

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON WOMEN'S ROLES IN
ADVANCING INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nadine Maenza, Chair
Nury Turkel, Vice Chair
Anurima Bhargava
Frederick A. Davie
Khizr Khan

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR MAENZA: Good morning and thank you for attending this morning's hearing hosted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. In honor of International Women's Day, today's hearing will focus on Women's Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom. I'd like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing. USCIRF is one of the many organizations working around the world to advance religious

freedom abroad. We are joined by government and non-government partners across the globe who share a commitment to protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief, also called FoRB, for all.

Often under-heralded are the women doing this work day in and day out, fighting to protect FoRB in their communities and for all people around the world.

Today we'll recognize some of these women and learn how they have fought and continue to fight to protect FoRB rights and promote religious freedom norms. Through these stories and analyses, we will reveal how the U.S. government and its partners can best support religious freedom efforts led by women and fight religious freedom violations on the basis of gender.

In 2017, USCIRF published a landmark report on the synergies between the right to freedom of religion or belief abroad and the right to women's equality.

This research highlighted the urgent need

to better understand the unique harmful practices that women suffer because of their religion or belief while also acknowledging that these two rights are not clashing and, in fact, are indivisible and interrelated.

Protection of the right under international law to freedom of religion or belief greatly benefits women and women's rights worldwide. From respecting a woman's right to practice her faith free from legal guardianship restrictions in Saudi Arabia to protecting Uyghur, Rohingya, Yazidi and Christian women targeted with torture and sexual violence because of their ethnoreligious identities in China, Burma, Iraq, and Syria respectively, protecting freedom of religion or belief has significant positive impacts on the lives of women around the world.

It is perhaps no surprise then that wherever we see religious freedom violations, we also see women taking up the mantle to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief and advocate

on behalf of those most vulnerable to religious violence and oppression.

From working to repeal blasphemy laws to fostering interfaith tolerance, women are often on the front lines of the fight to protect and advance religious freedom worldwide.

Personally, I've been inspired by so many Yazidi women in Iraq who have risen up to take leadership roles after their community was targeted for genocide by ISIS. It has also been motivating to see the women of Northeast Syria play a leading role in ensuring that the government they were building protected freedom of religion and belief while also standing for gender equality.

Today, we consider their stories and others not only to confer upon them much deserved recognition and gratitude but also to uncover what we can learn from their successes and setbacks and how we can better support their efforts in the future.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair

Turkel to discuss in more detail some of the ways in which women have worked to advance religious freedom worldwide.

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Chair Maenza.

I'd like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing. As Chair Maenza has highlighted, women not only benefit greatly from international religious freedom standards and protections, but they also play a vital role in protecting those rights and advancing those norms.

Women's impact on religious freedom has been varied and wide-reaching. In countries like Pakistan and Russia, women demand a repeal of blasphemy and apostasy laws. In Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, women advocate for the legal rights to interpret Islamic texts and traditions through their own gender inclusive lens.

In Sudan, women played an integral role in ending an authoritarian regime that placed significant restriction on religious practice and

discourse.

In countries as diverse as Kenya, Syria and Mali, women led efforts to combat violent extremism, reduce hate, and foster interfaith tolerance through dialogue and social services, often at great personal risk.

Many of these efforts are global in scope. Around the world, many women work tirelessly for the protection of atheists, humanists and non-believers from the harm and discrimination, including women who are members of these communities.

Women played a vital role in drafting and passing the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which protects indigenous peoples' rights to practice and pass on their religious traditions and safely access sacred spaces and objects.

Women have spearheaded efforts to combat antisemitism, anti-Muslim bias in Europe and elsewhere around the world. And women represent a

cornerstone in the efforts to protect the rights of LGBTI individuals to interpret and practice religion free from state repression.

Today, on International Women's Day, we celebrate these efforts by placing some of these women in the spotlight. While we cannot possibly cover all the ways women have been instrumental in protecting and promoting religious freedom globally, we're excited to at least scratch the surface and discern with our stellar panel of witnesses what we can learn from women's efforts and approaches to promote religious freedom around the world and how the U.S. government can better support these efforts.

I will now turn the floor to Commissioner Bhargava for her remarks.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Commissioner Turkel.

On this International Women's Day, we at USCIRF wanted to celebrate the affirmative and powerful ways in which women have been a force for

religious freedom around the world.

For the multiple years in which I've been a part of the Commission, we've seen time and time again the ways in which women have led efforts.

As Commissioner Maenza, Chair Maenza, and Vice Chair Turkel have already mentioned, fights for freedom of religion and belief around the world, in particular, in Burma, where we have seen time and time again women who have at extraordinary cost to themselves, they certainly bore the brunt of many of the ways in which there has been the violence and the genocide against the Rohingya. But they have also stood for those communities in ways that have inspired not only many across the country but many across the world.

And the same is true of Sudan where the grassroots, everyday ways in which women organized, came together in community, were instrumental to changing the tide in Sudan and getting out of the rule of--the 30-year rule of the government.

So I think in many ways today, we wanted

to spend some time highlighting how women have come together. They have come together across the globe but also within some of the most difficult and challenging conditions around the world and have stood firm for the importance of the ways in which faith is intertwined, as we noted in our 2017 report, with the ability of women to exercise their rights, but also the ways in which faith, in order for it to be practiced in a free way, needs to be supported and have a strong foundation in the rights of women.

So with that, I will turn it back to Chair Maenza for a wonderful hearing today, and I want to thank all of our witnesses for actually bearing witness to what it is that women are doing around the world to really affirmatively support the freedom of religion and belief.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you, Commissioner Bhargava, for those thoughtful remarks.

Now we will begin our first panel with Dr.

Rita Stephan, the Regional Coordinator for Religious and Ethnic Minorities at USAID. She has quite an impressive background, and you can see that and all the other panelists we'll have later this morning on our website at uscirf.gov.

Good morning, Dr. Stephan. It's wonderful to have you. You may begin.

DR. STEPHAN: Thank you.

Chair Maenza, Deputy Chair Turkel, and distinguished commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important topic of women promoting international religious freedom, particularly today, as we celebrate International Women's Day.

I would like to recognize and thank the Commission for your dedicated efforts to support people around the world in their free expression of religious belief and to call attention to those persecuted for their beliefs whatever they may be.

The Commission's report and advocacy work inform U.S. Agency for International Development

and makes our efforts stronger and more effective.

My name is Rita Stephan, and I am the Regional Coordinator for Religious and Ethnic Minorities in the Middle East Bureau at USAID, where I oversee a team dedicated to supporting religious and ethnic minorities and diverse communities in the Middle East and North Africa Region.

I'd like to start with USAID Administrator Samantha Powers' stress on the agency's commitment to international religious freedom in her remarks last year at the International Religious Freedom Summit when she said, "The fight for international religious freedom is not just a reflection of who we are as Americans, but of a strategic national interest to the United States as a key foreign policy objective.

