



## International Foundation for Electoral Systems Submission in response to

### Call for Submissions: Report to the United Nations General Assembly on Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) June 1, 2020

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) welcomes the efforts of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in collecting examples of both discrimination against religious minorities as well as good practices that promote and protect the rights of religious minorities. In response to this call, IFES respectfully makes a submission that draws from our global experience promoting the political rights of minorities, which spans over 146 countries over the past three decades, and offers the IFES Muslim Women's Initiative in India as a specific good practice example. A detailed publication of this effort titled **Seher: A New Dawn Breaks The Story of IFES' Muslim Women's Empowerment Program in India** can be found here [www.ifes.org/mwi](http://www.ifes.org/mwi).

With our mission "Together we build democracies that deliver for all", and as a global leader in democracy promotion, IFES advances good governance and democratic rights by providing technical assistance to election officials, empowering the underrepresented to participate in the political process, and applying field-based research to improve the electoral cycle.

In this submission, we seek to address the following core challenge:

*Gender-based discrimination: the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by minority women and girls who are members of minority religions or belief-based communities.*

And offer a model that falls under this good practice category:

*Examples of legislative, policy and institutional frameworks and measures protecting minority religious or belief communities against discrimination and violence.*

### **The Muslim Women's Initiative**

**The IFES Muslim Women's Initiative (MWI)**, implemented by IFES and civil society partners in India<sup>1</sup>, promoted the empowerment of Muslim women as active agents in developing their own communities, arresting the negative cycle of their marginalization and promoting their social, economic and political participation. It did this through a phased approach that:

- addressed the knowledge gap among Muslim women about their rights in the Qur'an and under Indian law;
- supported Muslim women in accessing their rights;
- fostered understanding among all sections of the Muslim community (including men and boys) about women's rights;

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<sup>1</sup> IFES partnered with several local organizations throughout implementation of MWI. These included: Gharib Nawaz Mahila Avam Bal Kalyan Samiti (GNS); Group for Urban and Rural Development (GUARD); SABALA; Spurthi Mahila Mandal; and Visthar.

- encouraged participation in women's self-help groups (SHGs) and income generation projects;
- developed leadership skills among Muslim women; and
- created community-based support for Muslim women's rights.

MWI was supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other funding sources and implemented as a key component of IFES' Women's Legal Rights Initiative. MWI was implemented 2005-2011.

### *Context of Multiple and Intersecting forms of Discrimination faced by Minority Women*

Until recently, amidst decades of economic growth and democratic consolidation in India, little attention is given to Muslim women, the majority of whom are triply marginalized as women, persons living in poverty, and members of a religious minority. Such multiple and overlapping disadvantages – poverty, discrimination based on religion, and gender – reinforced Muslim women's exclusion. Added to this, Muslim women also tend to experience “spatial inequalities” as they are more likely to be concentrated in disadvantaged locations, which in turn contributes to exclusion from political processes and decision making.<sup>2</sup>

Key factors driving the low status of Muslim women in India are a lack of education, economic power and autonomy.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the overall ghettoization of Muslims has often deprived them of government infrastructure such as health centers, schools, roads, garbage disposal and sewage facilities.<sup>4</sup> Compounding this is the fact that Muslim women in India face each of these factors in isolation due to restricted mobility imposed by conservative social structures. Exacerbating all of the disadvantages highlighted above — and in some respects perpetuating them — is the fact that although Muslim women have the same political and legal rights as the rest of the population, they are unable to properly exercise those rights.<sup>5</sup> Many Muslim women do not realize they have rights both under the Indian Constitution and religious law.<sup>6</sup> This lack of knowledge restricts their ability to stand up for their rights, make decisions that affect their lives, earn a livelihood, or access government programs and services intended for them.

For Muslim women, marginalization is driven by different actors. Outside of the Muslim community, there is a common misperception that the gender disparity seen in many Muslim societies is a result of the religion itself, leaving non-Muslim Indians to disparage Islam and isolate Muslims as backward. Added to this, Government actors have not consistently ensured that government services extended to Muslim citizens. This was noted in the 2005 Government of India study on Muslims in India — known as the Sachar Report — which found that affirmative action programs and government alleviation projects rarely reached the Muslim community.

