

USCIRF Event: Women in FoRB Making a Difference

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One of the key ways women are bringing change is raising awareness about their experience. Too often women's freedom of religion and belief rights are excluded in media reporting. Religious freedom is mischaracterised as religion and is pitted against other women's rights. Women have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief – which means they also enjoy the right to practice their religion or belief. Religious and other ideological laws and interpretations, not religious freedom, are used as a tool to curb women's human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief.

Anti-apostasy and anti-blasphemy laws in countries with Islam as a state religion violate several women's rights, including religious freedom, freedom to choose a spouse, custody rights, protection against torture and others.

I wanted to flag two women survivors of anti-apostasy laws who are current champions. Their stories outline the challenges with these laws and amplify the importance of working for the repeal of these laws which violate religious freedom and other women's rights fundamentally.

Huda Al Obaid- National Council of Minorities in Yemen

Huda Al Obeid is a Christian convert woman currently in exile as a refugee due to religious persecution in Yemen. Houthi militia arrested her, and held her under enforced disappearance for more than a year and two months, on charges of evangelization and apostasy, and conspiring against the girls of Yemen. While imprisoning her they threatened to marry off her underage daughter to a Houthi fighter. She was eventually able to flee Yemen with her family in 2022. USCIRF raised her case in their thematic report on Yemen. She also spoke recently during a UN Human Rights Council parallel event on Yemen and you can read her full remarks [HERE](#). In a parallel event hosted recently during the UN Human Rights Council she shared the important role women play in society and how their participation is central.

As a woman now currently exiled, she highlights how even in the diaspora authorities persecute religious minority women. She shares how the internationally recognised Yemeni government excluded herself and other women survivors of persecution under the Houthis when their religious identity as Christians or Jews was found out.

Mariam Ibraheem – survivor of the death penalty for apostasy in Sudan

Mariam Ibraheem is a Sudanese woman who was born to a Muslim father and a Christian mother. In Sudan (at the time) and in several other states which allow for Islamic anti-apostasy or anti-blasphemy laws, a child's religion is determined by that of her father. So while Mariam Ibraheem chose to be a Christian, society and the state would always treat her as a Muslim. In practice this meant in school she had to recite the Quran and later when she got married to a Christian man – her family [from her estranged father's side] reported on her and considered her marriage void. A Muslim woman in her ID [that is a woman whose father

is registered as Muslim] is only allowed to marry a Muslim man. [Historically, Tunisia changed this practice as one of the few MENA countries following the revolution and rigorous advocacy from women's rights groups.] Authorities charged her with adultery which included 100 lashes, authorities would have also placed her son in an orphanage, despite her son's father being alive since he is not considered a valid father being Christian. When Mariam challenged the authorities' annulment of marriage citing that she is a Christian not a Muslim woman – the authorities also charged her with apostasy for leaving Islam. In Sudan the punishment for a apostasy from Islam was death until July 2020. Mariam stood up for her conscience – she could have just said I am a Muslim and they would have released her but she was thinking about the rights of her child and future children to make their own decision about faith and marriage and also wanted to stay true to her conscience. The bravery of this one woman to stand by her convictions in the face of death took the authorities by surprise – violence cannot change conscience. There is a force more powerful than threats and that is the truth. Thanks to international pressure and – as shared by Mariam a woman of faith – divine intervention Mariam was released. But the anti-apostasy law remained until the Sudanese people's revolution and the separation of state and religion. Mariam has however, continued to flag concern with the Islamic family laws which was the law first used to charge her with adultery. I recommend that anyone working on women's rights and freedom of religion and belief read Mariam Ibraheem's book, [Shackled](#).

Recommendations:

- Amplify the voices of survivor women and approach survivor women for solutions.
- Emphasise FoRB as women's rights – freedom to adopt and change a religion or belief should apply equally to women
- Categorise laws which restrict women's rights of religious freedom as violations of religious freedom.

Dr. Ewelina Ochab has faithfully and persistently lift violations of freedom of religion or belief of women and girls. One [article](#) that has stayed with me addressed the perpetuation of genocide of Yazidi women by the Iraqi government via their national identity cards laws. Iraq forcibly registers Yazidi women's children born of ISIS rape as Muslim, removing their Yazidi identity, this is the same case for Assyrian women. This shows how systemic laws that deny equality further perpetuate injustices that come later, such as with the genocide by ISIS of Yazidis and Assyrians. The aftermath of a genocide should be an incentive to review and reform laws which perpetuate the intolerant spirit of the genocide. A concrete and longlasting reform Iraq can work towards for the protection of all its citizens is to remove this discriminatory law and see women as rights holders. Iraq should **allow the registration of children's religion or belief according to either of their parent's religion and also allow the change of religion or belief in ID cards, including from the state religion**. This recommendation could be applied also for Pakistan and several countries which deny Muslim women the freedom to change their religion or belief.