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EAST AFRICA POLICY BRIEF NO.4

Women and Girls' Inclusivity and Engagement in
Protecting the Right to FoRB

Reimagining the Role of Religion in Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies: East Africa and Beyond

*Recommendations informed by a workshop for Scholars, Policymakers,
Practitioners, and the Communities in the Horn and East Africa*



Ministry of Foreign Affairs





Women and Girls' Inclusivity and Engagement in Protecting the Right to FoRB

INTRODUCTION

This thematic area examines the crucial role of female religious actors in protecting the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief and other interrelated rights to create peaceful societies. This brief highlights the key findings of the workshop regarding the context in which female religious actors operate, their unique contributions, and the challenges they face.

Female religious actors play critical roles in addressing local conflicts and human rights abuses, mediating within families and communities, and contributing to the success of FoRB-led peacebuilding initiatives. Despite these successes, religio-cultural and structural barriers hinder the resolution of complex local issues and conflicts, confining their leadership roles primarily to the private sphere. These structural barriers are further exacerbated by wars and conflicts in the Horn and East African region, where female religious actors must navigate life-threatening circumstances in their quest to build peace within their communities.

Workshop discussions emphasize the importance of community buy-in to enhance women's inclusion in FoRB-led peace-building processes. Recommendations include gender-sensitive capacity strengthening, support for grassroots women's groups, addressing religio-cultural and structural barriers to ensure the meaningful participation of women and girls in decision-making, and recognizing them as leaders in FoRB-led peace-building processes.

THE WORKSHOP

The workshop, 'Reimagining the Role of Religion in Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies' on 5-6 November 2024, aimed to locate religion's contribution to building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, creating space to re-envision what these concepts look like in practice. Religion has frequently been viewed as a problematic aspect of peace and security in domestic and international settings. Tainted by associations with conflict, terrorism, and violent extremism within a broadly secularist international public domain, religion is frequently ignored or deliberately excluded from projects aiming to build peace, democracy, and inclusive and just societies. Yet this narrative, while pervasive, is far from the full story. Religion, in all its multifaceted complexity, makes rich and diverse contributions to the goal of realizing just and inclusive societies. Excluding religious actors and factors from analysis and policy and program development limits the options we have available for pursuing peace and, worse, allows fringe and extremist groups to grow and strengthen if unchecked.

The workshop specifically focused on the Horn and the East African context, a region that has seen a marked spread of religion-linked conflicts and extremist activities over the last two decades. Representatives from government, non-government, international organisations, academics, and civil society networks participated in the workshop.

THE CONTEXT

Despite recognition at international and state levels of the role of female religious actors in bridging communities, building peace, and strengthening development, their efforts are often viewed as marginal at the policy level within overall peacebuilding and development architectures.¹ International and local policies and structures aimed at promoting the meaningful participation of female religious actors have yielded mixed results. While commendable progress has been made in enhancing the role of female religious actors, their involvement and contributions as peace and development actors are often seen as marginal in decision-making spaces, frequently limited to domestic spheres.²

Women make up approximately 52 percent of the population in the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda), justifying their meaningful inclusion in peace processes and national development.³ For example, data collected by the UN-Women in Peace Processes Monitor indicates that ‘women made up

only 9.6 per cent of negotiators, 13.7 per cent of mediators, and 26.6 per cent of signatories to peace and ceasefire agreements.’⁴ This trend of underrepresentation is reflected in the HoA region as well. For instance, in the 2015 Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan, women represented only 15% of the peace negotiations, highlighting their underrepresented voices in the peace agreement.⁵ A similar fate befalls women and girls’ leadership in religious spaces and institutions.⁶ The rapid growth and vibrant religious movements are often driven by the unwavering faith and tireless efforts of women, sometimes constituting up to 90% of congregants in certain churches. However, this numerical strength starkly contrasts with their representation in religious leadership roles.⁷

Gender inequalities are deeply ingrained in societal norms and are often inadvertently perpetuated within religious tenets and institutions. The line between culture and scripture is frequently blurred in most African contexts.



