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## The Role of Religious Women in Advancing Religious Freedom

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### *2022 Cornerstone Series on Translating Diplomatic Engagement to On-the-Ground Improvements in Religious Freedom*

*The 2022 International Religious Freedom Summit, hosted in Washington, D.C., and the 2022 Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, hosted by the United Kingdom, are among the most significant international events focused on advancing religious freedom globally. They bring together governments, religious leaders, survivors of persecution, advocates, and civil society organizations from around the world to grapple with religious freedom challenges and opportunities.*

*The events illustrate the role of robust diplomatic engagement—inclusive of state or government actors, civil society organizations, and individuals—in advancing religious freedom and associated rights in diverse countries and contexts. But how do we ensure engagement in diplomatic efforts like the Summit and Ministerial lead to practical and sustainable improvements in religious freedom for communities in participating countries?*

*This Cornerstone Forum series invites experts to reflect on their experiences in efforts to advance religious freedom globally, engage key stakeholders in the process, and safeguard against mere symbolic support for religious freedom to ensure this right is secure for everyone, everywhere.*

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Women are stalwart, powerful, and dedicated defenders of religious freedom around the world. From high-level interfaith processes and international forums to local negotiations with armed groups, women's efforts play a vital role in securing religious freedom for those in their communities and millions around the world.

There is no dominant method which women use to advance the right to religious freedom. Some women live normal lives, setting aside time to volunteer with religious and interfaith groups in their communities, while others by choice or by circumstance such as conflict, migration, and personal experience, become lifelong advocates for religious freedom.

At the United States Institute of Peace, the Religion and Inclusive Societies team (RIS) has sought to understand how religious women strategically engage extremists, violent actors, and partner with other peacebuilders in their local communities. Women's involvement in religious freedom work is sometimes work that may not be considered "religious freedom work," but through their efforts to

create peace, support the diversity of worship, and create inclusive religious communities, do advance freedom of religion.

A flagship RIS project, Religious Women Negotiating on the Frontlines, has documented many cases across the world of religious women—women of faith, personal piety, and religious social status—who have intervened in their communities and countries to advance and secure religious freedom rights. These stories demonstrate the roles women play, while others show the risk if they were not involved and active religious peacemakers.

The first story I would share is of a trio of women in Syria. These women—Asma, Houda, and Hind—were all well-established religious leaders. Asma and Houda led religious education institutions and were teachers of the Quran. Hind was from a prominent Christian family and a lay leader in her church. When some community members, including Christians and a priest with dissenting views, were rounded up and detained by a conservative militia fighting the Assad regime, the women reached out to each other when they got the call from their 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. They found those that had leverage and influence working to put pressure on the militant group from multiple angles. After two weeks of negotiations, they were able to secure the release of their community members. These women not only defended the lives of those imprisoned, but defended their right to freedom of belief.

I had the opportunity to meet with these women at an interfaith dialogue series where they were adamantly defending the rights of their community members to live without fear of retribution from any side due to their difference of belief or religion. This negotiation advanced freedom of religion without legal or social change, but through efforts to mitigate and prevent violence. These women went on to continue to seek alliances across faiths through their interfaith work with Yazidi, Christian and Muslim women in Syria, as they recognized that their work together is stronger than any one of their individual efforts alone.

On Ukraine, I am reminded of Tetiana Kalenychenko, 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 for dialogue among the various religious denominations within different religious organizations (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim) to de-escalate the rising conflict in Ukraine. She facilitated dialogue sessions with priests of Ukrainian Orthodox churches of Moscow Patriarchate and Ukrainian autocephalous Orthodox churches. She also facilitated dialogue between different Christian chaplains (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) across the line of conflict from the Donbas region.

Her brave efforts fostered greater understanding of and respect for each other's differences of faith to prevent violence and to make it more difficult for religion to become co-opted in service of political agendas. I believe that her efforts, along with her colleagues and supporting institutions, have led to a more united Ukraine that is now resisting the Russian invasion. In her study of the problem, she also found entry points and coordinated across institutions. Her good will was infectious and she brought trust to a process of communal dialogue starting at a local level that

changed important dynamics on the ground and yet had vertical influence on the hierarchical structures of the church.

Like many women's efforts, this was local and mid-level work that sought to work across fraught national and political divides, even while seeking to mitigate the role of religion in violence. The invasion of Ukraine has destroyed any interest on the part of Orthodox Ukrainians to be in dialogue with the Russian church, meaning that her work has taken on even greater importance, as it resulted in greater unity amongst Ukrainians.

Finally, an example from Nigeria. Fatima was among ten women in a steering committee in Jos tasked to mobilize and mentor grassroots women for broader participation. She was pleasantly surprised that the dialogue process had asked the ethnic and religious community negotiators to nominate women to negotiate alongside the men, which had never happened before. Her ethnic community, the Hausa, nominated Fatima. Fatima therefore became part of the dialogue process itself as one of the representatives of her community.

During the dialogue, the men kept the women they nominated in the background and hardly allowed them to speak. Fatima began to use her own efforts to work with the women nominated by other religious and ethnic communities to learn ways to assert themselves. The women responded by going to the community directly rather than working with the men to resolve violence. They were able to achieve what few have achieved before in Jos, which is to dialogue with Christian and Muslim extremists and therefore diffuse tensions when people were threatened by each other's violent extremists. Fatima now facilitates difficult sessions on how religious communities can respond to criticism of their identity. In time, the women Fatima worked with managed to solve some violent conflicts in the rural areas of Riyom, Barkin Ladi, Jos North and Jos South.

Freedom of religion and belief benefits from the protection and advancement of gender equality, as international human rights are interlocking and interdependent. Religious freedom empowers women to make their own decisions about what faith means for them and their families and allows women greater agency over their daily life.

On a global scale, generally women are both more religious than men and more devout (Pew Research, *The Gender Gap in Religion Around the World*, March 22nd, 2016) even as they are less likely to hold positions of institutional authority within religions.

The risk of excluding women from efforts to advance and promote religious freedom is not that women would cease advocating for religious freedom, but rather, that religious freedom advocacy will be weakened at an institutional, international, and local level. As our examples show, women advocate on behalf of religious communities to promote and advance religious freedom across the world with unmitigated temerity.

Their work is no less impactful than the high-profile efforts, mainly in the legal field, many associate with religious freedom advocacy. Excluding women from access to resources, ignoring their voices during strategic religious engagement, and refusing to recognize the breadth and diversity of their contribution to religious freedom substantially weakens and endangers international religious freedom around the world.

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Women require resources, meaningful partnership, and recognition to advance the work they already do. The international community can greatly aid their efforts through including them in summits and Track-1 processes, by supporting them through targeted funding and grants, and by going beyond symbolic rhetoric through creating mutually beneficial partnerships with women-led, organized, and developed groups that powerfully advocate for religious freedom at home and around the world.

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*She earned a master's focusing on gender, politics and religion from Harvard University's Divinity School and a bachelor's in religion and global studies focusing on peace and conflict from Bethel College in North Newton, KS.*

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