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<sup>2</sup> Kabeer, Naila. Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenge of intersecting inequalities. New York: United Nations Development Programme. (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Hasan, Zoya and Menon, Ritu, Unequal Citizens - A Study of Muslim Women in India (Oxford University Press, 2004), 241

<sup>4</sup> Action Aid, Jahangirabad Media Institute and Indian Social Institute, “Preliminary Report on the Socio-Economic Condition of Muslims in India” (New Delhi, 2006) pg 5

<sup>5</sup> Desai, S. and Gheda, T. (2014); see also Narain, V. Reclaiming the Nation: Muslim Women and the Law in India (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) pg 138

<sup>6</sup> Engineer, A. A., Muslim Women in Indian Society (2007)

Within the Muslim community, religious leaders have too often shared conservative and patriarchal interpretations of Islam that undermine women's rights and equality. Additionally, ongoing discrimination against the Muslim minority contributes to a siege mentality among Muslim leaders that encourages a restriction on women's rights. Finally, within and outside of the Muslim community, men and women subscribe to an interpretation of masculinity and gender norms that is oriented around male control over women. MWI demonstrated that if engaged, these actors - including religious and community leaders as well as men - can be transformed as pivotal partners in, rather than barriers to, promoting gender equality.

As a core message of its program, MWI recognized that advancing women's equality cannot be seen only as something that benefits women, but rather as a priority that enhances the wellbeing of women and men. The concept of equality, i.e. the full participation of women in all fields of endeavor and decision-making, was explored as something that would have positive impacts on the community's economic and social development, as well as be closer in line with the principles laid out in the Qur'an. This framing helped motivate religious leaders to share more equality-focused interpretations of Islam, in keeping with Islamic principles, as well as encourage men to support their wives, sisters, and family members to engage in public life and economic ventures.

The IFES MWI program was implemented at a time when there was significant data emerging around exclusion and the challenges therefrom in India. As noted above, the Government of India's 2005 "Sachar Report" assessed the status of Indian Muslims to be among the lowest of all segments of society. The report showed that Muslim women are particularly marginalized and disadvantaged. Women's organizations were also actively lobbying for the passage of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, having come together and formed a national lobby organization called Women Power Connect. The time was ripe for a program such as MWI to galvanize women in the Muslim community to action.

### *Addressing Multiple Marginalization*

While universal approaches may be necessary to promote equality (e.g. to empower all girls and women and to ensure universal access to rights and services for all), there is a critical need to target particularly disadvantaged or marginalized groups, especially those facing multiple marginalization.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, while responding to the specific and overlapping factors that contribute to Muslim women's unique marginalization, MWI did integrate a universal approach by framing interventions around the common and universally-applicable principles of equality, transparency, accountability, integrity, and the rule of law, and a firm belief in the power of unity, not only within the marginalized community but also with the wider community. MWI used both Qur'anic and secular quotes and resources to establish an atmosphere of strict adherence to democratic values and human rights principles and actively supported Muslim women's participation in the larger women's rights movement. These values and participation were reinforced in the information workshops and MWI events, and through other means such as monthly newsletters and other communication mechanisms.

MWI recognized that women experience different forms of oppression and marginalization depending on their different positions in society. Therefore, responding to marginalization of women based only on their gender fails to account for other forms of oppression a woman may face, and the way these different

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<sup>7</sup> Amanda Lenhardt and Emma Samman In Quest of Inclusive Progress, Exploring Intersecting Inequalities in Human Development, Overseas Development Institute, Development Progress, Research Report 04 (2015).

forms interact with one another to produce a unique pattern of oppression or disadvantage.<sup>8</sup> The multi-pronged approach to MWI addressed these overlapping forms of marginalization through targeted, intersectional approaches that included engaging religious leaders and advocates for women's rights, advancing knowledge of women's rights in the context of both Indian and Islamic law, promoting income generation of women, and fostering women's Self Help groups among other interventions.

