are entitled to the same rights and opportunities.

Just like FoRB is protected by various international, regional, and local human rights instruments and mechanisms, several conventions have been ratified throughout the years to promote gender equality and advance Sustainable Development Goal #5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Both of these rights can reflect diverse individual experiences that are not only shaped by religious or non-religious affiliations but also by one's gender. One important factor that can help us understand the intersection between FoRB and gender equality is to view the latter as a dynamic lens through which the entire spectrum of human rights can be unpacked and analyzed. Gender both influences and is influenced by religions, beliefs, and cultural norms, different legal frameworks, and general communal expectations. Therefore, the interaction between these two highlights how religious/non-religious beliefs and practices, or their different interpretations thereof, can either empower or constrain certain individuals based on their gender, and conversely, how gender norms may impact the exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

This report will present key regional issues and opportunities in the intersection of FoRB and gender equality in the WANA region. The examples and issues presented are based on insights by experts, activists, and religious/belief representatives from across the region, who met in Beirut in October 2023 to discuss issues pertaining to the intersection of both rights. Workshop participants included experts and activists on topics like FoRB, gender equality, theology, and law, but also representatives from different religious/belief backgrounds including but not limited to agnostics, atheists, Bahais, Christians (Catholic, Coptic, Orthodox, and Protestant), Muslims (Shia and Sunni), and Yezidis.

The workshop was co-organized and facilitated by Stefanus Alliance International and the Adyan Foundation. Stefanus Alliance is a Norwegian and Christian human rights organization, with a special focus on FoRB for all, and Adyan is a Lebanese multi-religious NGO working on the promotion of Inclusive Citizenship, FoRB, and good governance in the region and beyond. It was the fourth workshop in a series of regional workshops on FoRB and gender equality, held from 2022-2024, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented by Stefanus Alliance. This initiative builds on, and is a follow-up to, an Expert Consultation Process on FoRB, gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which Stefanus Alliance organized together with the Danish Institute for Human Rights in 2019-2020, also in cooperation with the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, the UN

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development. This pilot phase of the project was funded by the Danish and Norwegian Foreign Ministries.¹ The present report does not express the views of these organizations or institutions.

Background Information

Methodology

It was important for both Stefanus Alliance and Adyan to create a safe space for workshop discussions, where participants could present a wide range of viewpoints, including those considered contradictory, controversial, or contested. Discussions took form in a peer-to-peer learning exchange between civil society and faith-based actors, engaging stakeholders at different levels, including grassroots actors from both majority and minority religious/belief communities in the region, as well as gender equality activists and FoRB activists. Due to lack of opportunity, there was no representation of experts or activists for the rights of people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) at the workshop, so this perspective will subsequently not be covered in this report. The idea behind an interactive structure was to initiate insightful discussions, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between FoRB and gender equality within the WANA region. However, it is important to note that not all countries nor all religious/belief backgrounds from this region were represented at the workshop, indicating that findings in this report might not cover a full spectrum of key issues related to FoRB & gender equality there. Yet it is plausible to assume that multiple issues overlap across border lines and communities.

The workshop began with a brief human rights introduction by the organizers, clarifying the normative framework around the intersection of FoRB and gender equality. This was essential to ensure that all participants had similar level of conceptual knowledge before delving into discussions on challenges and opportunities in their respective contexts. The introductory session also highlighted select regional perspectives from non-governmental organizations, which showed the gap between religious and secular feminists/organizations, and outlined initiatives to promote FoRB and gender equality, both respectively and collectively.

It was quickly noted how both terms ‘FoRB’ and ‘gender’ are often not well-received in communities across WANA and are in fact often seen as ‘a trojan horse’ for the promotion of Western ideologies and values. A baseline survey conducted by Adyan in 2022² showed that 56% of respondents in this region believe that members of their communities do not prioritize issues related to FoRB and other thematic rights, nor do they find them relevant for their context. This could either be explained by the lack of general awareness and ownership for universal rights in the region, and/or because regional rights activists frequently face resistance and backlash from political and religious institutions in their respective countries, making it challenging and sometimes dangerous to raise awareness around this. Highlighting the human rights intersectionality between FoRB and gender equality in the WANA region, through a peer-

¹ For more information about this process, see Marie Juul Petersen, *Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality in The Context of The Sustainable Development Goals: A Focus on Access to Justice, Education and Health. Reflections from the 2019 Expert Consultation Process*. Copenhagen: The Danish Institute for Human Rights.

² This baseline survey was conducted in August 2022, as part of the Changing Attitudes and Perceptions on Freedom of Religion and Belief in the MENA region project. The total number of respondents was 279 participants: 62% male and 38% female. The respondents were online users to Adyan’s platforms, including activists, journalists, academics, government employees and individuals working in religious institutions.

to-peer learning and sharing of experiences, would enable relevant stakeholders with a safe space to explore ways where both rights are protected and promoted.

After the introductory session, participants were divided into parallel breakout groups, each including people with various national, gender and religious/belief backgrounds, offering a diverse blend of expertise when engaging in further discussions on regional issues around FoRB and gender equality. Each breakout group was tasked with identifying challenges in the intersection of these two rights from their respective countries and communities, as well as suggest strategies on how to overcome them. These ideas were then shared in plenary discussions to ensure peer-to-peer learning and cross-collaboration among all participants.

Key Human Rights Standards

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)³ both outline freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as a fundamental right for all, in their respective Article 18. In short, FoRB is defined to include the right to have or adopt a religion or belief, and the right to practice one's religion or belief. Equally importantly, these conventions also protect the freedom to not hold or express any particular religion or belief. While individuals are the primary holders of the right to FoRB, it also has a collective dimension, granting religious/belief communities specific rights, including but not limited to legal recognition, autonomy in internal affairs, and the establishment of religious schools. Therefore, religious/belief institutions play a significant role in preserving the rights of all and to counter-act discrimination in all its forms. In the WANA region, where religious affiliation is an important identity marker significantly influencing public and private life, the state's recognition and protection of all individuals and religious/belief groups is especially important.