Religious tenets and cultural values are interpreted in ways that reinforce patriarchal perceptions of women as subordinate, where their leadership is rarely acknowledged, and women’s leadership is sometimes viewed as contrary to religious values.⁸ For some, female participation serves mainly as a symbol for influencing public opinion and perceptions.⁹

Notable progress is achieved through advocacy, lobbying, and organisational efforts to enhance gender equality and advance female leadership in religious and community spaces in the Horn and East African region. Among the many local initiatives in the region, the Joint Initiative for Religious Action (JISRA) has worked to empower female religious actors in their struggle for equality, peace, and security. Efforts include supporting female religious actors to respond to gender inequality at the local level. Regionally, JISRA has advocated for female religious leadership in promoting women’s rights, peace, and security, aligning with the lived realities of women in faith communities.¹⁰

¹ Datzberger, S., and Mat, M.L.J.L. (2018). *Just add women and stir? Education, gender and peacebuilding in Uganda*. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 59, 61 -69; Moser, C.O., and Clark, F. (2001). *Victims, perpetrators or actors?: Gender, armed conflict and political violence*. Palgrave Macmillan.

² Diaz, P.C., and Tordjman, S. (2012). *Women’s Participation in peace negotiations: Connections between presence and influence*. New York: UN Women.

³ American Friends Service Committee (2023). *Inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes (negotiation and mediation): women peace and security agenda*. <https://tinyurl.com/ez7y8ba2>

⁴ UN Women (2023). *Facts and Figures: Women, Peace and Security*. <https://tinyurl.com/bdfjwx8v>

⁵ American Friends Service Committee (2023). *Inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes (negotiation and mediation): women peace and security agenda*.

⁶ Obare, A. (2021). *The Role of Women in African Indigenous Churches: A Case Study of the Ruwe Holy Ghost Church in East Africa*. tinyurl.com/muydkjue

⁷ Kagicha, K. and Goropevsek, T. (2025). *African women have been underrepresented in Church leadership but this is changing, says Seble Daniel, WEA Women’s lead* <https://tinyurl.com/39j3aekz>

⁸ Diefellah, M. and Namukose, R. (2024). *Between religion and rights: African Muslim women navigate a tight balance*. <https://tinyurl.com/4abnppur>

⁹ Tetteh, H. S. (2022). *The Contribution of Women in Leadership in Africa and How the UN is Partnering with the AU to Help Prepare the Next Generation of Women Leaders in Africa* <https://tinyurl.com/yw8yhjcz>

¹⁰ Pordon, E. (2024). *The first Women of Faith Conference initiates significant dialogue* <https://tinyurl.com/2xwht2jk>

The following key findings, issues, and recommendations were discussed at the workshop:

1. Women's leadership in FoRB initiatives relies on promoting religious gender-inclusive approaches, interpretations, and scholarship on equity and leadership within religious and belief communities.
2. Addressing religio-cultural and structural barriers to ensure women and girls' meaningful participation is crucial to implementing FoRB-led peace-building processes.
3. As community and religious engagements¹¹ dwindle in conflict and war environments, spaces for women's voices advocating for protecting the right to FoRB also diminishes. Conflict and wars in the Horn and East African region give opportunities for militant groups.¹² Militant groups compound contexts for women as biasedly construed religious narratives are used to violate the rights of women and girls.¹³
4. Female leadership and authority in religious engagement and spaces remain limited,¹⁴ which affects FoRB initiatives in local communities. Therefore, facilitating FoRB platforms enables discursive spaces for women and girls for open and honest discussions. Moreover, these platforms need community buy-in and support from male allies for these initiatives to be sustainable.