"We know that when countries promote religious freedom and protect religious minorities, democracy is more stable, communities are more likely to develop equitably, and the rights of

women and girls are more likely to be protected and overall quality of life improves." End of quote.

Our work in the Middle East reflects the unique and powerful role of women as agents who advocate for and advance religious freedom for themselves and their communities.

It brings into focus the interconnectivity between the free exercise of one's religion and the inclusion of women as equal citizens. Our work also brings the reverse into focus: when women's rights are restricted, or, worse, when citizens are persecuted for their religious or ethnic affiliation, women often bear a disproportionate impact.

The strategic goal of USAID's Middle East Bureau's Religious and Ethnic Minorities team, or the REM team, is to promote equal representation, equal protection and equal opportunities for marginalized religious, racial and ethnic communities in the Middle East and North Africa.

We do this by holding freedom of religion

or belief as a fundamental human right, by combatting exclusion, violence and atrocity, by promoting equal protection of diverse communities, by expanding equal access to economic and educational opportunities, and, finally, and consistently with USAID's existing policies and directives, we integrate gender equality as a cross-cutting issue for all REM policies and programs.

Throughout all of our efforts, we've been committed to supporting women as advocates and agents of promoting religious freedom. We work throughout the region, specifically in Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, of course Yemen and Iraq, as well.

We focus on inclusion dialogue, advocacy and strengthening laws, policies and regulations. Our programs ensure that women within the diverse communities have the space to assume a leadership role and to express their voice in decisions that impact them and their community.

In short, we focus on what we call the enabling environment for women, for REM communities, to be agents of social change.

We address the enabling environment through a variety of activities. I would like to share a few activities in key countries. In Yemen, we work on advancing tolerance towards members of a historically racially marginalized community, the Muhamasheen, whom we have specific lens supporting women in these communities to advocate for their rights and social inclusion.

Working in conflict and post-conflict settings, we make an impact in the lives like women like Zahra. Zahra is a member of the Muhamasheen who was forced to leave her hometown and move to Aden with her family because of ongoing conflict. As a young girl, Zahra faced immense pressure from her family and community to drop out of school and remain at home and get married to an older man at a very young age.

With our support, she pursued her

education and completed a degree in education while raising eight children. Zahra is currently a leader in the internally displaced community in the South and an activist for education and women's rights.

She has mentored young girls and supported their efforts to seek education. Women in her community now go to her for wisdom and guidance for their problems and have expressed to her how grateful they are for her leadership.

Zahra's determination sets an example for many others, leading to her place as a trusted leader in her community.

You may also be aware of USAID's work in northern Iraq after the defeat of ISIS, and specifically with women who are part of religious and ethnic communities. USAID, working specifically in the Ninewa Plains, along with other areas in Iraq, and we've spent, provided more than 500 million in assistance to run communities in Iraq.

The Ninewa Plain is actually inhabited by Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Yazidis alike. And we are working with the Catholic University at Erbil that provides support for women from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, particularly IDPs, to integrate economically to build sustainable communities in Northern Iraq.

From this region allow me to share the story of Zuhat Udi. She's one of our participants in our program. She used the training to strengthen her knowledge of business management and improve her English skills in the hope of one day establishing her own non-profit to help women and minorities.

She said now I'm ready to work improving the reality of my community to help women and other vulnerable communities find jobs and opportunities and rebuild their lives after persecution.

Our partner, Jiyan Foundation, is also offering mental health and psychosocial support to Yazidi victims of ISIS. Sana is a beneficiary of

Jiyan organization. Born in Sinjar, Sana was 15-years-old when ISIS attacked her city, killing hundreds of the Yazidis. Seeing firsthand how violence comes from ignorance she sought an opportunity to combat prejudice.

She participated in Jiyan Foundation's Youth Network for Peace and Dialogue where she found a safe place to speak freely of her experience, realize her own prejudices, and learn perspectives of young people from different religions and backgrounds.

Through these engagements, Sana joined the network, Youth Network, activities to build Sinjar with small community projects. Reflecting on her experience, she said all religions call for love and peace. We need to emphasize those points in our country to build a peaceful life.

Zahra, Sana, and Zuhat show us that whether providing support for trauma recovery, skill building and education, or economic opportunities, we at USAID support the enabling

environment so that we move women from being framed as victims to agents of change of their own destiny, agents of change and advocates on behalf of their religious and ethnic communities.

I want to give you a vivid image--I want to leave you with this vivid image of women as partners and agents with the story of Ferial. Eight years ago, she was a young woman when masqueraded as an old lady with curved back so that she would not be subject to rape or sexual harassment when ISIS invaded her hometown. She sheltered in her home for 20 days while the city was under siege.

Ferial has participated in USAID-supported Sanad Community Center which provides counseling for women who suffered tremendous horror during ISIS occupation. Now, a woman in her mid-20s, talking about her experience at the Sanad Center, Ferial said, "I was suffering silently and alone, but now I feel more confident with myself as a woman, and I have learned to look at myself as a

strong, not weak, woman. Now I am well and alive, and I want to encourage other women that life is worth living."

In conclusion, I would like to recognize the Commission's 2017 Special Report on Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities, which brought into focus a comprehensive review of women and religious freedom.

The report has served as a terrific lens through which we at USAID view our work with women in REM and diverse communities. The Commission's subsequent 2018 policy focus on women and religious freedom has invited us to explore ways in which we can work together to shore up groundswell of support for women as advocates of religious freedom.

Chair Maenza, Deputy Chair Turkel, commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to share our work at USAID and to explore ways in which we can advance our joint objective.

I look forward to your questions.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for your inspiring testimony and the important work.

I was especially moved by how you talked about empowering women to be advocates, agents for change and advocates for their own community, and I've seen that firsthand and so thankful, the important work that you and your colleagues do over at USAID.

So, first of all, thank you and thanks again for joining us, and we're looking forward to this discussion. I know my colleagues are going to have some questions, and then we'll go on when we're done here with our second panel.

I'm going to, first, hand it off to Commissioner Davie, who I know has a question for you.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you, Chair Maenza and thank you for the presentation and helping us understand the various ways in which USAID so effectively interacts with women in countries where issues of both women's freedom and

religious freedom intersect.

So I really appreciate--I've been a big fan of USAID for a long time, definitely a big fan of your current Administrator. And USCIRF has a colleague there in your office, Reverend Adam Phillips, who heads your Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. So we appreciate your comments today and this partnership that we have with USAID and the important work that it does around the world.

My question has to do with foreign policy of women and freedom of religion or belief. So it's got two parts to it, and they're sort of the flip side of each other.

So the first part of the question is what would it look like to institutionalize a freedom of religion or belief lens into women, peace and security agenda in U.S. foreign policy?

And then on the other side of it, what would it look like to institutionalize a gender-inclusive lens into the religious freedom agenda in

U.S. foreign policy?

So women's lens on freedom of religion or belief, I mean freedom of religious or belief lens on women's issues, and, then, vice versa, a gender-inclusive lens on freedom of religion agenda in U.S. foreign policy.

DR. STEPHAN: Thank you very much for this question.

