

## Statement

### U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

#### IRF Women's Leadership Development Strategy

Submitted by:

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Women's voices are critical to advancing peace and inter-faith harmony among Abrahamic faith communities. The promise of the 2020 Abrahamic Accords requires a fuller dialogue between faith communities. The nuanced experience of women and the leadership role that they provide has not been fully realized.

#### **Vision:**

To educate, equip, and empower women IRF advocates, increasing their participation across all religious freedom summits, ministerials, secretariats, networks, organizations, and collaborative strategies. This includes providing access to resources and funding from government and IRF agencies. Video Summary: <https://empowerwomen.media/marrakesh/>

#### **Context:**

We are living in historic times where women are beginning to outpace men in education and economic empowerment. However, religious-based discrimination and violence are dramatically increasing worldwide, both of which have a disproportionate impact on females. Particularly in regions such as the Middle East, women face significant barriers to engagement due to cultural, theological, and structural constraints. Women's IRF efforts are often overlooked, and they face institutional barriers and limited opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making and strategic planning. Yet women continue to bravely serve as powerful agents of change and play a unique role to inter-faith harmony. We urge USCIRF, government, and civil society leaders to expedite their support for women-led IRF education, training and programming, including funding and resource allocation. There is a notable absence of an allied inter-religious network focused on equipping women leaders to counter religious based conflict. We must aim to gather and equip professional women to advance freedom of religion and belief, highlighting the benefits of multi-faith tools and strategies. Research consistently demonstrates the pivotal role of women's voices in conflict resolution and societal flourishing. Women-led religious freedom advocacy is crucial for conflict resolution and fostering peaceful and prosperous societies worldwide.

## **Gender Gap:**

Despite strides made since the Arab Spring, millions of women in the Middle East still suffer from various forms of persecution and religious based violence. Child marriage, honor killings, slavery, sex trafficking, FGM, polygamy, war, and unequal laws regarding marriage, divorce custody and inheritance. Meanwhile, women's IRF approaches for the Middle East are rarely highlighted at IRF Summits, roundtables or ministerials. Women's IRF groups also face the financial barriers of having to pay large fees to enter the IRF steering committees and events.

- Women rarely appear on IRF platforms outside of performing traditionally accepted administrative roles.
- Women's IRF messages and efforts are rarely highlighted in summits, roundtables, marketing, and media.
- Women are rarely invited as plenary speakers or panel participants.
- Women are not included in decision-making and strategic planning sessions.
- Women are not challenged to share their approaches, solutions, and tools to advance IRF.
- Women are not included in funding decisions and allocation of resources.

## **Solutions:**

We seek to build an allied network of IRF women leaders which provides practical tools and resources to advance peace building, gender equality and religious freedom in the NEA. Since 2021, our efforts in training over 5,000 IRF advocates, particularly in areas affected by conflict, demonstrate a tangible commitment to educating the next generation (through digital media, online certificate courses, film festivals, and education events). Our emphasis on conflict resolution, multi-faith cooperation and women's empowerment within civil society is crucial for creating environments where religious freedom can thrive. By prioritizing the needs of vulnerable populations, such as women and children disproportionately affected by violence, we're addressing critical gaps in humanitarian efforts.

## **Objectives:**

- Respect human dignity and sacredness of life
- Counter religious based violence and attacks on people of faith
- Stand against anti-semitism, racism and hate speech of religious communities
- Amplify women's voices & peace building approaches
- Encourage inclusive diplomacy and dialogue among multi-faith leaders
- Identify multi-faith champions and encourage collaboration
- Educate the public about blind spots toward Jews, Muslims and Christians
- Provide practical tools to educate and empower multi-faith champions (ie. short films, social media, animation, podcasts, online courses and "live" events...)
- Encourage exchanges between multi-faith leaders to learn from each other

- Highlight human rights (Article 18)
- Build a social movement in the US, Europe, Middle East
- Advance the peace process, Abraham Accord & multi-faith societies.

### **Empower Women Media Accomplishments**

The success of our women-led IRF trainings in Los Angeles, Washington, DC, London, Tunis, Marrakesh, and the upcoming event in NYC (March 25, 2024) are a testament to the growing recognition and support for our initiatives. Bringing together leaders from diverse backgrounds and organizations for the Abrahamic Panel showcases the potential for collaboration and collective action in promoting peace-building efforts. By providing practical tools, short films, networking opportunities, and thematic panels, we're enabling attendees to actively contribute to advancing an IRF women's leadership development strategy and peaceful coexistence.

We are honored to share the need to accelerate the development of IRF women advocates for the Middle East. USCIRF's support is essential for the success of elevating women's voices and practical solutions as Empower Women Media aims to equip 10,000 advocates in 2024-2025.

To learn more: [www.empowerwomen.media](http://www.empowerwomen.media) & <https://empowerwomen.media/marrakesh/>

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