

What is Freedom of Religion or Belief?

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. FoRBLN exists to promote and protect the dignity and safety of all our brothers and sisters, no matter what their religion or beliefs are. Everyone, everywhere, must be free to be who they are based on what they believe without fear – as long as there is no danger or harm to other people and their fundamental rights.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief (FoRB) is a human right that we all equally have as members of the human family. It is an important right that protects our identities, based on the conscience and reason that we are all blessed with. FoRB does not support the doctrines of religious institutions or organisations themselves. Without being able to have and practice our religious or non-religious beliefs, which allow us to fulfil who we are, we will not have the foundation for free, just and peaceful societies we all seek. **FoRB is closely intertwined, interrelated and interdependent with other human rights. To enjoy FoRB fully, several other rights, including the right to ‘equality and non-discrimination’, must also be protected – and the other way around.**

54 African nations (including The Gambia, Ghana, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda) have agreed that this human right is important and signed International and African agreements to say so.

[The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which over 173 countries have ratified, says that:

“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.” (Article 18.1)

The [Banjul Charter](#) or African Charter on Human and People’s Rights says that:

“Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be submitted to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms.” (Article 8)

In practice, this right means that people have the right, among other things, to meet and worship, establish organisations, write, teach, celebrate holidays and wear symbols of their religion or belief.

- ([1981 Declaration on the Elimination of Intolerance & Discrimination based on Religion or Belief](#)).

So that we can all equally share in this human right, the right to **FoRB is not unlimited**. It does not protect harming others, including by coercing them to believe or act on something. FoRB also protects the right to criticise, change your religion or belief or have no religious beliefs.

Countries are obligated to make sure that there is **no discrimination or violence** in law, policy or practice because of religion or belief, no matter who the perpetrator is. There are social, economic, political, or other inequalities between different ethnic and religious communities – e.g. some people may be wealthier or have more representation in politics than others. Sometimes, people experience more discrimination or violence than other people because of their religion or belief as well as other parts of their (‘intersecting’) identity including their gender, age, ethnicity etc. – Not addressing known discrimination and inequalities is a violation of FoRB.

Sometimes, mistrust and anger towards people from other religious or ethnic communities may result in violence. If someone violently targets another person because of their religion or belief, or their own religion or beliefs, this is a violation of the right to FoRB.



No country is perfect. In every country around the world, and even in our own communities, people experience discrimination and even violence because of their religion or beliefs. For example:

- Widespread violence between Christian and Muslim ethno-religious groups in the Western Sahel, including in **Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon and Mali**, has seen many thousands of people die and religious buildings destroyed. While socio-economic reasons play a large role in the conflict, people's religious identities have increasingly been used to encourage more violence. In **Ethiopia**, tension and conflict between Ethiopian Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim communities has also caused several mosques and Muslim-owned businesses and Churches to be attacked since 2011. In the **Central African Republic**, Christian-Muslim violence and some forced conversions since 2013 has driven many out of the country. (SDG 16)
- Education on different religions or beliefs is limited in **Malawi, Ghana and Uganda**. Children are not taught about FoRB. In **Ghana, Malawi and elsewhere**, some children have been forced to stop wearing religious symbols or join a religious class. (SDGs 16 & 4)
- 'Traditional' beliefs in **Tanzania, Malawi, Ghana and elsewhere** has led to some harmful practices including 'female genital mutilation'. Older, poorer women have been accused of 'witchcraft' and violently attacked, sometimes, as widows, for their land. Albinos have also been harmed for use in local medicine because of "traditional beliefs". In 2015, the Tanzanian Government banned witchdoctors to help prevent some of these practices. FoRB does not allow someone to harm another because of their religion or beliefs. (SDGs 16 & 5)
- In **Eritrea**, only 1 in 4 religious communities are legally permitted to operate. The government has arbitrarily arrested members of non-recognised religious communities, forcibly closed religious healthcare centres and revoked Jehovah's Witnesses' citizenship. (SDG 16 & 3)
- Government legislation to regulate religious activities in **Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa and elsewhere** needs scrutiny to ensure that FoRB is not violated. Some governments have the challenge of both protecting FoRB whilst also seeking to curb harmful practices – such as some 'traditional healers' whose beliefs have encouraged citizens to avoid seeking professional medical help for HIV/AIDS. Government counter-terrorism policy must also not disproportionately restrict certain religious or belief communities. (SDGs 16 & 10)
- 9 African countries have apostasy laws, 25 criminalise blasphemy and 29 criminalise hate speech. All of these laws can all be used to restrict the rights to FoRB and expression. (SDG 16)
- Refugees across Africa need to be able to practice their religion or belief without fear of violent attack. In 2019 in **Uganda**, 40 Rwandan refugees were arrested in a Church because of "security concerns". (SDG 16 & 10)

Many other FoRB-related issues exist around the world: Rohingya Muslims in **Myanmar**, Muslims in **India** and Uyghur Muslims in **China** are violently targeted and imprisoned for being Muslim. **Across Europe**, Jewish people and buildings are targeted in antisemitic attacks and Muslims experience Islamophobia. In **Iraq** and **Syria**, Da'esh's violence has been condemned as genocide against Yazidis and systematic targeting of Christians and Muslim communities.

There are many challenges at home, across Africa, and across the world that need your help. We can support you to help bring change. Can we have your support?