In fact, we are working on both fronts. In terms of the implementation of the Women Peace and Security Act, for instance, USAID sets a robust series of commitments that we need at the global level, and we are committed to supporting women leadership in preventing conflict and promoting stable lasting peace around the world, and, of course, minority populations, religious and ethnic minority populations, are part of this agenda because minority women are part of promoting the peace, negotiating an end to conflicts, and doing rescue missions in disaster-affected areas.

Specifically, in the Middle East region, I

want to point at where we're working on both fronts in Yemen and in Egypt. We're working with young girls and young women from minority areas, working hand-in-hand with the Egyptian government to empower those young girls to engage in dialogue, understand the multitude of ethnic and religious backgrounds, and then promote economic empowerment and well-being.

Likewise, when we're working around the world to improve lives of minorities, religious minorities, we are looking at women as integral parts of those groups, and we look not only at the intersectional needs of women and girls, but also boys and men, who are part of the diversity, in all of the expression of diversities, whether ethnic, whether religious or others.

In our development and humanitarian work, we target systems that hinder optimal outcomes, including identifying and addressing restrictive gender norms and equalities to help foster sustainability of results.

So this is done at the strategy, design and implementation phase of all our undertakings, both region-wide and globally.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Commissioner Bhargava, I know you had a question.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Sure. Thank you, Commissioner Davie, for those important questions, and Dr. Stephan, thank you for being here.

I had two questions, and, again, I know this is partly questions that might be within the scope of USAID and maybe sort of broader. I just wanted to sort of focus some attention on two things.

One is the ways in which women who have been displaced and who are currently refugees around the world and how are we supporting their ability to continue to practice their faith and religion, even as they are, you know, in conditions and in places that are not their homelands?

And, second, I wanted to ask about what I

think is a very important role of women in documenting what is happening on the ground. They are most often closest to some of the ways in which hate, violence, religious persecution are playing out, and getting a sense of, you know, what is actually taking place.

In the conditions we have around the world right now, which is it's hard often to do through media and through the other channels to have a real good sense of what's accurate, I wanted to understand the ways in which women are being supported as documenters of religious persecution and violence.

And so, again, maybe very broad questions, but I just wanted to get a sense of how you're thinking about those two particular roles and areas of focus.

DR. STEPHAN: Absolutely, and thank you so much for the question.

You know, IDPs, or internally displaced persons, as well as refugees, suffer a lot, lose a

lot, but they don't have to lose everything when they leave their homes and their hometowns.

And we work with them, whether in their refugee camps in Jordan, in Syria, or their IDP camps in Libya, and Iraq, and in Yemen, to provide them back their dignity and ensure that their dignity and their humanity is there. And women play an important role.

In our work in Yemen specifically, we, our number one partners are the women on the ground, who are delivering services, and we know that they are delivering it to those in need.

I want to thank you for your question on documenting because my own heritage as someone from the Middle East, it was, it has been the women who documented those norms, heritage stories, and religious and faith foundations. And, in fact, we are working--I want to highlight two areas that are very significant in our work.

In Iraq, we're working with the Assyrian and Chaldean communities to document their heritage

and document actually, digitalize their ethnic and religious heritage, and this is a current project that we are currently doing in Iraq.

Equally, we are working with the mellahs in Morocco. As you know, these are former Jewish communities that currently are suffering from socioeconomic, low socioeconomic status. So what we're doing is working with women on the ground there, as well, to document this heritage and revival of Jewish heritage in Morocco.

So, absolutely, this is a strong part of our work. Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Wonderful. Thank you.

Commissioner Khan.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: I, Chair Maenza, thank you.

I don't have a question. I just have a brief comment. I wish to pay tribute to your leadership and leadership of women generally, especially today on International Women's Day.

Hopefully, with women's leadership and

equal dignity, we will have a more peaceful world, and with that, I just wanted to pay tribute to you and to our other guests and our audience for joining us today.

I'm honored. Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you, Commissioner Khan.

Dr. Stephan, I would like to ask, you know, obviously our role here at USCIRF is to make recommendations to our own government. So I would welcome any ideas you have for recommendations we can make to strengthen the work that you're doing and the work of including women, of course, in religious freedom and foreign policy.

And also if you have any recommendations for congressional work that Congress can do to better strengthen this.

DR. STEPHAN: Thank you very much for this question.

From my experience, first working at the State Department and now at USAID, I have learned

two lessons, and those are very important lessons in implementing and promoting our U.S. foreign policy, and safety, security and stability in the world.

I want to share with you that where I've seen us excel is when we up-front integrate women and minority issues in the design of our work instead of having it as an after-thought.

We've had a successful track record working with our implementers. I want to highlight an example that I did now at the State Department where we have the congressional program, Tomorrow's Leaders, and we had an opportunity to alter a little bit how it's, the eligibility criteria for this program. And so we made it as the eligibility criteria is children of Lebanese mothers, in that we communicated a strong message to governments in the region that women's citizenship, equal citizenship, is very important. And this has been an incredibly successful program. And so this is from my own experience.

The second thing I want to say is when we partner with locals as equal partners, and I am very impressed with how USAID does that, especially with our NPIs, programs working on the local level, which is a very important initiative also for our Administrator to work on the localized level.

And this is the approach is working with partners, with limited resources, instead of we having to come to offer them a solution, but let's look at the resolve and wanting to find a solution and having great potential.

And, then, finally, complementing these two things is to actually work together and coordinate and ensure that we are all on the same page, and this is why we hold monthly meetings with our colleagues at USCIRF, with our colleagues at the State Department, and our colleagues at USAID to work together and coordinate.

The challenge is vast. We're seeing increase of lack of tolerance in the region. I want to alarm you that at least 30 percent, one in

three people, in the region do not like living next to someone of a different religion. This is in the Middle East. That is, tells us that we have a lot of work to do in advancing tolerance in the society. So we have a lot of work to do in this area.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Stephan. This has been a really useful conversation, and we appreciate your testimony, and we look forward to having you join us again. And thank you for having an open door to USCIRF. We appreciate these monthly meetings and the opportunity to continue our work together.

DR. STEPHAN: Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

We're now going to segue over to our second panel. And first I'll introduce our three panelists, and then we will have each of them go and give their testimony, and then we will have a time again for questions for each of them.

First, we'll have Dr. Nazila Ghanea, who is a Professor of International Human Rights Law and Director of Human Rights Programs at the University of Oxford.

Then we'll have Dr. Azza Karam, who serves as the Secretary-General of Religions for Peace, the largest multi-religious leadership platform with 92 national and six regional Interreligious Councils.

And then we'll have Palwasha Kakar, who is the Interim Director for Religion and Inclusive Societies at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

So, Dr. Ghanea, you may begin.

DR. GHANEA: Thank you very much, Chair Maenza, distinguished commissioners, and dear guests.

It's a real pleasure to be invited, and I hope to address this more at a normative level. We've been asked how we can enhance women's role in advancing freedom of religion or belief. And I would like to say that to release women's role in

advancing freedom of religion or belief, the first thing we need to do is to ensure that they are not silenced, they are not excluded, and their dignity and full humanity is not denied.