Women's rights are also at the core of international human rights law. This gender-attentive focus within human rights advocacy has surged as a response to the widespread and global gender discrimination, in which women have largely been excluded from accessing equal rights and opportunities for centuries. Also here, the UDHR lays foundational principles of equality and non-discrimination based on gender, serving as a bedrock for all women's rights declarations. Numerous international documents form a comprehensive framework aimed at safeguarding women's rights, with the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)⁴, at its core. Considered the main document to address discrimination against women in various spheres of society, it requires states to take measures to eliminate gender-based discrimination, promote gender equality, and ensure women's participation in all aspects of life.

Contextual Analysis

Understanding the context of FoRB, gender equality and women's empowerment in the WANA region is key to critically analyze the results of the discussions that took place during the workshop in Beirut.

³ All countries assessed in this report have ratified ICCPR:
tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CCPR&Lang=en.

⁴ All countries assessed in this report have ratified CEDAW, except for Iran:
tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CEDAW.

Despite few advancements and reforms, women in West Asia and North Africa still face disproportionate levels of harassment, discrimination and violence.⁵ Human rights violations often have a specific gender dimension when it comes to women and girls, and FoRB is no exception to this. For example, 2.5 billion women and girls around the world live in countries that have discriminatory laws towards them⁶, such as personal status laws, while only 10% have laws that protect against gender-based discrimination.⁷

Women across the WANA region face multi-layered forms of gender discrimination, both direct and structural.⁸ Multiple levels of discrimination particularly affect women who are part of religious or belief minority groups, as they are especially at risk of impediments to practice their faith or convictions freely. Such gendered perspectives are frequently overlooked in discussions concerning the protection and promotion of FoRB, because FoRB violations, which are sometimes justified through misguided interpretations of religious texts, are often described within a framework that fails to consider the gender aspect. Similarly, individuals and organizations advocating for women's rights might not give much attention to FoRB and the importance for some women to have a religious or belief identity.

Because there is a general regional misconception that ensuring religious freedom for all might undermine efforts to advocate for women's rights, this workshop aimed at highlighting the intersection between FoRB and gender equality to gain a better understanding of these issues in the WANA region while encouraging stakeholders to work together for the development of their communities.

As previously mentioned, the theoretical foundation of FoRB stresses the indivisibility of human rights. Therefore, recognizing the layered discriminations faced by women in the region, because of their gender, and also exacerbated by other factors such as religion, belief, or ethnicity, help clarify misconceptions and the assumption that rights function separately from each other.

In 2023, some reports suggest positive changes related to FoRB in the region, in comparison to the previous years; however, no country in WANA is ensuring complete FoRB for all groups.⁹ Factors including pandemic-related restrictions and ongoing political instability negatively affected the protection and promotion of several human rights in the region, including FoRB.¹⁰

All countries covered in this report, except for Lebanon and Tunisia, mention Islam as the state religion in their constitutions. Although most countries constitutionally guarantee FoRB, many states simultaneously hold a strict adherence to Islamic laws, making it difficult to have a

⁵ MENA: Gender-based violence continues to devastate lives of women across region (2022). Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/03/mena-gender-based-violence-continues-to-devastate-lives-of-women-across-region/>

⁶ Petersen, Marie Juul Petersen, *Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality in The Context of The Sustainable Development Goals: A Focus on Access to Justice, Education and Health. Reflections from the 2019 Expert Consultation Process* (2020). The Danish Institute for Human Rights. https://www.humanrights.dk/files/media/document/Brief_no4_03%20FINAL-a.pdf

⁷ *Leave no LGBT person behind* (2018). OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/05/leave-no-lgbt-person-behind?LangID=E&NewsID=23092>

⁸ *Intersectionality and Multiple Discrimination* (n.d.). Gender Matters. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/intersectionality-and-multiple-discrimination>

⁹ *Religious Freedom Report* (2023). Aid to the Church in Need. <https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/reports/global/2023>

¹⁰ Ibid.

different religion/belief than the State-favored interpretation of Islam, or also to convert from Islam to another belief.¹¹ Despite the freedoms granted in legal text, declaring a state religion often limits the practical implementation of such freedoms. In fact, five countries in the region still have apostasy laws¹² while 18 countries have blasphemy laws.¹³ Reports also state that freedom to manifest and practice one's religion is constrained for non-recognized religious minorities, who instead face difficulties in legal registration and restriction on activities.¹⁴ One report classifies extent of religious freedom in WANA countries as follows: six out of 22 countries are at the "persecution level", 15 are at the "discrimination" level, and one is "under observation".¹⁵

The individual and collective dimensions of FoRB protect the rights of individuals as well as religious or belief communities. However, it is imperative to clarify that this recognition does not protect the hegemony of certain groups over the others, especially in countries where there is a certain religious majority or a state religion. In the WANA region, this might translate into the use of power to justify violations of women's rights in the name of religion, for example. In an area where patriarchal norms persist and where "human experiences" are mainly defined by men, the individual aspect of FoRB becomes key to challenge gender-based discrimination and ensure equality.

The concepts of "FoRB" and "gender" carry significant weight in the WANA region, shaping perceptions and influencing the discourse around human rights. The term gender, a universal key identity marker to every human being, has often been subject to manipulation by both religious institutions and political leadership in the WANA region, to serve their agendas and maintain control over specific segments of the population. When it comes to gender, it is especially women's gender roles who are sought after for manipulation and control. On one hand, a lot of WANA states are currently engaged in "gender washing", meaning pushing progress for women's equality solely to achieve regime stability and support; while others are doing the opposite by painting all campaigns on gender equality and women's rights as an imposition of Western secular values threatening to override religious authority.¹⁶

Problems with terminology because of politicized human rights concepts have pushed activists in the region to present FoRB through an inclusive citizenship lens, to advocate for governments to bear the responsibility of protecting this right and ensuring that all religious or belief communities, and all women, can actively participate in public affairs. An inclusive approach to this does not only guarantee that FoRB is protected, without backlash from political and religious institutions, but goes beyond that to emphasize diversity as a valuable factor for active citizens and fostering a collaborative understanding of different religious and belief systems.

