

# Case Study

In July 2022, the UK government hosted the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in London, the United Kingdom. The conference was designed to urge increased global action on FoRB for all. Discussions centered around the existing challenges facing FoRB, as well as what is working well in different countries and lessons learned. It brought together governments, parliamentarians, faith and belief representatives, and civil society from all over the world - including the Minister of Religious Affairs of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



One aspect of the global event included the fringe events - a series of civil society events - with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Birmingham Central Mosque, Tearfund, a Christian charity, and Search for Common Ground. Search for Common Ground (Search) and its JISRA partner, Peace and Freedom Organization (PFO), participated and spoke at these events.

Peshtkir Hizir, Search Iraq's Senior Program Manager, shed light on significant challenges that women minorities in Iraq face and how these can be overcome. Peshtkir highlighted that women minorities continue to be underrepresented in politics, unable to garner substantial and genuine support for their needs. This has widespread ramifications such as inadequate economic support to improve minorities' livelihoods and create employment opportunities, ultimately leaving women in vulnerable and insecure positions. To address this, and increase their political and economic participation, Peshtkir emphasized that the focus should be on providing educational opportunities.

# FoRB Ministerial Conference

*"Providing educational opportunities would allow women to enter the workforce and provide further economic support and security for their families. Moreover, it would enable them to effectively advocate for their needs, empowering women to have their voices heard in politics."*

Shno Qane from PFO equally participated in the panel discussions. She brought to light her firsthand experience as a woman advocate in Iraq. Shno Qane touched on the importance of including women and youth in political processes to generate sustainable and inclusive policies. While Iraq has committed to UNSC Resolution 1325 and there is a vibrant civil society working on women empowerment, Shno stressed that it is important to continue such efforts to build the capacity of women to advocate for themselves and increase women in decision-making spaces on the national level. She was also able to shed light on the challenges minority women face in the Iraqi justice system, including issues under Sharia law, exclusion from decision-making processes, and social and religious discrimination.

The conference was another invaluable and important step towards ensuring that everyone is able to enjoy the right of freedom of religion or belief and inspiring the next generation to champion and defend their rights. It offered individuals, including youth and women, the opportunity to highlight the prevailing challenges and achievements in their countries, bringing them to the attention of leaders from their countries but also the international community. It enabled individuals from different countries and cultures to come together and listen to and learn from each other in an open and safe space.

On a more concrete and higher level, national governments represented at the conference were invited to co-sign written statements. This led to overarching commitments on protecting and raising awareness on FoRB with like-minded partners and strengthening the capacity of FoRB defenders to do so, as well as speaking out against any FoRB violations. More specifically, countries also committed to thematic statements addressing FoRB in regard to conflict or insecure context, youth, digital technologies, education, cultural heritage, gender equality, and civil society.