Of course, the very purpose of international human rights law has been to ensure rights for all to uphold the full humanity of all, whether minorities, children, LGBTI, refugees, migrant workers, or any other person or persons. But today, on International Women's Day, we've been given the focus of women and girls.

International human rights law has long recognized the full and equal human rights entitlement of women and girls. It has done so in non-discrimination provisions, in every single international human rights instrument that has ever existed.

It has done so in CEDAW, the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and in its 38th general recommendations to date.

And in the operation of the CEDAW Committee and the gender dimension of the work of the other U.N. Human Rights treaty bodies. But also in the work of the Special Procedures of the Special Rapporteurs, not least the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, and also in the Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls.

The enjoyment--women and girls' enjoyment of rights is critical in and of itself, but additionally because research has given evidence to the fact that the education of girls has such profound effects on societal progress, on economic well-being, and plays a critical role in ensuring peace and security.

[Clears throat.] Sorry I'm fasting so I'm not going to have water if possible, but if I need to, I will.

Yet women and girls suffer violations of human rights and are targeted for violence in both war and in peacetime, and they remain invisible or

inadequately visible at every level of society.

Even religion itself has been used as justification for violating the most basic rights of women and girls, and it is indeed routinely used as such, even in the international human rights fora themselves.

But when religion passes as justification for violating the rights of women and girls, we have forgotten the fundamental canon of human rights. We have forgotten about universality, about indivisibility, about the interdependence of all human rights, and indeed of the human family, the interrelatedness and the prohibition on the abuse of rights.

Article 5.1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights says nothing allows states, groups or persons to destroy any other rights and freedoms, and, indeed, it is clear throughout human rights instruments that the fundamental rights and freedoms of others must be maintained.

Reservations against key provisions of CEDAW, for example, Article 2, Article 5(a), Article 15, and other relevant rights, and the so-called honor defense in the light of horrendous crimes against women and girls flies in the face of this prohibition of the abuse of rights.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Everyone includes women and girls, and it's unfortunate that we need to have to keep restating that.

The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to be able to change them is central to human development. It allows us all scope to search for meaning and be guided by that in how we live our lives deliberately and reflectively in community with others.

Freedom of religion or belief allows us to understand, to interpret, and to apply the provisions of our religion or belief in our daily lives, but it does not allow us to impose our standards on others, especially not to do so

coercively.

It's even questionable whether we have the right to expect others to live according to our standards. We may seek to persuade them without coercion. We should have, you know, vigorous and ongoing debates with all who are interested, and we should be free to do so. But we cannot impose our standards until that person or those persons have chosen of their own volition to adopt those same standards or other standards. That also deserves respect.

It certainly does not allow us to commit harmful practices against others, let alone mass violations of human rights.

Five years ago, USCIRF published *Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities*, as the chair opened the session with. This encouraged us to see FORB as an opportunity to create bridges between women's rights and freedom of religion or belief between advocates of women's rights and freedom of religion or belief advocates.

The projects and champions of these areas of human rights law were encouraged to build bridges with one another. There has been a great acceleration in such collaborations and discourses over the last five years, all the way from grassroots NGOs and faith leaders to collaborative projects around development work, around the SDGs in foreign office trainings, in the work of IPP FoRB, the International Platform of Parliamentarians on Freedom of Religion or Belief, at international site events, in the work of international NGOs, in publications, regional bodies and U.N. women.

Many have exerted efforts to find the precious points of unity between them and others and to seek to constructively collaborate.

The CEDAW Committee itself has emboldened its efforts in interrogating states' claims of religious justifications for not respecting the rights of women and girls, and they have done so using the Faith for Rights framework to leverage

the spiritual and moral worth, weight rather, to leverage the spiritual and moral weight of religions and beliefs to strengthen the protection of universal human rights and preventive strategies.

Freedom of religion or belief, as Heiner Bielefeldt said, is aimed at the empowerment of human beings as individuals and in community with others. Let's not distort it. Let's not weaponize it against dignity, equality and human rights.

The more we exert efforts to ensure that it does not get turned against women and girls, the more we will witness the emergence of women and girls as champions of freedom of religion or belief internationally.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much. And thank you again for your contribution in authoring this important report that USCIRF put out in 2017. So thank you so much for that work.

Dr. Karam, you may begin.

DR. KARAM: First of all, I begin with a sincere thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today.

I begin also with what we say in my tradition, which is to wish you and bid you peace, "As-salaam 'alykum," to each and all of you.

And also to thank you as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for the remarkable pioneering leadership and wisdom that you do through your work and your engagement. Thank you again and always for this very, very worthwhile work.

I also want to make sure that I nuance that I am a student of Professor Nazila Ghanea in all but actual being a student. She has been someone who I recognize, thanks to, again, the wisdom and the foresight of this Commission enabled us to begin to appreciate--high time--the link between women and religious freedom issues, and it is a very important strategic connectivity that impacts on all policies and most certainly is

foundational for human rights.

So I wish to appreciate her, her work, and the legacy that with USCIRF she helped build and to note that much of the work that is taking place today that I will also reference some of in my testimony is, indeed, thanks to that pioneering effort by USCIRF and Professor Ghanea. So many, many thanks noted for the record.

In the traditions that we all come from, we must appreciate before we demand.

And I will now proceed to share my testimony and beg you for your indulgence and patience as now that I wear this hat of Religions for Peace and not the United Nations hat, I will take the liberty to be rather forthright and somewhat provocative in what I will share with you shortly.

So I thank you in advance for your patience and willingness to hear me out.

There are incredible moments of history that we are living through at the moment. It is

extremely difficult and unwise to ignore the fact that we stand at the cusp of a very critical tipping point of relationships between nations, between communities, and between individuals.

For a number of years now, we have seen an increasing rise in the normalcy of speech, narratives and actions that discriminate, that make it seem as if prejudice and discrimination of all types based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, any difference, any diversity, that it is almost normal to have prejudice voiced and acted.

This is a very complicated, very difficult, very sad state of affairs. And this means that the work of this Commission and the work on human rights has become more urgent than ever. I wish to second everything that has been said and the testimonies that have been provided to date.

I believe very strongly and as Religions for Peace that the dignity of each of us is intrinsically connected to the dignity of all of us, as we have heard said mentioned earlier.

This is a message shared by the way among all faith traditions, not just religions, but all faiths, and bear with me as I insist on making the distinction between religions, religious institutions, and faiths.

The fundamental vision of any faith is transcendental and inclusive. Faith does not recognize any of our differences and boundaries. And when faiths work together, the enjoining of spirit and action is unparalleled. No army or armies in the world can stand against faiths working together.

So the only way we believe to counter the narrow interest-based politics and narratives of populism and hatred and discrimination and the imagination of discrimination--the only way--is to secure an inclusive discourse, which transcends any one faith, any one set of laws, any one convention.