¹¹ *Regional analyses* (2022). Stefanusalliansen. <https://www.stefanus.no/english/regional-analyses/>

¹² *Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium* (2023). United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023%20%20Anti-Conversion%20Laws%20Compendium.pdf>

¹³ *Blasphemy Legislation Factsheet* (2023). United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/2023%20Blasphemy%20Legislation%20Factsheet.pdf>

¹⁴ *Regional analyses*. (2022). Stefanus Alliance. <https://www.stefanus.no/english/regional-analyses/>

¹⁵ *Religious Freedom Report* (2023). Aid to the Church in Need. <https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/reports/global/2023>

¹⁶ El-Housseini, Rola, *Women's Rights and State Feminism in the Arab World* (2023). Arab Center Washington DC. <https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/reports/global/2023>

Key issues in the intersection of FoRB and Gender Equality in WANA

Legal Structures and Personal Status Laws

Legal structures governing FoRB and gender equality play a crucial role in safeguarding individual rights. However, one of the main challenges to safeguard said laws in the WANA region is the substantial difference between what is written in the law and what is actually implemented in different communities. Therefore, the development of mechanisms to ensure that these laws are being implemented is important, especially structures that can increase social awareness of rights in parallel with legal development.

Workshop participants underlined examples including contradictory laws and policy loopholes as some factors persistently subjecting women and girls in the WANA region to a multi-faceted discrimination, both because of their gender and their religious/belief identity and belonging. In Jordan and Egypt for example, the official legal age to marry is 18, but multiple loopholes in different laws, will legally allow for customary interpretations to take precedence over the official legal age limit. Using these kinds of loopholes to allow for marriage to girls under 18 years old are particularly observed within Muslim communities. Recent international reports also document these trends.¹⁷

The issue of gender discrimination in legal frameworks is universal for all women and girls, despite being part of a majority or minority religious/belief group. But the issue tends to have an added layer for those from minority groups. Despite progress that has taken place in the past decade, legal ambiguities and weaknesses in the implementation of laws protecting women and girls have demonstrated to increase inequality, discrimination, and gender-based violence. For example, despite the fact that the Tunisian constitution protects FoRB for all its citizens, some laws restrict this freedom to non-Muslims under the pretext of ‘public order’, a vague term often used to limit people’s right to manifest or practice their religion/belief, which is also disproportionately enforced among belief groups with a minority status.

Workshop participants also shared examples of clear gender- and religious/belief discrimination in inheritance laws from in several countries in the region. In a number of countries, including Tunisia, non-Muslim women have extremely limited legal protection because of both their gender and also their lack of religious affiliation to the majority group. Another example was shared from Iran, where women are subjected to more restrictions than men in practicing their religion/belief and are also granted half of the value of a man before the law for simply being a woman. Giving testimony in a court, for example, a woman’s testimony would be worth half of that of a man. Similarly, a person from a religious/belief minority group is also legally defined as half as valuable as a Muslim person. So, a *woman* from a religious/belief *minority* group, would basically have zero legal protection up against that of a Muslim man.

The politicization of religion in WANA countries creates a complex landscape that leads to increased discrimination of religious minorities and to gender discrimination towards women, due to the state’s fear of losing power by challenging the status quo in case it was to ruffle the

¹⁷ *Women and girls’ rights ‘precarious’ in Middle East and North Africa* (2021). Plan International. <https://plan-international.org/news/2020/12/10/women-and-girls-rights-precarious-in-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

feathers of the perceived majority in granting traditionally discriminated groups equal rights. Therefore, the inferior status of women within non-recognized religious/belief groups extends not only to men from those groups, but also to other women who belong to the majority group.

The absence of a comprehensive civil law that advocates for women's rights and gender equality is a challenge faced by women across the region. Personal status and family laws based on patriarchal, and gender discriminatory interpretations of religion negatively impact the rights of women and religious minorities, as they encourage discriminatory behavior and/or violence.¹⁸ These laws cover areas of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and guardianship. Workshop participants gave multiple examples of how this looked like in practice. For example, inheritance laws in Jordan and Iran perpetuate gender disparities by disallowing fathers to distribute their inheritance equally between sons and daughters – or between daughters and other male relatives in the extended family, in the event where a family does not have sons. These laws were described by some as “transforming women into beggars” and show how women are often treated as so-called second-class citizens. However, stories were also shared on how families creatively find ways around these discriminatory laws to protect their daughters. Many families in Iran for example have resorted to transferring assets from parents to daughters while parents are still alive, to ensure inheritance is distributed equally for their daughters.

Coupled with the systematic gender discrimination, there is also discrimination based on religious or belief affiliation within most personal status laws in the WANA region. In Lebanon and Iraq for example, not all religious/belief communities are recognized by law, and since these countries operate with multiple and parallel legal systems according to religious belief, only the ones who belong to a recognized religious group will have a chance – albeit not a guarantee – of being subject to personal status laws according to their beliefs. Everyone else is subject to laws of communities that they do not identify with or belong to. An example of this would be a Bahá'í in Lebanon, forcibly subjected to Muslim Shia or Christian Catholic personal status laws, since one of these would likely be the religion registered on their individual civil extract since the Bahá'í faith is not a recognized religious group and consequentially do not have their own legal framework registered or recognized.

Even though discriminatory laws affect both recognized and non-recognized religious groups, women from minority groups once again face an additional layer of discrimination both because of their gender and because of their minority status. For instance, women from non-recognized religious groups whose husbands pass away cannot register as widows to claim inheritance because, technically, their marriage wasn't recognized to begin with. This is evident for Bahá'ís in Egypt, where they cannot get their marriage recognized by the state and consequentially lose out on inheritance rights when spouses pass away, because those claims can only be done by someone the state recognizes as a legal spouse. For women, the inherent gender discrimination in the legal framework will make it even more difficult to argue claims to inheritance by lost husband or father.