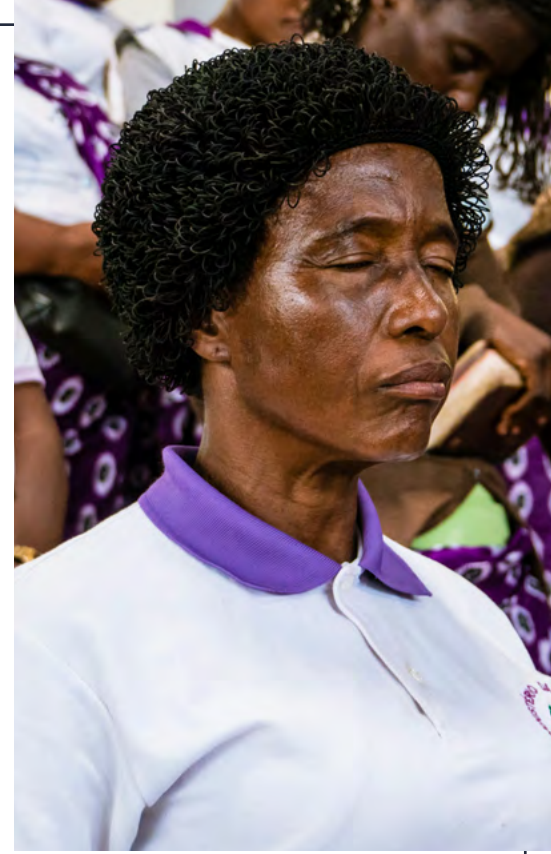
¹¹ *Religious engagement refers to peacebuilding activities that engage religious actors, often in collaboration with other sectors in the broader society. See: SEARCH (2020), Overview: The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement. <https://www.sfcg.org/news/the-common-ground-approach-to-religious-engagement/>*

¹² *UN Women (2025). The impact of Sudan's war on women, two years on. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/the-impact-of-sudan-s-war-on-women-two-years-on>*

¹³ *Badurdeen, F. A. (2020). Women who volunteer: a relative autonomy perspective in Al-Shabaab female recruitment in Kenya. Critical Studies on Terrorism, 13(4), 616–637.*

¹⁴ *Agadjanian, V. (2015). Women's religious authority in a sub-Saharan setting: Dialectics of Empowerment and Dependency. Gender and Society, 29(6):982-1008.*





ISSUES OF CONCERN EMANATING FROM THE WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

Stereotypical religious narratives, coupled with cultural factors, reinforce patriarchy and subordinate women and girls, thereby limiting women's access to leadership positions.

Stereotypical religious narratives, coupled with cultural factors, reinforce patriarchy and subordinate women and girls, thereby limiting women's access to leadership positions. Despite inclusive and women-affirming advancements, women remain excluded from leadership roles in religion and community. Female religious actors often navigate the obvious tensions between the various interpretations of religious teachings and how these teachings are embodied, enacted, and performed within diverse religious communities and their worldviews. In the Horn and the East African region, fewer attempts have been made to examine women's ascension to formal and informal religious leadership in a religiously complex region with dynamic and multifaceted social change.

A woman's religion or spirituality helps mould her beliefs, values,

and ethics, influencing how they govern themselves when they become leaders. Women in leadership roles as religious actors often confront the dilemma of facing local attitudes of not accepting women in leadership roles, being told to conform to historical gender norms, and lacking proper role models. These discriminatory attitudes towards women in communities supported by religiously biased narratives have direct and sometimes indirect implications for women's participation and leadership in communities. A participant described her experiences in Uganda of how traditionally religion had been biasedly construed to position women in the domestic sphere. These long-established discriminatory attitudes prevent women from taking leadership roles or even participating in community development or peace-building activities.



There are traditional gender roles established by Islamic preachers who believe that women are restricted to the private sphere. The equality of men and women is not even emphasized. In the Quran, believers are addressed as 'us' and often use the expression 'believing men and women' to emphasize the equality of men and women regarding their respective duties, rights, virtues, and reality. When it comes to reality, it's completely a different thing. If I posed a question for the Muslims here, for example, on Friday during Jumma prayers [congregation prayers], how many times have you heard the imams [the mosque leaders who lead prayer] speak about the rights of women in these mosques? I'm sure the biggest percentage of you will say 'no.' They hardly hear about these rights being spoken about. But the question is: aren't they provided for in the Quran? The answer is: Yes, they are provided for. Islam looks at a woman and devotes an entire chapter to her - Surah Al Nisa.