In a joint article inspired by the work of Professor Nazila Ghanea, published by Marie Juul Petersen and Katherine Marshall, they speak of the

need, they emphasize the need, to quote, "right size freedom of religion and belief in the human rights landscape." End of quote.

Right-size freedom of religion and belief in the human rights landscape. Now that might seem contrary to the mission of USCIRF, but please wait.

They warn that treating freedom of religion and belief, and I quote, "as the first and foremost right," as some do, "is potentially as damaging as overlooking freedom of religion and belief entirely."

Neither approach, they argue, "adequately reflects the complex realities on the ground. Human rights are indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated, and very often so are violations of human rights," meaning that violations of human rights are indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated.

Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief rarely concerns only restrictions of religious practices and manifestations, but also

involves violations of various other rights.

And the freedom of religion and belief perspective on its own is not necessarily the sole, or even the most relevant, perspective through which to view these violations.

From 2018 to 2020, with my U.N. hat on then, I was privileged to be a co-architect with the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, with Professor Ghanea, with the FoRB Ambassadors from Norway and Denmark, and some key faith-based non-governmental organizations as partners, on a process which included a series, which was inspired by Professor Ghanea and her work, and which included a series of expert consultations and research on the linkages between freedom of religion or belief, gender equality and the sustainable development goals.

Why the sustainable development goals? Because 193 nations signed on to hold themselves accountable for those goals. 193 nations. Not one, not ten, not 20, 193 nations. Those are the

members of the United Nations.

Therefore, the sustainable development goals are not something out there. They're very much part and parcel of a global language of commitment, accountability and citizenship of this planet.

The argument we made for this process, which resulted in at least two reports detailing the outcomes of the research and the discussions, remains a key argument we need to be mindful of in today's conversation. Namely, that we cannot silo freedom of religion and belief as a stand-alone human right or foreign policy unit or a series of engagements. I did say I was going to be provocative.

From a human rights perspective, freedom of religion and belief is not about protection of conservative or patriarchal religious traditions and values, as previous testimonials have noted.

In fact, it is not about protection of religion at all. It is about protecting

individuals' and groups' rights to have, adopt, or change a religion or belief; to manifest and practice this religion or belief, alone or in community with others; and to be free from coercion and discrimination on the grounds of their religion and belief.

This includes women and LGBTI people's rights to interpret and practice their religion or belief the way they believe is true, even when this goes against the orthodoxy of the religious institutions and wider religious community.

As such, freedom of religion and belief can be a tool to empower people in their struggles for gender equality and non-discrimination. Freedom of religion and belief should not be used to justify violations of women's rights or other rights related to gender equality.

We know that female genital mutilation, for instance, honor killings, gender-based violence, and other harmful practices, often justified by or through religious narratives, are

actually not protected by the right to freedom of religion or belief.

In fact, laws dealing with some of these issues, which end up placing a higher burden of proof on victims, effectively end up reducing the value of women's testimony and allowing perpetrators of violence to invoke "honor" to escape criminal responsibility.

Such laws are just as egregious violation of freedom of religion and belief as of women's rights.

On the other hand, the fact that there is no inherent contradiction between rights related to freedom of religion and belief and gender equality does not mean that the relationship between the two is always straightforward. This is part of the wisdom that Professor Ghanea and many others, and you yourselves in the opening as commissioners, have attested to.

In fact, the two sets of rights can and do collide in specific instances with the fulfillment

of one right resulting on restrictions on another.

For example, ensuring that religious minorities respect their own understanding of what is permissible, for example, and let us use the most complicated one, access to abortion in specific cases, some religious communities believe that this is permissible for certain conditions. But this may well conflict with state and government regulations which forbid abortion entirely, as we see in some Latin American contexts.

Frankly, there are no clear-cut answers to such questions. But while such practical conflicts between rights related to freedom of religion and belief and gender equality obviously deserve careful attention, in reviewing their relationship between freedom of religion and belief and gender equality, most challenges seem to be about violations of both freedom of religion and belief and gender equality rather than about a clash between the two.

Analyzing the relationship between freedom of religion and belief and gender equality in the context of health, education, access to justice, and in doing so, it is noteworthy that gender-based and religiously-based discrimination and inequalities often exist in tandem.

In fact, research shows a strong correlation between countries with high restrictions on religion and low protection of gender equality.

As examples, I would mention that the drivers of challenges that LGBTI people, women, girls and religious minorities face in terms of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion are often similar and often, albeit not always, they are the same.

Moreover, women confront challenges which frequently intersect and overlap. Religiously-based discrimination can entail some gendered consequences. Again, think of LGBTI communities.

And gender-based discrimination has

consequences for religious minorities, women bearing the brunt of the violence as targets thereof, as a very horrid example, and we note what is unfolding in India, as we speak.

When studying family laws in several Arab countries, with the exception of Tunisia, it is difficult to ignore how family laws restrict women's right to divorce, or custody of their children, as ostensibly inspired by interpretations of religious jurisprudence. These laws constitute a violation not only of women's rights but of freedom of religion and belief, as well.

We therefore need to be diligent, and here I affirm what has been shared, in noting the multiple forms of intersecting discrimination faced by women and girls who are part of religious minorities. They are being discriminated against not only by the state, the broader majority culture, and by their own religious community simultaneously.

The fact is that even persecuted religious

minorities can, just like their majority counterparts, be highly patriarchal with practices and traditions that run counter to gender equality norms and principles.

Being a minority, being of a minority religious faith, even in a context where freedom of religion and belief is understood and practiced, does not guarantee being treated as an equal human being with equal rights.

The universality of human rights should also translate into freedom of religion and belief protections for individuals from all religious communities rather than the current tendency, including among the most well-meaning of sectors, to focus on particular religious minorities over others.

These approaches polarize rather than build alliances towards common cause and end up rarely addressing the core of the problem. Discrimination and persecution rarely targets just one minority or race.

Let's take the Middle East as an example, and notice here I'm not referring to the Arab world but to the whole of the Middle East.

Freedom of religion or belief violations do not only affect Christians but also the Yazidis, Shias, Bahai's, amongst others. In fact, it is wise to remember that discrimination is rarely limited to one type.

Indeed, persecuted religious minorities themselves may be highly discriminatory and oppressive towards those who differ from their mainstream views, whether feminist theologians, people who advocate for democracy, advocates for other human rights, or those who believe in no religion.

Working on and with freedom of religion and belief or, as we prefer to name it in Religions for Peace, honoring the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Belief, offers us an unparalleled opportunity. To do what? To realize all human

rights because the Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Belief is the ultimate foundation for all freedoms and the basis for the struggle for all rights.

To work on Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Belief and the intersections with gender equality and women's rights offers us the opportunity to see as clearly as it is possible to do in a very complicated and murky world, but it offers us an opportunity to see as clearly as it is possible, to stand in witness and to finesse our actions so they do not fall between the messy cracks of human prejudice.

Again, freedom of religion and belief should be understood as Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Belief, and in that capacity allow us to see the intersecting discriminatory attitudes, behaviors and laws, even some that attempt to champion one aspect of gender equality for others.