Personal status laws can also perpetuate gender discrimination against recognized or majority groups, like Christian and Muslim women. In Egypt, it is also evident that Sharia-based

¹⁸ *Personal Status and Family Law in the Middle East and North Africa* (2023). USCIRF. <https://www.uscifr.gov/publications/personal-status-and-family-law-middle-east-and-north-africa>

inheritance laws can result in a dual violation that involves both gender-based discrimination coupled with the imposition of a different religious framework on Christian women, in case of disagreements between heirs.¹⁹ Such laws add a layer of concern in relation to divorce, either because of the right of men to take an autonomous decision to separate or because of significantly complicated procedures that favor men and deprive women from exercising their rights. In Iran, men can get granted divorce without arguing a legal case, while women cannot. Women are then in some cases obliged to change their religion to either obtain a divorce, ask for alimony, or re-marry. All these examples are a violation of women's freedom of religion or belief, and also of women's right to equality.

Yet another layer of complexity arises in matters of marriage and custody in the region. Examples from different countries included the fact that a Christian (or non-Muslim) woman married to a Muslim man is denied custody of her children in the event of divorce or death of her partner, since custody automatically shifts to paternal figures like grandfathers or uncles within the Muslim legal tradition. These decisions, ostensibly based on religious interpretation, sometimes fail to consider the child's best interests and reinforce a hierarchical and patriarchal view of gender inherent in religious laws and jurisprudence. Furthermore, inter-religious marriages for Muslim men are allowed (but only with "people of the book"²⁰), while Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men unless they agree to convert. Even then, they might face societal backlash. Divorced women who chose to convert also face the repercussion of losing custody of their children. The same does not apply to men. Examples of this were shared from both Egypt and Lebanon, highlighting cases of women who lost custody of their children to the child's father, grandfathers, or uncles because they chose to convert. These examples were not particular to one religion but spanned over various recognized religions in the region. In brief, workshop participants agreed that the absence of a civil law (even if optional) that protects women is allowing practicing and non-practicing families to exploit religious laws, especially in matters of custody and inheritance.

In addition to discriminatory personal status laws, workshop participants believed that biases within the judicial system, influenced by different perspectives on gender equality, contribute to the widening gap between legal provisions and their practical applications. A patriarchal interpretation of the law dominates decision-making tendencies among judges in the region and can even create a climate of impunity for cases of gender discrimination, especially related to gender-based violence. The presence of multiple judicial systems in the same national context, as is the case with most countries in WANA, also leads to varying verdicts and interpretations of the law, mainly dependent on the judge's alignment with universal human rights principles. Discrepancies in parallel court systems can result in weak legal protection for women, especially if judges lack knowledge on human rights frameworks and broader inclusive religious interpretations. Having a clearer and more universal legal system will not only contribute to strengthen gender equality but will decrease the reliability on customary procedures to solve conflicts, which often aggravate existing tensions.

¹⁹ Preventing discrimination and persecution. Models of inclusion of religious minorities in the Euro-Mediterranean space (2022). Center for Religious Studies - Fondazione Bruno Kessler. https://atlasminorityrights.eu/filemanager/pdf/Final_Report.pdf

²⁰ "People of the book" is an Islamic term referring mainly to Jews and Christians.

All of the above highlights the pressing need for legal reforms and mechanisms that ensure the effective protection of FoRB and gender equality, particularly for women, in the WANA region.

Discriminatory Religious and Social Structures

Pre-imposed gender roles in the WANA region create major discrepancies in access to rights and duties. Despite some legal guarantees of FoRB, cultural and religious traditions often exert a more significant influence on individuals and communities, than the legal frameworks themselves. In fact, certain reports claim that “deeply entrenched societal norms, combined with conservative interpretations of Islamic law, continue to relegate women to a subordinate status.”²¹ However, discussions with workshop participants clarified that misinterpretations of all religions in the region, not only Islam, can instigate discrimination and violence against women. The term “conservative” also sparked some debate among participants, who agreed to use “misinterpretation” or “discriminatory” interpretation of religion instead.

For example, despite the fact child marriage is not as prevalent as before, personal status laws in different WANA countries specify legal ages of marriage starting as low as 9 years old.²² Even in countries where the legal age to marry is 18, like Egypt, it is common in some areas for people to fake birth certificates to increase girls’ ages. Girls also continue to be married off by their families, without reporting or registering those marriages, and without registering children born out of these marriages.²³ Since the law does not criminalize wrongdoers and because this behavior is socially accepted in some communities, it still persists today. This is where the role of religious institutions and community leaders becomes important to stop discriminatory practices and protect women and girls’ rights. Promoting FoRB is an opportunity to counter said issues, since it affirms the right of religious/belief leaders to practice their beliefs, but also protects women and girls from gender-based violence simply because they belong to a certain religious/belief community. Another example is found in Tunisia, a country with constitutional recognition of FoRB, but women who opt to display their religious affiliation if it relates to a minority group, like wearing a cross necklace, will often face discrimination or even risk being arrested by police. Although men who convert from Islam to another religion/belief also face backlash, women and the (often female) family members of male converts would still usually be primary targets for harassment, hate speech and violence.

Religious institutions can play an important role, either to increase inequalities or to address discrimination effectively; meaning that religious leaders can either be enablers of inequality, or defenders of human rights, including of FoRB and gender equality. Influential religious leaders in the WANA region, who are often politically backed, tend to view themselves as gatekeepers of morals and values. Therefore, some of them instrumentalize religion to eliminate any kind of legal or cultural evaluation that deviates from their own preferred narrative. In some areas, police are unable to interfere and stop discriminatory behavior as religious leaders and/or religious institutions in multiple countries hold such significant political power. These groups,

²¹ Sanja, Kelly. *Recent Gains and New Opportunities for Women's Rights in the Gulf Arab States* (2009). Freedom House.