I also want to draw your attention to the history of Islam, where female leadership was visible. Those who have heard about Khadija [Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) wife]. She was a great businesswoman. She was Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) employer. Many Muslim scholars who do not want to associate themselves with progressiveness do not even want to hear about the fact that Khadija was the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) employer. She is the one who employed Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which is never spoken about. She performed many roles as a leader during her time, showing the possible female leadership during the time
(Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).

Discussions in the workshop alluded to the efforts of feminist religious actors leading the way in re-examining religious teachings and laws. There is progressiveness in the interpretation of religious doctrines, and efforts to advocate for women to be part of this progressive movement supporting the interpretations of religious doctrines. This enables generating new religious narratives, strengthening gender norms to achieve full equality.

Religion and cultural interpretations of guardianship further limit the potential of women in leadership, participation in religious engagements, and peacebuilding efforts

Practices such as 'guardianship,' defended in the name of religion and culture, do impinge on human rights as they are gender specific, where practices aim to preserve patriarchy at the expense of women's rights. Historically, guardianship has been used by religions and cultures to protect women; however, the practice imposes discriminatory restrictions

on women's freedom of movement. Culturally framed family laws imposed in some countries, like Sudan, require women to either "obey" their husbands, live with them, or seek their permission to leave the marital home, work, or travel.¹⁵ These practices have limited women's participation and community leadership.

Guardianship is being used particularly in Muslim communities to exclude women largely from public spaces, such as the political arena, leadership spaces, and it is constructed through decades of jurists' efforts and contributions.

Guardianship is about women having less competency than men in making decisions. It was based on the assumptions of ownership of economic access to resources. It is interpreted as women do not have sufficient mental capacity to make decisions. And this is what the whole guardianship concept is built around, and based on that, it is reflected in legislation. It is reflected in how women have been approached in family laws and succession laws, inheritance, and access to property. It is a constructed concept that was put together over decades and has affected the status of women. It contradicts reality to a large extent. So, if you are talking about a country like Somalia, women-headed households are definitely above 60%. This is similar in Sudan, Kenya, or any other country in this region. It is this assumed idea that dictates women's exclusion from politics, from decision-making, from accessing resources, and from inheritance. And unfortunately, a majority of Muslim countries interpret that into laws in those sectors. This affects women's choice to marry, have access to equal inheritance, have access to resources and land ownership, or create norms around women in terms of political participation.

(Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).

¹⁵ Al-Nagar, S. and Tønnessen, L. (2018). *Family law reform in Sudan: A never ending story?* Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6581-family-law-reform-in-sudan-a-never-ending-story>

During the discussions, the importance of just and fair family laws were recommended as a way forward for women and girls in leadership positions and their meaningful engagement in families and communities. Though the scope of family law in creating equal societies is evident, it was highlighted that the investments in family law and the use of family law are very limited in the region.

Just and fair family laws are needed that take into consideration the interests of the family, society, and the interests of the children— where both girls and boys are given priority. This is something that we are largely lacking in the region. Fair family laws can shift power relations. This is why dogmatic institutions within society have no interest in allowing the debate about having family laws that are just and fair to enable us to have egalitarian societies and equal societies. I would like to mention an interesting Muslim family law in the region that I have a lot of respect for— the Djiboutian family law, which is largely inspired by the Moroccan experience of family law. I think this change has created shifts of power for women and girls. Guardianship and women's participation are well-linked. I see it's very much connected as well. When we speak about women's participation and their capacity to engage in decision-making without having a solid framework of family law, it will always be missing the critical aspects of inclusivity and participation. This is why I would emphasize the importance of family law (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).



Religiously biased patriarchal narratives are often compounded by existing conflicts and wars in the Horn and the East African region, limiting women's participation in community activities

Today, the region grapples with brutal wars, militancy, and terrorism, such as in Sudan, DRC Congo, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Most often, the brunt of the war is faced by women and girls as they succumb to high prevalence rates of sexual violence and femicide. The region also struggles with religious militancy and fundamentalism, where religion is used as a tool to access power, access resources, and undermine the status, particularly of women and girls. Implications of these demeaning behaviours imply a fight against democracy and the presence and participation of women and girls in public spaces, and also against women taking control of their bodies. A participant described extremist narratives as a way of asserting the identity and power of individuals using very selective interpretations of religion. Global issues like Islamophobia and stereotypical discourses around Muslims further provide opportunities for extremists to strengthen their religiously pegged narratives.