My last part of this presentation--and I

apologize for the background noise--the last part of my witness or testimony is as follows. It refers to what can the U.S. government do.

We must insistently encourage and support faith leaders, not just religious leaders, but faith leaders. Why? Because we're talking also about indigenous peoples whose voices are remarkably silent on much of what we see and hear.

We must insistently encourage and support faith leaders, not just religious leaders, to showcase how together they value and uphold the dignity of diversity of thought, conscience and belief, rather than seeking to prioritize certain rights over others.

So what can the U.S. government do? Internally, not only religious but multi-religious literacy is what we require. We're hearing quite a bit about religious literacy, which is grand and absolutely necessary but by no means sufficient.

We don't live in a uni-religious world. No community anywhere in the world is of only one

faith. So we therefore need multi-religious literacy within the U.S. government, different departments, sectors, institutes, offices, and affiliates, and across all units working on religion and/or religious engagement. We need an understanding and a nuance about religious and multi-religious work.

Understanding the relationship between and among diverse faith communities is a prerequisite to working on freedom of thought, conscience and belief.

It isn't enough to know about what happens in one religion. It isn't enough to know about what happens in five religions. It is very important to know what happens when all these religions coexist and cohabit, which is our normal.

Religious relations and faith relations are not data and stats only, as we heard from the stories shared by many of the other excellent testimonies. They are about beliefs and ultimately about interpersonal engagements.

We cannot afford, therefore, to do what we see becoming more normal, which is to work with select faith actors or faith-based organizations on select areas. Rather, we have to work with multi-religious entities--and by the way, I used to say this and uphold this long before I joined and led a multi-religious entity.

When I working within the secular sacred spaces of the United Nations system, this was exactly the same advocacy. We have to work multi-religiously with multi-religious entities and not just any, but with those with a proven track record of working with diverse local entities and delivery on a gamut of human rights, interconnectedly, and working with secular civil rights/human rights actors at the same time.

When we put these criteria together, we will find that there are few but still powerful actors to work with.

We also need to ensure that actions in this area should not only target but actively

involve the very people who are subject to gender and religiously-based inequalities, making sure that the perspective, knowledge, and experiences from, for example, women from religious minorities, non-believers, and LGBTI communities are heard and taken into account.

And, again, don't forget our sisters and brothers from the indigenous worlds.

Promoting freedom of religion and belief, Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Belief, needs to be integrated with, not detached from, efforts to promote democracy and peace-building.

Siloed FoRB-only focused efforts can and will meet sustained resistances, including from within the same communities who stand to benefit. This is especially the case when and where gender is involved.

As Professor Leila Ahmed from Harvard notes in her epic research on gender and colonialism of old, and Leila AbuLughod and Mary Ann Slaughter reference in more recent works

looking at Afghanistan and other contexts, when foreign governments try to include women's rights in their foreign policies, they raise the hackles of patriarchs even more.

The foreign governments have little to lose relative to the women in these countries. The latter, the women, then find themselves squished in between all the goodwill. Combining freedom of religion and belief efforts with gender means stepping in two minefields at once.

Working with intergovernmental entities, like the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, et cetera, is necessary. It cannot be done as only one governmental approach. A multilateral approach is what we all need in today's world for all human rights to succeed.

Work in partnership with multilateral entities. It is not easy by any stretch of the imagination. But, I'm sorry, given the standing the United States government has today vis-a-vis other major world powers, given the dynamics of war

as normal and hatred as normal and hate speech as absolutely normal, and given the now very well-known civic disturbances and grievances of racism and discrimination within the United States itself, the long-lasting original sin that this country has not yet overcome, working with intergovernmental entities will reduce the misperceptions of the U.S. or the United States as an imposer and yet an imposter.

The credibility of intergovernmental entities is not unimpaired for sure, but these institutions have a stronger standing on human rights than any one government alone.

I urge you to please take these suggestions in the best spirit in which they are intended because your work matters and it needs to matter more.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much. We really do appreciate your compelling testimony.

And now we're going to move to Ms. Kakar.

You may begin.

MS. KAKAR: Thank you so much, Chairwoman Maenza, Vice Chair Turkel, distinguished commissioners and guests. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify on "Women's Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom" today as we celebrate International Women's Day.

At the same time, I want to acknowledge with a heavy heart the situation of war and conflict and how it disproportionately affects women from Afghanistan to Ukraine, from Myanmar to Syria, from Yemen to Nigeria. These are hotspots of ongoing conflict where women have risen up in important ways to defend each other's rights and freedoms, including their freedom of religion and belief.

I am the Interim Director of the Religion and Inclusive Societies program at the United States Institute of Peace although the views expressed here are my own.

The U.S. Institute of Peace was

established by Congress over 35 years ago as an independent nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad and in accordance with U.S. national interests and values.

My focus at USIP is on a comparative country approach analyzing religion and peacebuilding with a special lens on women's roles in Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria, Colombia, Burma and Ukraine, to name a few.

Over my 20-year career I've met many courageous women, and we are collecting their stories and learning from these women who negotiated the release of prisoners of another faith, negotiated for safe passage, negotiated to de-escalate conflict, and so on. These are the women on the frontlines of advancing religious freedom in their communities.

As colleagues at USCIRF noted, freedom of religion or belief benefits from the protection and advancement of gender equality as international human rights are interlocking and interdependent.

Religious freedom empowers women to take their own decisions and make their own decisions about what their faith means for them and their family.

Furthermore to being the rights holders themselves, women are activists, working proactively to defend this right for themselves and others around the world.

In this vein, I'd like to share some of their inspiring stories with you today, some actually talking about this messy relationship between defending the rights of freedom of religion and belief and women's rights that Dr. Azza Karam so eloquently described.

The first story that came to my mind was the incredible work of a trio of Muslim and Christian faith women leaders who worked together through their networks to negotiate the release of dissenting Muslim and Christian community members who were imprisoned by conservative militant groups in Syria.

Asma and Nour were recognized religious leaders that led religious education institutions and were teachers of the Quran. And Hind was a prominent Christian, from a prominent Christian family and a lay leader in her church. When community members were rounded up and detained by conservative militia fighting the Assad regime, some because they were of their Christian faith and others because of their "liberal" dissenting views, the women instinctively reached out to each other when they got the call from community members asking for their help.

Through their networks they contacted the leaders of the militant group and started a mediation process, which involved prominent community members and finding those that had leverage and influence to put pressure on militant groups from multiple angles.

After two weeks of negotiations, they were able to secure the release of their community members. These women were seeking alliances across

faiths, recognizing that their work together was stronger than any one of their individual efforts alone in defending the rights, the religious rights, of their community members.

With Ukraine weighing heavy on my mind, I'm reminded of Tetiana, who started doing research on the role of religion in Ukraine, but seeing the need for resolving conflict over the years, her work evolved. She saw the need as a believer within the orthodox church for dialogue among the various religious denominations within the orthodox church to de-escalate the rising conflict in Ukraine.