<https://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Women's%20Rights%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa,%20Gulf%20Edition.pdf>

²² *White Paper for Reforms in Religious Personal Status Laws and their Application in Lebanon* (2022). Adyan Foundation. <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/personal-status-and-family-law-middle-east-and-north-africa>

²³ *Policy Brief: Curbing Child Marriage in Egypt* (2018). American University of Cairo. <https://documents.aucegypt.edu/Docs/GAPP/Public%20Policy%20Hub%20Webpage/8-%20Curbing%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Egypt%20Policy%20Brief%20-%20En.pdf>

if fueled by patriarchal attitudes, tend to act as vigilantes to exercise control in society and maintain a male domination over women. They can also influence parliament, local governance as well as religious and civil courts.

Since there is already a notion among patriarchally-informed religious leaders that human rights like FoRB and gender equality are Western imposed ideas, it is important to create change from within the local communities, since any external influence will be met with little to no credibility. Locally anchored processes on changing narratives and interpretations of religious texts, with a cultural and local sensitivity, including also a specific focus on masculinity and other stereotypes related to gender roles, is key for effectively challenging ideas of 'imposed Western values' and instead finding local references and ownership in religious institutions for values that are normatively related to human rights, including that of FoRB and gender equality.

Despite identifying the issue of politicized religion, workshop participants agreed that promoting the idea of secularism versus religion is not effective for communities in the region to move towards a broader support of human rights. This is because some vocal secular political movements and activists see religion and religious institutions as inherently backwards and problematic, fueling ideas among religious actors that secular women's rights activists pose a threat on morals, values and traditions. The generations that grew up with this polarized narrative and mentality can be easily influenced and manipulated by radical movements, which might then lead to an increase in entrenched societal violations and discriminatory practices. The fact is also that religion is so deeply rooted in this region, that untangling it from social progress altogether does more harm than good. Developing alternative narratives about religion, FoRB, and gender equality, that are rooted not only in regional minority-groups, but also in majority-group religious traditions, and backed by its religious leaders, is considered the only sustainable solution for achieving FoRB and gender equality.

Women in Religious Leadership and Places of Worship

Since the vast majority of religious interpretations are patriarchal in nature, it is needless to note that there is a great need for women to find and explore alternative interpretations of their religion, in search of narratives that do not perpetuate gender discriminatory practices towards them because of their religious identity and belonging. However, when pressure is exercised to silence voices of women who adopt or share alternative and gender equal interpretations of religions/beliefs, this is considered a violation of FoRB, as FoRB protects the freedom to adopt any interpretation of a thought, conscience, religion, or belief.

Another aspect of this is when patriarchal regulations are put in place to restrict women's access to mainstreamed places of worship, which might prohibit their ability and opportunity to practice an alternative interpretation of their religion, and not allowing her to freely practice her religion as she sees fit. Across the WANA region, these kinds of limitations are usually manifested in spatial constraints to places of worship, where women are limited or confined to smaller areas, often segregated from men, and with restricted time intervals for their presence to worship. Workshop participants noted that this kind of division reinforces conservative gender roles and positions women as being limited to passive participants in religious rituals.

The regulation of women's freedom to practice in these public spaces are frequently justified through religious interpretations and notions of 'shame', 'impurity', and 'modesty', which encourages harmful stereotypes against women and limits their roles to being obedient listeners and not active agents of their own religious/belief practice. An example from Egypt discussed

at the workshop highlights how spaces allocated for women in Muslim places of worship are often smaller, over-crowded, are found on the lower levels of a building, far from the ‘main rooms’, and often lack basic equipment to be able to properly hear prayers of Friday sermons.

Despite small-scale advancements being made in terms of gender equality, a ‘glass ceiling’ most definitely still limits women’s ability to reach positions of power and leadership in political institutions,²⁴ which are often religious too in the WANA region, as well as in non-political religious institutions. Bringing about conversations of change or progress within a religious/belief community, both in majority and minority groups, is necessary for building sustainable community resilience. However, it is practically impossible for these conversations to take place if not every segment of the community group is able to access platforms or processes where decisions are being made.

A key issue to advance FoRB and gender equality in the WANA region is therefore to address the lack of/minimal representation of women included in conversations at leadership level within religious institutions. The underrepresentation of women in clerical roles reinforces the perception that religious authority is inherently male. Many religious traditions cite historical precedence or interpretative readings of sacred texts to justify this gender disparity, supporting the notion that leadership roles within religious institutions are reserved exclusively for men. This has effectively limited opportunities for women to reach leadership positions within religious hierarchies.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that within these extensive limitations, there also exists glimmers of hope and progress. The Greek Orthodox Church in Lebanon currently has two female judges presiding over child custody cases, and the Sharia (Islamic) courts in Palestine includes five female judges.²⁵ This is considered important progress granted the overall low number of female religious leaders and judges in the WANA region. As already noted, the resistance of inclusion of women in positions of power often finds justification for these views in conservative interpretations of religious scriptures. But when these arguments are taken out of their historical and cultural context in sacred scriptures, they appear to uphold male dominance over any other ‘sacred’ principle. Workshop participants asserted that it isn’t only important for women in the region to be able to lead prayers and congregations, if they want to, but also to contribute to theological discussions and inclusive interpretations of religious texts. Excluding half of the population for input when deciding direction or needs at community-level seems counterproductive in ensuring the survival and health of any given community.

One month after this workshop took place, Pope Francis called for a global ‘demasculinization’ of the Catholic Church, emphasizing the need for a better understanding of women’s theology to truly grasp the essence of the Church. But the difficulty for women in accessing places of worship and obtaining leadership positions is not limited to any particular religion; rather, it is a global issue with manifestations across various faith traditions. In some cases, women-led movements and advocacy groups within religious communities have emerged to challenge

²⁴ *Women in the MENA Region: Between Progresses and Obstacles* (2023). ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/women-in-the-mena-region-between-progresses-and-obstacles-119953>

²⁵ *Women’s Rights in Religious Personal Status Laws in Lebanon: Possible Reforms* (2022). Adyan Foundation. <https://adyanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ENGLISH-WRL-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

these inequalities and push for more inclusive practices. These movements seek to reinterpret religious texts, challenge discriminatory traditions, and promote gender equality within their own religious institutions. Men within these groups who share the view of equal participation of women in religion and religious institutions, and advocate for more gender equality and women's right to practice their religion/belief freely, have unfortunately also faced significant backlash from more traditional patriarchal communities interested in safeguarding inequality.