MWI programs to advance the equality of women and men cannot be conceived only in terms of bringing women into the various arenas of the current power structures. They must involve women and men striving together to build a new social order. MWI participants worked together to conceptualize fundamentally different concepts of power, work and equality. Power was conceptualized as the capacity to transform, mutualistic and integrative. Work was conceptualized not just as a means to accumulate material wealth that enriches a few but as a means to collective prosperity that promotes individual and community well-being. Equality was explored as not only a recognition of the unremunerated and unacknowledged work of feeding, nurturing and caring that women perform, but also full participation of women in all fields and decision-making. Exploring, developing, and articulating these concepts contributed to the effective implementation of MWI.

While MWI focused on the empowerment of Muslim women, the approach also proactively engaged men and boys to advance effectiveness of the program, deter the risk of male hostility being directed toward women's development/empowerment projects and alleviate the fear that the women might be plotting something against them. At the outset of the program, MWI partners met with religious and community leaders - particularly men - to explain the initiative and seek community leaders buy-in. Additionally, husbands, brothers and sons of activists were encouraged to be actively involved in the planning, execution and evaluation of MWI. Information workshops focusing on the rights of women and girls were organized for men at the same time as the women utilizing the same curriculum.

Finally, it is important to note that MWI's holistic approach ensured that people from other religious communities in MWI's geographic areas of operation were also impacted by the program. Negative stereotypes and preconceived notions about women's rights in Islam were often shattered. Law enforcement officials and the judiciary began to perceive Muslim women as empowered citizens who knew about their rights and expected fair treatment and resolution of issues.

### *Lessons Learned and Recommendations*

Based on lessons learned from MWI, the following recommendations are presented for practitioners and policymakers focused on the inclusion of marginalized groups in the democratic mainstream.

1. Existing knowledge, beliefs, and strengths of marginalized groups should be taken into consideration in developing and implementing programs for democratic inclusion.
2. Individuals should not be viewed as victims or passive recipients of support, but rather as active protagonists and partners in the development of themselves and their communities.
3. Rights education and support to access those rights builds confidence in marginalized groups needed for greater social and political participation.

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<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, K.W. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color (Stanford Law Review, Vol 6, 1991) 1242

4. In any project whose goal is to improve the lives of women, it is essential not to ignore the other half of the community. The involvement of men in women's empowerment programs is critical.
5. Empowerment of marginalized groups requires the involvement of existing leaders and trusted intermediaries from the marginalized community.
6. Youth are a major source of idealism, energy and enthusiasm in communities. Harnessing this potential through school-based programs can be highly effective.
7. Emerging leaders should be introduced to the ideas of community leadership and leading with integrity.
8. Linkages between government and private structures and services, and engagement in mainstream political and governance processes are critical.
9. Intersectionality and interconnectedness of various dimensions of marginalization of minority women (including but not limited to poverty, discrimination, lack of education, disabilities, and poor health) require multi-dimensional interventions.
10. Collective action through community action groups, networking, and building alliances contribute to sustainability of the program.
11. Robust monitoring and evaluation and research should be part of the design of the program to ensure efficacy and inform the wider discourse and practice.
12. Programs aimed at mainstreaming marginalized groups and minorities should be based on principles of equality, transparency, accountability, integrity, and the rule of law, and a firm belief in the power of unity, not only within the marginalized community but also with the wider community of which they are an integral part.
13. Programs to advance the equality of women and men cannot be conceived only in terms of bringing women into the various arenas of the current power structures. They must involve women and men striving together to build a new social order.

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# 30,000

Muslim women, girls,  
men and boys received  
information  
about women's rights

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# 7,000

women received  
counseling services and  
legal aid through  
counseling centers

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# 1,500

students (male & female)  
attended courses on  
women's rights in Muslim  
high schools

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# 500

mid-level religious  
scholars and madrasa  
students have been  
sensitized on women's rights

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# 400

Muslim women's groups  
(5,000 members) formed for  
community-based support  
and advocacy for women's rights