She facilitated dialogue sessions then with priests of the Russian Orthodox churches and the Ukrainian autocephalous orthodox churches, and she facilitated dialogue between chaplains of the orthodox churches across the lines of conflict in the Donbas region.

Her brave efforts were to foster greater understanding and respect for each other's

differences of faith to prevent violence. And I believe that her efforts along with her colleagues in supporting institutions have led to a more united Ukraine that is now resisting the Russian invasion.

With the Taliban takeover also still fresh in our memories from August, I'm worried about the increasing number of imprisoned female protesters. Women and men locally and internationally have worked tirelessly to secure the release of so many of these women who were detained because they chose to voice their differences of belief about their rights that went against the views of the Taliban.

Coalitions of women, such as "Together Stronger" and "Our Voices, Our Future," have worked with local and international networks to secure the release of these women who have been protesting for the rights to believe differently than the Taliban, as these women believe that they should have the right within their religion to education and to work.

In Afghanistan, there are also examples of women working across denominations and religions standing up for each other's freedom of belief and religion.

For example, when a law was introduced in Parliament to limit Shia women's rights, Sunni and Sikh women parliamentarians and activists joined the protests and advocacy efforts to stop the bill from passing.

I wanted to turn to Burma, where there is currently a lot of unrest and turmoil. In 2012, in a quarter of Mandalay, where Muslims and Buddhists used to live in peace, tensions rose after a fire broke out. Lives, homes, and resources were lost in the fire, and it sparked tensions and blaming across religious lines.

Suii Chitt, a woman from the Buddhist order, was worried that the tensions would turn violent so she decided to reach out to the women in the Muslim quarter looking for ways to build trust and reduce the tensions. They worked together to

bring Buddhist monks and Muslim Imams and community leaders together to work towards common goals for their community.

They began with working on dialogues that were focused on how to improve their community rather than talking directly about religious tensions or the history of the conflict.

The first project that came out of the dialogue was planting trees together. Then they continued to tend the trees together, and this built more trust. As they grew closer, the Muslim quarter offered to share their library and then their sportsground with the quarter of the Buddhist community, and then in 2016 for the first time since the fire, the Buddhist invited their Muslim neighbors to their religious celebrations, catering to the food requirements of their guests.

In turn, instead of rising violence, she was able to foster a community of trust.

The hearing today is looking for strategies for how best to empower and enable women

to promote and protect religious freedoms abroad. And the U.S. government has an important role to play in this effort. I believe the U.S. government can better support such efforts by first consulting locally to understand where the conversation is around religious freedom and belief and to understand the contours and the conflict lines that local activists are working on and that they believe are most important.

And within these consultations, of course, it is most important to include women and religious women in these consultations.

Secondly, asking when U.S. pressure is helpful and what issues U.S. pressure can support, recognizing that some religious women in some of these issues are more successful without being internationally recognized, and they may not want it to be recognized.

We've also found that it's more helpful if horizontal and vertical relationships are supported within the country for recognition to grow

organically rather than outside recognition.

Finally, it is important in terms of recognizing the breadth and diversity of women's contributions to freedom of religion and belief that it is another way to empower women as many types of work that protect freedom of religion and belief or protect religious groups, such as hostage negotiation or conflict de-escalation, might sometimes fall out of the, what is outside of what is traditionally thought of as religious freedom and advocacy.

Enabling funding and pressure to support these lines of effort would also be helpful for religious women involved in these areas of protection.

Again, the views expressed here are my own. I thank you for this opportunity to share these stories with you that are so near and dear to my heart on the important work that women are doing on the front line of protecting the very basic rights of freedom and belief.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for that testimony. It's always wonderful hearing about the people on the ground, the real stories of what this looks like, and especially the work you're doing there at the Institute of Peace. Thank you.

And now we're going to turn to a time of questions and discussion, and I'd like to first hand it off to Commissioner Bhargava, whom I know has some questions, and then each of the commissioners are welcome to jump in.

Thanks.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thanks, Chair Maenza.

I actually just wanted to start--I have a number of questions--but I want to start where you just left off, which is the examples of the ways in which women are leading around the world, and I wanted to get your sense of how USCIRF can be supportive in highlighting those examples and lifting them up and having them be ones that sort

of inform our recommendations for how, you know, how the U.S. government, the State Department, the Administration, and Congress, can be investing to try and have interventions be on the ground that are positive in the way in which you're describing.

So I just wanted to start there and then we can move to some of the other many questions from the testimonies.

MS. KAKAR: Well, you're asking me. Okay.

So, yeah, I think, like I said, there's a lot of tension between, on the one hand, wanting to support the local efforts and, on the other hand, through recognizing and supporting those efforts, we don't want to undermine those efforts.

And so the best thing is to ask, to talk to these people and reach out to them and ask them what are the best ways to support? It's really integrating their suggestions into the work that you do. We find across so many of our efforts at the U.S. Institute of Peace having really action-oriented inputs from the local ground is really

important, and it's also important because then they also have ownership in it.

So, on the one hand, they're expressing where it makes sense to have international pressure, where it doesn't make sense, but also they have ownership in the kinds of requests that they're asking. So that's really important.

The other piece to that is at the local level, we have to be very cognizant of very delicate relationships that exist where these women are able to really have the right kind of entry point. And so even reaching out to them, we need to do carefully through institutions, as Dr. Azza Karam mentioned, through local institutions, so that we don't upset that balance as we're seeking their guidance and consulting with them on the ground. I think that's really important.

The other thing to think about, too, is thinking beyond the traditional boxes of how we think about the freedom of religion and belief, thinking about, you know, just basic differences of

belief are really on the front lines on a lot of these conversations at the local level and can be really at the forefront of tensions that create violence and conflict.

And so really understanding those contours in detail is important in doing any kinds of efforts at the local level. So oftentimes, you know, myself, I come in with assumptions, and I really have to check my assumptions and understand locally from people who are working on the ground what the contours of the conflict really are, where exactly is the issue, is the line of conflict when it comes to beliefs, when it comes to freedom of religion, where are the differences, where are the really entry points there, and then work strategically on the ground thinking through with local partners and local activists when does it make sense to have international pressure?

When does it make sense to have the U.S. step in and give their voice to this and acknowledge what's going on, putting pressure in

terms of what's going on, and when does it make sense to actually have more vertical relationships and horizontal relationships within the communities and the country to support the efforts and how then we can support those kinds of local efforts that are on the ground.

CHAIR MAENZA: Yes, go ahead.

DR. GHANEA: Thank you.

I just wanted to add to what, continue from what Palwasha was saying, is that let's not assume. You know, I think there's a rule of thumb, there's a norm in minority rights standards, that is to consult minorities in all matters that concern them.

So if we're talking about thought, conscience, religion and belief, and we're talking about women and girls, I mean we're talking about a lot of people. So let's not make the assumption that this is rocking the boat, this is not appropriate, this is not timely. We, I know that that's not the only imperative of foreign policy,

but certainly at least we can start from the base of consulting the people concerned as to what is timely.