Guardianship over Women

Another challenge pertaining to the intersection between FoRB and gender equality is guardianship and women's loss of agency in a number of different areas when it comes to practicing their religion or belief as they see fit. Including but not limited to the imposition of a particular dress code, travel bans, educational and professional opportunities, paralleled also with the freedom to change one's religion/belief. One of the most famous examples of this from the WANA region is the example of the Hijab. While women who choose to adhere to the Hijab may face limitations in certain professions due to restrictive dress codes, which in turn will hinder their economic prospects; those who do not wear the Hijab may also encounter societal judgment and discrimination, showcasing the complex situations women have to navigate to ensure balance between their community's religious/cultural expectations and their own financial independence and freedom. Discrimination based on a woman's dress choice can also affect their ability to rent/sell a house, access to public places, beaches, shops, restaurants, and places of worship.

Workshop participants from Lebanon shared that in 2023, the municipality in the city of Sidon banned swimsuits in its public beaches after pressure from the league of Muslim Ulama (religious scholars). Meanwhile, in other Lebanese municipalities, the local authorities in Christian-majority areas have banned the burkini. Other workshop participants reported on a similar religiously argued gender discrimination in Iraq as well, after being harassed for wearing a colorful scarf, instead of being dressed in more 'subtle' colors. The patriarchal politicization of Islam, sometimes also brought about by women, reinforces the stigma against concepts like gender equality and FoRB. Similar and increasing negative attitudes support discriminatory behavior, violence, and controversial practices such as child marriage and gender-based violence through different religious interpretations. Workshop participants also assessed that changing people's attitudes on these issues is a long and difficult process, since religious leaders have such a significant influence at the grassroots and governance level.

Workshop participants from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco also shared common and general experiences of discrimination they faced because of their choice of religious dress. Some were not accepted in jobs because they *were* wearing a Hijab, and others because they *weren't*, illustrating how these practices are not limited to only religion. Some multinational companies in Egypt do not allow the hiring of veiled women because they see the Hijab as a representation of social class. Veiled women and their families are considered middle to lower class in some areas and are thus not allowed to enter/access certain spaces, especially international spaces like multinational companies, or even certain restaurants, or to rent/buy properties there because of a social stigma related to this. A multi-layered discrimination is evident in this example, including discrimination based on gender, religion, and socio-economic status.

Although one might expect norms for religious dress codes to stay static, the fact is that preference for religious dress often changes according to the place, time, and situation – with criteria for this mainly imposed *by* men and *for* women. The men tend to be religious/community leaders, and their criteria are usually imposed to evaluate a woman’s dress code by connecting it to her values, morals, beliefs and place in a given community. For instance, while wearing a burkini at the beaches in Alexandria is not permitted, wearing a bikini at other beaches in Egypt will attract harassment. It’s all about “dressing the right way”, which is not only difficult to navigate, pending variety and diversity in local customs, but sometimes is also not enough to avoid gender-based harassment and discrimination. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief’s report to the Human Rights Council in 2021 noted, “such [dress code] prohibitions can violate Muslim women’s rights to freedom of religion or belief and non-discrimination and exacerbate their social marginalization.”²⁶

Dress code challenges usually go hand in hand with restrictions on women’s right of movement and their ability to travel independently. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, many countries in the WANA region still impose restrictions on internal and external travel without the permission and/or companionship of a male guardian.²⁷ They use cultural norms and misinterpretations of religious texts to justify limitations on women’s mobility and reinforce patriarchal structures that hinder their autonomy. The popular concept of a “Wali” (male guardian) further exacerbates this restriction and contributes to a woman’s loss of agency. For example, workshop participants from even the more “liberally recognized” countries in the region, like Jordan and Lebanon, shared that it is difficult for women to travel solo without a male companion or without the permission of a guardian, or even that a mother cannot travel with her children without written consent from their father.

When discussing agency, addressing the loss of women’s control and autonomy over their bodies becomes another important part of the conversation. For example, the topic of abortion is so culturally sensitive that even in cases of threat to mother’s life if continuing a pregnancy, women tend to be shunned when exploring or opting for this decision. As in most other regions around the world, public opinion and control over women’s bodies take precedence over women’s own opinion and control of their bodies, unveiling the challenges women face in having agency to make choices regarding their reproductive health and rights. Restrictive laws, social stigma, and some religious teachings contribute to a broader pattern of denying women autonomy over their bodies. This is an issue which emphasizes the need for nuanced discussions surrounding women’s medical, economic, and social rights in the WANA region, both to achieve better gender equality but also to strengthen FoRB, as many personal preferences involving how to dress, where to move, or which medical choice to pursue is rooted in one’s religious/belief. Through all these multi-layered issues, it is important to remember how our individual religion or belief is a crucial source of our profound and identity-shaping convictions, and it is only if we have the freedom to explore and practice our freedom of religion or belief that we will also have a chance of autonomy in navigating other areas of life.

²⁶ *Rapporteur’s Digest on Freedom of Religion and Belief (2023)*. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Religion/RapporteursDigestFreedomReligionBelief.pdf>

²⁷ *Middle East and North Africa: End Curbs on Women’s Mobility (2023)*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/middle-east-and-north-africa-end-curbs-womens-mobility>

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is still rampant in the WANA region, and on multiple levels – both within the family and beyond.²⁸ Protection systems and structures in place also sometimes ignore or fail to support groups of women from religious/belief minorities, migrant workers, and/or stateless women, creating another form of gender-based violence albeit structural rather than physical. GBV is sometimes justified by cultural norms and religious interpretations, which parallelly impose a burdensome concept of “honor” on women. This kind of pressure limits them in different areas; it restricts their freedom to express their ideas freely, to change their religion, or to practice their beliefs without restrictions.

