



Speaking of religion 1 h 15 min

FORB, OTHER RIGHTS AND DEVELOPMENT

THINK-PAIR-SHARE
MULTI-FORMAT EXERCISE

About the exercise

THEMES

Freedom of expression; Freedom of religion or belief (FORB); blasphemy, public order and social harmony laws.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Best suited to grassroots-level groups/faith communities, civil society organisations and human rights defenders. For audiences that may be less willing to share personal experiences (e.g., decisionmakers and officials) skip the first think-pair-share section.

PURPOSE

- To familiarise participants with the right to freedom of expression and its intersection with the right to FORB.
- To enable participants to recognise how the rights to freedom of expression and FORB are restricted by laws on blasphemy, public order, and social harmony.
- To help participants explore their attitudes towards rights for others in their own context.

DESCRIPTION

A think-pair-share exercise in which participants reflect on barriers to freely expressing religion or beliefs in their context followed by a discussion of a case study that highlights the impact of laws restricting freedom of expression and FORB. This exercise should be run after trust has been established within the group.

The exercise could helpfully be preceded with the '[Traffic lights](#)' exercise on page 55 using statements related to freedom of expression.



Instructions

RESOURCES AND ADVANCE PREPARATION

- Choose the [case study](#) that you think will work best with your group of participants and print one copy per participant.
- Prepare flipchart sheets/PowerPoint slides with pair discussion questions written up (see below).

Read the case studies on [page 271](#) and download and print your chosen case study handouts at www.forb-learning.org/exercises/speaking-of-religion-handouts.



OPTIONAL EXTRA! BUILD YOUR CONFIDENCE

Prepare yourself for any sensitive discussions by reviewing the '[Tips for facilitators](#)' section on page 282 and '[Responding to tricky questions](#)' on page 286.

HOW TO INTRODUCE THE EXERCISE 10 MIN

- Introduce the exercise by asking the following questions in plenary:
 - What is freedom of expression?
 - How is it protected under human rights law?
 - How does it relate to freedom of religion or belief?

Be prepared to briefly explain freedom of expression and FORB protections, in case participants get stuck. You might like to prepare a PowerPoint slide with the text of ICCPR article 19.

- After a brief discussion, emphasise the following points:
Freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression are both fundamental for a well-functioning society. They complement each other and are equally important for the protection of minorities, non-believers and those whose opinions or beliefs differ from power holders.
Our right to manifest our religion or beliefs includes the right to express it in words and actions. This is also protected by freedom of expression. Freedom of religion or belief includes the right to say what we believe and what we do not believe to be true. By saying what we believe to be true we will, most likely, contradict the basic tenets of faith of another tradition. But without freedom of expression, we would be unable to talk about our beliefs at all!
- Explain that we are going to reflect on this cross-cutting dimension of FORB and freedom of expression more deeply. Ask people to find a partner and move a little apart from neighbouring pairs.

HOW TO RUN THE EXERCISE 58-63 MIN

- **THINK** (4 MIN)
Ask everyone to spend 5 minutes thinking silently about the discussion questions on display:
 - Think of a time when you were able to freely express your religion or beliefs with others. How was that experience for you?
 - Have you ever been denied the right to freely express your beliefs? What happened?
 - Are there groups of people in your context who face barriers to freely expressing their religion or beliefs?
 - Who are they? What barriers do they face?
 - Why do they face those barriers?
- **PAIR** (15 MIN)
Ask people to discuss the questions in pairs for 15 minutes. Emphasise that no one needs to say anything that feels too private – they should share only what they feel comfortable sharing.
- **SHARE** (10 MIN)
Bring everyone back to the plenary. Thank participants for sharing their experiences with each other. Invite people to share their reflections on who faces barriers to freely expressing their religion or beliefs in their context – who faces barriers and why? What are those barriers?



SHORT TALK

- **KNOWLEDGE INPUT** (5-10 MIN)

Explain that you are going to focus the discussion on the issue of blasphemy laws and other similar laws that are often used to restrict expression of religion or beliefs. This issue may already have come up during the plenary discussion.

Hold a short talk emphasising the following points:

- It can seem logical and moral to ban offensive speech and behaviour, in order to protect social harmony. It is, however, impossible to define what is offensive. Some people are offended by the mere existence of ideas other than their own. According to international law, the speech that should be banned is speech that incites hatred and violence.
- Laws on blasphemy, apostasy and ‘protecting social harmony’ are usually much broader than this. These laws tend to make insulting religious feelings or defamation of religion (and especially the majority religion) a criminal offence. These laws usually violate both freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.
- Often these laws are vaguely worded, providing no clear definition of what is and is not blasphemy. Sometimes no concrete evidence is required and there is often a lack of due legal process. These factors put anyone who expresses beliefs or opinions contrary to those of the majority or power holders at risk being accused of blasphemy, as well as making the laws easily abused for personal vendettas. As a result, minorities and dissenters are particularly vulnerable to accusations, but anyone can be affected.
- Criminal cases relating to blasphemy, (or the disruption of social harmony), often occur in the context of broader religious freedom violations, such as attacks on places of worship, desecration of religious sites, hate crimes and the harassment of individuals belonging to minority belief groups. In some contexts, violent extremists take matters into their own hands, inciting violence and administering mob justice against those accused. Instead of prosecuting and punishing those who use violence as response to peaceful speech, laws on social harmony and blasphemy often result punish the victims of that violence – those who are accused of blasphemy or disrupting social harmony.

Explain that we are going to look at a case study and reflect on it in pairs. Ask people to go back into their pairs.

- **THINK** (4 MIN)

Distribute the case study and ask everyone to read it quietly by themselves. Then display the discussion questions and ask everyone to spend a few minutes in silent reflection:

- How did you feel reading about the experiences of the person in the story?
- Do you think blasphemy and other similar laws are necessary or desirable? Why or why not?

- **PAIR** (10 MIN)

Tell participants that they will now share their thoughts in pairs. Emphasise that this is a sensitive topic, and they may have different views. Ask them to decide who will share first and to practice deep listening – to listen carefully and respectfully without interrupting. Say that often, we listen in order to mentally prepare our own response, especially if we have a difference of opinion, but that in this exercise we are going to practice listening simply to understand the other person’s point of view. When the first person has finished talking, thank them for sharing and then switch roles. Tell them that they have 10 minutes to share with one another.

After 4 minutes, remind participants to switch roles. Keep an eye on the dynamics within the pairs and remind people to listen carefully – it is possible to respectfully agree to disagree!

TIP! Be careful with timekeeping here!

• **SHARE** (10 MIN)

Lead the discussion with the following questions:

- How did it feel to express yourself without being interrupted?
- How did it feel to listen to your partner, with the sole purpose of understanding their point of view?
- Has the exercise given you any new thoughts or perspectives on blasphemy and other similar laws? In what ways?

HOW TO CONCLUDE THE EXERCISE 2 MIN

Thank everyone for their willingness to listen to each other and engage with a sensitive topic. Say you hope they found the exercise helped them to deepen their understanding of freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief violations, or perhaps view them in a different light.

Source

Rachel Fleming



'Speaking of religion'