I also wanted to connect something that Palwasha Kakar and Azza Karam were sharing, is that my understanding is that religious literacy is not in order to make a theological call for others. It's not in order to become experts in the intricacies of theological and religious beliefs and differences and practices, but to have a sufficient understanding to know what is happening, to have that ear that knows when something is complicated.

There is, you know, what we're hearing, there's other levels, or there's other understandings, and just like courts should not intervene on theological matters, it's not their call, I don't think it's for governments to make that call as to, you know, who should do what on theological and religion or belief levels, but to understand.

Otherwise, our diplomacy will fail on so many levels and so many risks cannot be read and understood.

CHAIR MAENZA: I just want to say thank you, and you want to speak, too. Thank you so much. It's so encouraging to hear you say and remind us to work with local partners before we take actions or even speak into situations.

I think Washington so often generalizes, and it's so dangerous so, you know, thank you for reiterating that, and go ahead, Dr. Karam.

DR. KARAM: Just to say a sincere thank you to Palwasha and, again, obviously to Dr. Ghanea.

One point about working with minority women, in particular, which is it's, of course, it's obvious, I mean no-brainer. You need to consult with them. But you also need to consult with other partners in that wider civic space to see how the minority discourse and needs are being heard and listened to by others, not because you

want to ignore or to change or to challenge. Quite the contrary. But because you need, as Professor Ghanea said, you need that sensitivity, and you can't develop the sensitivity if you're only listening to one party.

Even if it is the right party, it's always a good idea to listen to competing or contrasting perspectives about the same set of issues, given that you're not living in that space, but you are trying to listen to it from outside. So just to nuance that point.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you. We so appreciate that.

Vice Chair Turkel, would you like to ask a question?

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Yes, thank you so much.

I apologize for not being able to sit through the hearing from the beginning. But I wonder what specific improvements that we should

recommend to the United States government in the broader foreign policy areas?

The Office of Global Women's Affairs has still not be filled with the ambassador-level official. That office used to be a place in the previous two administrations for rights activists from various groups go to address the religious freedom/human rights issues involved in their community.

So I think the United States government needs to focus, refocus on these issues. And if you can share any insights and recommendations that you have, specifically what those improvements, if at all, should look like in the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

CHAIR MAENZA: You can go right ahead.

DR. GHANEA: Thank you.

We heard several of the testimonies about how women have a unique, often have a unique access and a deeper engagement that they are so key to preventing and responding to conflict and settling

misunderstandings, et cetera.

I think alongside that goes the price that is paid when women and girls are imprisoned or their human rights are violated. But there are also, well, I was going to say unintended, but actually intended consequences for the wider community when they are victimized. So that's one thing to be aware of.

And the second is a very obvious one, is that sometimes we work on the rights of freedom of religion or belief and the rights of girls and women until the price of it becomes too high, and then we, we, you know, give up on that when times get tough and trade deals or other deals become the priority.

And, you know, that's just not coherent. So we need to continue that engagement, not only when it's convenient, but also when it's inconvenient.

We have the 1325 Resolution. It's really critical, really important. I somehow hope that on

the subliminal level, we can also have that awareness of the importance of minority voices at peace tables and peace engagements and indeed other turning points.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

Dr. Karam.

DR. KARAM: Thank you very much for that question.

I think that, in addition, exactly to affirm what Professor Ghanea said, I think there is value added in ensuring a certain amount of multi-faith literacy amongst all those working in that kind of space because obviously this is about religion and religious issues and dimensions thereof, so being literate not only about what one religion or two religions say but many is very valuable, but also to understand exactly, as Professor Ghanea said, to really norms that point further.

You can't work on freedom of religion and belief as a siloed area of engagement. It's not

smart. It's actually in the long-run and in the medium-run, it can be very counterproductive and result in actually putting women in between a rock and a hard place, especially the very same women that you're attempting to support and to encourage and to uphold.

So it is wiser if it is part of an overall set of engagements and partnerships and strategies, and that it is not seen as a siloed set of interventions from one government, but that there is indeed an echo from different multilateral entities of exactly the same set of principles and purposes intended. It only strengthens, and it minimizes the pressure of one especially minority women being seen to be working with "that" government, which is a very, very serious concern.

And it's actually more serious and more prevalent as democracy and human rights are threatened species at the moment. Actually, democracy and human rights are very threatened species.

So authoritarianism is the norm. It's on the rise. Given that domain of reality, it is very important to be super protective of the human rights defenders, especially those who work within minorities as minorities.

So how to be protective of them is not to appear to be their sole champion working only on championing their religious rights, but to be the champion of all women working with a multiplicity of like-minded actors and entities working on the whole of the human rights spectrum.

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

Dr. Kakar.

MS. KAKAR: I wanted to add that, you know, the aspect of religious women and faith-inspired women, peacebuilders, they often bring the protection of religious freedom, with the protection of religious freedom, understanding that human rights norms are universal, indivisible and interdependent.

They do this distinguishing FoRB from the right of religion to say and do things or as an instrument of support of religiously-phrased reservations and women's rights to equality. So there is this thing of disentangling some of the justifications of objections to women's rights from FoRB to support religious peacebuilders.

And just to explain a little bit more. Women peacebuilders and other civil society actors often, they often recognize that religious scripture, interpretation of scripture is used to often restrict women's rights. And I know this is done selectively with their passages interpretation.

But they also work to protect the welfare and rights of women, and so this reinterpretation oftentimes that women themselves do of their rights within religion is important, and it's a synergy between women's rights and FoRB, including the right to investigate religion, to have a direct access to teaching and interpretation, that faith-

inspired peacebuilders, they often defend this.

You know, we have lots of examples of this kind of work, such as MenEngage Alliance, the Tearfund, Wise Women, others, that have sought to draw on religious interpretation and ForB to support and transform these harmful interpretations in support of gender equality.

So, U.S. policy could do more to disentangle the religiously-phrased objections to women's rights from ForB and support religious peacebuilders, civil society organizations, and women actors that are seeking to highlight the synergies between rights and--

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for that. Really interesting.

Commissioner Khan.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Well, I just have a brief comment. I am grateful to our guests. Thank you for your voice. Thank you for your words. May there be more power to your pen and to your voice.

You have given us plenty to reflect, and

I, with your leadership, with your work, I hope that we will have a better future. I am an advocate of equal dignity and tolerance.

So thank you for continuing to speak. You're on the right side of history. Thank you. we are grateful. Thank you very much.

CHAIR MAENZA: Well, on that, I want to say thank you to everyone for joining us today. I want to thank you, especially to our distinguished panelists.

This is a really fascinating discussion. Hopefully, we will continue to have this discussion. It's the beginning, not the end, of our conversation on this, and I want to thank the professional team, especially Nina Ullom, who organized this hearing but also our Executive Director, of course, Erin Singshinsuk, and our entire team, because this really takes the entire USCIRF team in order to put on these hearings.

And, again, thank you to all of our panelists, and again you can go to uscirf.gov.

We'll end up having a video of this entire hearing and all their testimonies, and we really do, again, appreciate everyone joining us today. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:01 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]