Unfortunately, religious doctrines and texts are often used to justify gender-based violence and exonerate the perpetrator. In some communities, impunity is part of the legal culture to protect violators, a group vastly overrepresented by men, and especially if he was able to “prove” that his wife, sister, daughter or other female relative had tarnished the family’s “honor”, thus justifying his violent behavior, including murder. Some religious communities also fail to protect survivors of GBV by refusing to acknowledge it as a legitimate reason for divorce. Examples from Christian communities in Egypt were shared at the workshop, with cases illustrating how women tend to be ‘trapped’ in violent and abusive relationships, since many churches do not grant divorce easily, even in cases of domestic GBV.

A well-known regional example of GBV, coupled with violence based on religious identity, is the case of Yezidis in Iraq. The marginalized Yezidi community was in 2014 subjected to what the United Nations has constituted as a Genocide by ISIS/Daesh. This included physical and sexual violence, based on a violent and extremist interpretation of Islam. The challenges they faced were two-fold: the discrimination they were subjected to as a religious minority, and the added layer of abuse for being women. Another example of violence against women in minority groups, is violence against those who identify as non-religious, a group in the WANA region which has increased significantly in recent years. They are targeted repeatedly by hate speech and violence by actors who claim to be “religious”, and not only men but also by women. This rhetoric contributes to the creation of a hostile environment and encourages acts of violence against anyone deemed as “immoral”, an often used term for the non-religious believers. This feeds the climate of fear which limits women’s ability to express themselves, fight for their rights, and contribute to their communities.

Recommendations & Way Forward

Discussions among workshop participants illustrated how the intersectionality between freedom of religion or belief and gender equality in the WANA (MENA) region faces multiple and multi-layered challenges for the protection of both rights, and therefore demands a comprehensive and collaborative approach for effective counter of violations. Since traditional religious structures and public institutions play a pivotal role in shaping women’s rights, civil society actors need to collaborate with them, and vice versa, to promote common public life

²⁸ *Endemic Violence Against Women Persists in the Middle East* (2022). Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/endemic-violence-against-women-persists-middle-east>

values, such as universal human dignity, and develop frameworks and structures that grant all individuals their rights equally.

Empowering women to voice their concerns and changing patriarchal norms through education and awareness is an important and necessary step to ensure gender equality and the promotion of FoRB for women, but it is crucial that such processes are locally owned and initiated from within. Several examples of successful work in this area were shared during the workshop. For instance, Musawah, a global campaign promoting equality and justice in the Muslim family, both socially and legally, works from within by keeping an Islamic perspective on reforms related to gender equality. It involves different stakeholders such as NGOs, scholars, legal experts, policymakers and women from around the world – but perhaps most importantly, they are all Muslim. Having a local and contextualized approach to promote equality and FoRB is significant because when Western or secular organizations initiate similar movements for change, they are often not heard because of their lack of knowledge of local needs, and in the case of Muslim-majority contexts, lack of knowledge of Islamic laws and customs.

Adyan Foundation in Lebanon is another positive example of conscience about ensuring information collected on FoRB and other human rights comes from a variety of sources, including and perhaps most importantly those in the region in question. Local and regional reports are sometimes better at assessing the situation in light of more informed contextual nuances and better insight into advancements being made in this field as well. Wanting to emphasize local actors' own assessments of the human rights situation in their region, Adyan launched its [Bihorriya platform](#) in 2023, for the monitoring of FoRB violations and advancements in six select countries; Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

Building local capacity among grassroots activists is also key in mobilizing social initiatives. There is a lot of work still that needs to be done in this region, in terms of clarifying concepts and addressing misunderstandings. More knowledge and capacities of faith-based activists is therefore essential for the promotion of gender equality and FoRB, also in order to adapt it through a locally owned perspective. Not to mention that both men and women in the WANA region can go through life without ever being educated on gender equality, or the general human rights framework that their home states often have ratified to apply in their national context. Therefore, educational initiatives that can be adapted and contextualized to different communities, both rich and poor, educated and non-educated, conservative and liberal, have to be developed across different entities, like schools, universities and local organizations to ensure that citizens and residents are aware of their rights and duties, both towards themselves and others.

Educating on and increasing awareness of FoRB and gender equality in the WANA region should also be encouraged as components in training of religious actors and leaders. Both thematic rights are often overlooked in religious training, but because politics in this region is often informed by religion, inclusion and mainstreaming of the concepts would be an important step forward in training young religious leaders on personal status laws and gender-based violence to foster a more informed and inclusive perspective – not to mention how to consider religious freedom as religious actors. Coupled with this, training civil society activists on human rights from a religious perspective would also strengthen the collaboration between these two groups, as they will learn how to lobby for these rights in a language that resonates with one another, and within their local context.

Right-sizing FoRB and mainstreaming intersectionality of rights comes hand in hand with the need for more awareness of rights in educational programs. Social, legal and religious structures in the WANA region should seek to contextualize FoRB within the broader framework of women's rights and advocate for the mainstreaming of this intersectionality. This could be further facilitated through highlighting the relationship between these rights in sermons/prayers, academic research, and in the implementation of community initiatives, which are quite common spaces in WANA. Another successful tool in this context for awareness raising and advocacy would be the use of storytelling, employing traditional and social media channels to target different stakeholders for highlighting women's rights issues. Furthermore, the role of scholars and activists was deemed important during workshop discussions to open up debates at the local level, challenging religious and non-religious belief assertions and claims that deprive women from their rights.

Workshop participants also emphasized that people in the WANA region are used to interpretations of religious texts from male scholars. By acknowledging and highlighting women scholars in religions and religious study will foster a more inclusive dialogue and discussion between them and their male counterparts, as well as with other activists and organizations working with women on the ground. Countries in the region should also start adopting a more inclusive language, not only focusing on male pronouns which is the standard in Arabic, and especially in the interpretation of religious texts. A successful case of progress with inclusive language was shared from Lebanon, where a group of actors created change by holding both state and religious leaders accountable through involving them in open discussions with a range of different stakeholders. The initiative for change was in the Protestant church and was about changing the language in legal directives from "religious men" to "religious people". This might seem as a simple change, but congregations in Lebanon saw it as a crucial step towards the recognition of women's right to FoRB.

