

INFORMATION SHEET

Gender and FORB



READ AND REFLECT

In this information sheet you can find examples of ways in which FORB violations overlap with violations of women's rights more broadly. You may wish to include the points most relevant to your context in presentations on the topic.

Women as symbolic carriers of the community's dignity and honour

The symbolic value of women's bodies often leads to religious restrictions being imposed on women to protect their 'purity'. This normally happens at the level of the family or community although in some instances, states regulate this. In conflict situations, the communal symbolic value placed on women's bodies enables women's bodies to be weaponized as an object that can achieve a particular goal, for example to humiliate, threaten or punish the community that they belong to. This leads to women being exposed to sexual violence, as the violation of their bodies is seen as an attack on the whole community. In addition, if women's purity is perceived to be lost (whether by choice or violation), cultures of shame can mean that women bear full responsibility for this loss and are punished or shamed, or that women are encouraged to stay silent about violations they have faced.

Underreporting

In most countries with data, less than 40% of women who experience violence seek help of any sort, indicating barriers to remedy and a lack of confidence in judicial systems.

Women's clothing

Women face social harassment, exclusion or punishment if others deem their dress to be either too 'immodest' or too 'religious' in no less than 56 countries, according to the Pew Research Institute. Rules about what is socially, morally and religiously appropriate vary between countries. In 61 countries there are legal restrictions concerning what women can wear. In Iran and Saudi-Arabia, women are required to be veiled by law and may be punished if they fail to comply. Conversely, Muslim minority women in Europe who choose to wear head coverings are increasingly vulnerable to street harassment. France, Belgium, Austria and Bulgaria have legislation that prevents women from wearing the full-face veil.

Abduction, forced marriage and forced conversion

Abduction, forced marriage and forced conversion of women and girls from religious majority by religious minority men is, in some contexts, a regular occurrence and can be part of attempts to weaken particular groups and control their demographics. The risk of abduction can cause minority communities to restrict women and girls' movement in order to protect them, which in turn negatively impacts girls' access to education and women's access to the job market. Many minority girls and women live in fear of abduction in countries such as Nigeria, Iraq and Pakistan.

Female genital mutilation

In 30 African and Middle Eastern countries, 1 in 3 girls aged between 15 and 19 have experienced some form of female genital mutilation/cutting. In some countries almost 90% of women have been mutilated.

Family and personal status laws

In many countries these laws are based upon a person's perceived religion. Laws often restrict a woman's choices when it comes to marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance and awarding children her nationality – particularly affecting women from religious minorities or those whose religious or belief identity is not covered by the legal framework. Women in countries such as Egypt, Lebanon and India can encounter such legal challenges.

Religious nationalist discourses often focus on women

Women are often portrayed as 'mothers of the nation' and the future of a nation's religious and cultural identity. Policies to protect this 'identity' can negatively affect the scope of women's choices, including their right to freedom of religion or belief. In 2015, Myanmar adopted four 'race and religion' laws to 'protect' the Buddhist majority. One of these laws explicitly regulates the marriage between a Buddhist woman with a non-Buddhist man under the pretext of 'protecting' them from conversion. Another law regulates the ability of women from poorer areas - where religious minorities live - to plan how often they want to have children. In India, Hindu nationalists also use a gendered stereotyping of religious minorities, often stirring up social tensions. Muslim men, for example, are claimed to pursue 'love jihad', or a courting of Hindu women with the intention of converting them to Islam and weakening the 'Indian' nation.

Most religious leaders and theologians have historically been men

Women have often been denied the possibility of participating in religious decision-making bodies and in formally interpreting their religion or belief. Therefore, women's perspectives, lived realities and modes of practice have often been neglected. In some contexts, women are also denied access to certain places of worship, for example to the Hindu Sabarimala temple in India.

Different dangers

Women are much more likely to experience restrictions on their freedom of religion or belief within the context of the family and the faith community. Women are also much more likely to experience sexual violence. Men are more likely to be imprisoned for their beliefs than women. However, in prison and prison camps, female prisoners of faith, including converts, religious dissidents, and women from religious or belief minorities face a greater threat of sexual violence, rape and forced sterilisation. Women including Tibetan nuns, Chinese Uyghur Muslims, and Eritrean Christians risk experiencing such acts of violence.

Sources

FORB and gender – Enemies or allies? FORB Learning platform www.forb-learning.org/courses/forb-and-gender
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