



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

“Women’s Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom”

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Chairwoman Maenza, Vice Chair Turkel, distinguished Commissioners, and guests, thank you for the 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, and 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 U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), 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, 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, Ukraine, among other countries. Over my 20-year career, I have met many courageous women. USIP is collecting their stories and learning from women who negotiated for the release of prisoners of another faith, for safe passage, and to de-escalate conflict. 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 make their own decisions about what their faith means for themselves and their families. Furthermore, in addition to being rights holders, women are activists, working proactively to defend this right for themselves and others around the world. I would like to share some of their inspiring stories with you today.

The first story is 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

Houda were recognized religious leaders, that led religious education institutions and were teachers of Quran. Hind was from a prominent Christian family and a lay leader in her church. When some community members were rounded up and detained by the conservative militia fighting the Assad regime, some as Christians including a priest and others because of their dissenting views, 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, finding 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. These women formed an organization, Tastakel and are continuing to seek alliances across faiths through their interfaith work with Yazidi, Christian and Muslim women in Syria, recognizing that their work together is stronger than any one of their individual efforts alone in defending the religious rights of their community members.

On Ukraine, I am reminded of Tania 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 with priests of Russian Orthodox churches and Ukrainian autocephalous Orthodox churches. She also facilitated dialogue between chaplains of the Orthodox churches across the line of conflict from the Donbas region. Her brave efforts fostered greater understanding 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.

With the Taliban takeover still fresh in my memory from August, I am worried about the increasing number of imprisoned female protestors. 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 women who have been protesting for the right to believe differently than the Taliban, as these women believe that they should have the right to education and the right to work.

As the Taliban were taking over the country in July, they were targeting everyone who they considered “infidels” and western spies which included those who worked with the government.

Zuhra Jalal, a provincial council member from Khost was kidnapped along with her family. Many were worried that she would be killed because of her opposition to the Taliban's movement. However, Homa Ahmadi, a member of parliament from Logar province where Zuhra Jalal was kidnapped, stepped in and started a process to negotiate her release. MP Homa Ahmadi worked through her local networks of religious leaders and tribal elders to secure the release of Zuhra Jalal and her family within hours to prevent bloodshed. Once Zuhra Jalal was released, she praised the efforts that she said: "went all the way to the Taliban's political office in Doha"

In Afghanistan, there are also many examples of women across denominations and religions standing up for each other's freedom of religion and belief. For example, when a law was introduced to parliament in 2009 to limit Shia women's rights, Sunni and Sikh women Members of Parliament and activists joined the protests and advocacy efforts to stop the bill from passing.

I want 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, which sparked tensions and the blaming across religious lines—Buddhists blaming the Muslims and Muslims blaming the Buddhists. They had all lost so much. A road was constructed between the two communities, separating them, and the conflict around the country exacerbated their relationship. Winn, a woman from the Buddhist quarter, was worried that the tensions would turn violent, so she decided to reach out to 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 dialogues focused on how to improve their community rather than directly talking about religious tensions or the history of the conflict. The first project that came out of the dialogue was planting trees together. They continued to tend the trees together and build trust between the communities. They grew closer when the Muslim quarter offered to share the library and sportsground in their quarter with the Buddhist community. In 2016, for the first time since the fire, the Buddhists invited their Muslim neighbors to their religious celebrations and catering to the food requirements of their guests.

Finally, an example from Nigeria about Fatima who was among ten women in a steering committee in Jos tasked to mobilize and mentor grassroots women for broader participation in the process. 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.

The hearing today is looking for strategies for how best to empower and enable women to promote and protect religious freedom abroad. 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:

1. Consulting *locally* to understand where the conversation is around religious freedom and belief in order to see the contours and the conflict lines that local activists are working on and believe are most important. It is important to include religious women in these consultations. U.S. engagement with religious actors is often confined to national level religious leaders holding formal titles—who more often than not are men—when in fact much of the vitality, energy, and transformative potential of religion resides at the community level where women often play unique roles.
2. Asking when the U.S. pressure is helpful and what issues U.S. pressure can help to support recognizing that some religious women are more successful without being internationally recognized and may not want to be recognized. We have found it is more helpful if horizontal and vertical relationships are supported within the country for recognition to grow organically.
3. Recognizing the breadth and diversity of women's contribution to freedom of religion and belief 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, would fall outside of what is traditionally thought of as religious freedom advocacy. Enabling funding and pressure to support these lines of effort would be empowering for religious women involved in these areas.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify and share stories with you on the important work that women are doing on the frontline of protecting basic rights of freedom and belief.

I am happy to answer any of your questions.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.