More inclusive language and a better understanding of what the different rights respectively consider will allow community leaders to raise awareness and speak up against discriminatory behavior more effectively. Attalaki, a Tunisian organization specializing on freedom of religion or belief, seeks to clarify the notion of FoRB because many Tunisians still struggle with misconceptions around it, by for example linking FoRB to the promotion of atheism and/or homosexuality. This is of course a critical misunderstanding of the right, because FoRB does not promote any single religious/belief life stance over another, but rather universal concepts like diversity and human dignity.

It was clear from workshop participants' input that ensuring FoRB and women's rights in the region also requires the collaboration of both religious institutions and civil organizations/activists. One cannot cancel the other because they both hold significant power in local communities. Therefore, several organizations in the WANA region are now mobilizing grassroots religious leaders and male faith-based activists to support gender equality, emphasizing their crucial role in influencing communities to stop discriminatory practices like gender-based violence and child marriage. UN Women's Regional Office for Arab States have realized this and emphasizes it in their project called "Dare to Care", which aims at transforming patriarchal social norms, including increasing the involvement and ownership of men and boys in caregiving and household responsibilities, as well as enabling laws and policies that are more gender inclusive. Despite the project's regional implementation across Arab States, local implementers ensure that narratives promoted and activities implemented align with social and

communal norms. For example, using the term “positive masculinities” will not be accepted by the public in some contexts; therefore, this notion was replaced with “well-being of the family”. Workshop participants confirmed that using locally accepted terminology is necessary for initiatives to successfully involve different stakeholders in the region, including a wider reach with the male half of the population, and especially with religious leaders and faith-based activists. There is a particular attention to this by actors in the WANA region, due to the widespread and negative perception of “Western” ideologies and values often being seen as imposing on Arab/Muslim culture. Terminology that rings well in Western contexts will therefore often not be well-received in communities across WANA.

Multiple participants at the workshop were able to refer to successful initiatives for change at higher political levels, by having a conscious approach of including different stakeholders in their context. This approach is described as both feasible and encouraged in the WANA region. It acknowledges the work that both civil society organizations and religious leaders do and boosts cross-collaboration between faith-based activists and feminist organizations, which in turn can result in better protection and promotion of both FoRB and women’s rights. Regardless if different actors employ the same methodology or not, the end goal should be support of gender equality and religious freedom for all. One success story of this was shared from Tunisia, where a range of different civil society and women’s rights organizations worked together for several years to ensure the cabinet would approve a bill demanding equal inheritance rights for both men and women. When this was eventually passed in 2018, the same coalition of organizations recognized a need to continue raising awareness around this on a social level, to ensure implementation of the new law would be followed up in various local communities.

A challenge identified across the WANA region was precisely lack of social change even in cases where there had been legal change. Therefore, parallel to strengthen legal framework to diminish inequality for women, it is important to invest in developing implementation frameworks and mechanisms to ensure these laws will be respected and considered by not only judges, but also religious institutions and communities at-large. It has in several cases not been enough to amend and pass laws; it is therefore also necessary to invest in raising awareness on a social level and encourage communities to support and embrace legal changes when these occur. Furthermore, holding state and religious leaders accountable is necessary for achieving FoRB and gender equality. When institutions see that their members are constructively criticizing them and asking for change, they are more likely to respond, even if the progress is slow.

At a global level, it is many times addressed how key actors in international legal mechanisms should strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration for success in respective initiatives. In the United Nations, there is for example documented encouragement by both state and non-state actors for different UN committees, treaty bodies and special rapporteurs to advance thematic rights by having an intersectional approach in their respective frameworks and mandates. States’ responses to human rights country reviews will depend on the treaties they signed and the particular segment of the population these impacts, be it for example women, migrant workers, or any other group with numerical or power minority status. Collaboration between special rapporteurs is therefore key to ensure an effective and multi-level approach to eliminate discrimination and violence against women and violations of FoRB across mandates. The same idea of cross-sectoral collaboration applies to the WANA region to ensure initiatives for change are holistic, sustainable, and successful. Within this, there should be a particular focus on the

important role religious actors play for enabling change. Unlike several other regions, politics in WANA are often either informed by religious beliefs or interlinked with religious institutions. It is therefore imperative to ensure religious actors are considered stakeholders in any initiatives for social progress.

In conclusion, the intersection between FoRB and women's rights in the WANA region remains underexplored. A combination of different strategies is identified by workshop participants as necessary to effectively address challenges in this thematic intersection of rights in the region. These include cross-sectoral educational and awareness-raising initiatives to clarify concepts where misunderstandings of these exists but also to spread awareness of them in the first place, both in concrete stakeholder groups like civil society, training for religious actors, but also among the general population. A particular attention to more gender-inclusive language and feminist interpretations of religious texts and legal framework is key in that. Meanwhile, it is also needed to ensure the male half of the population are not alienated in efforts to open space for gender-inclusive language and feminist interpretations, but rather motivated within these efforts to become allies in the work for more equal opportunities and rights. A multi-level partnership for creating change is also identified as a necessary strategy to help overcome a regional challenge of discrepancy in implementation, in instances when legal change is not enough to affect social change. Perhaps most central of all is the need to anchor all initiatives and processes for change with local and regional actors, so support can target those who need it most, in the way that will be most effective and relevant for them. These are some of the key recommendations that form part of a comprehensive strategy that is needed to bridge the gap between FoRB and women's rights in the WANA region, and challenges found in the intersection of these rights. By working collaboratively, empowering women, highlighting their voices, raising awareness of normative concepts, and contextualizing these processes through local ownership, including through engagement with religious institutions, an inclusive and rights-based environment can be better be promoted in West Asia and North African countries to support freedom of religion or belief and women's equality.