And in this particular situation, I'm going to specifically speak about Muslim communities. Being a Muslim myself, and also working and interacting with a large number of women across the greater horn of Africa, I invest my time in understanding the roots of women's subordination. Subordination is injected into the culture of Muslim communities, which, in my view, is not about religion, but it's all about politics and more about power. And more about the exclusion of women. On multiple occasions, especially where we have minority Muslim communities in Eastern Africa, and parts of the Horn, inclusion entails identity assertion. Certain patterns of identity resemble and match dominant interpretations. Global issues, like Islamophobia and the stereotypical discourse around Muslims, have implications as well. It creates this narrative and positions of women giving fundamentalists, anti-democrats, and anti-women human rights advocates an opportunity to flourish. (Workshop Participant, November 2024).

Women's participation in peacebuilding efforts is further limited by the state's failure to protect women's rights in countries like Somalia, Sudan, and DRC Congo. Lacking state protection amalgamates the already existing situation of sexual violence, mainly among minority groups. In Sudan, since the beginning of the current war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), countless women mainly from the peripheries have been subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence. Vague legislation coupled with ethno-religious narratives has worsened the conditions for women.

A participant explained the lack of appropriate legal frameworks as the main reason for increased sexual and gender-based violence in pre-conflict and conflict contexts in Sudan:

In Sudan, particularly the enabling of sexual violence against women and girls was a natural outcome of decades of legal framework that did not recognize crimes of sexual violence against women as the legislation around rape and sexual violence has been very vague. It also somehow intersected with Zina or adultery. So, for decades, women were not able to report on rape and sexual violence, because they were too afraid to be victimized and this has enabled sexual violence to exist.

Perpetrators were not held accountable as well. Sexual violence has also been committed over the past 30 years in Sudan against minority groups, against women who are non-Muslims, against women who are persecuted for their own ethnic identity, and this has enabled a wide scale of sexual violence to happen. So this is a very hefty price that women are paying for the consistent failure of the Sudanese regime to consider and take care of women's rights.
(Workshop Participant, Nov 2024)

Employing intersectionality in FoRB initiatives in the Horn and East African region highlights the unique challenges encountered by women and girls due to the convergence of multiple systems of oppression associated with religion and belief

Women and girls from indigenous communities, such as the African traditional religions, for example, have typically experienced the intersection of gender-based prejudices along with ethnic and religious oppression under colonial and postcolonial periods. Intersectionality, therefore, helps to illuminate how their experiences of oppression are shaped not only by their gender but also by other identities such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status, contributing to their oppression and limited access to resources and opportunities. Further, power overlaps over ethnicities, class, gender, and race, where each social group enjoys more privilege than the other, making the need for FoRB initiatives to be more inclusive of the less-heard voices in the peripheries.

We need to reflect extensively on the narratives and experiences of women in societies across Eastern Africa, the Horn of Africa, and across the continent in a very open manner. This includes the experiences of women in minority communities, majority communities, and those who face discrimination due to their identities, such as their skin colour, sexual orientations, class, and how religious identities are consistently used as tools to alienate and suppress women in various positions and public spaces
(Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).



Acknowledge that women and girls from minority religious communities have very few discursive spaces to voice out their concerns and display their leadership roles

The need to create more opportunities for women and girls is crucial in religious engagements and in promoting the right to FoRB.

We have very few discursive spaces to voice our concerns. For instance, in Uganda, where I live, I cannot go to the mosque and discuss what I'm sharing today [women in leadership using scriptures]. I might have more knowledge than men, but in some settings, I cannot speak much. I'm not granted that space to go to the mosque, for example, because the prevailing belief, whether true or false, is that I should be somewhere in the kitchen preparing cocktail juice for my husband. Therefore, these ongoing misinterpretations of modesty and authority are obstacles to women's participation in community engagement and peace-building projects (Workshop Participant, November 2024).



It is also important to know that when women religious actors are marginalized from male-led public forums, they establish and lead alternative discursive spaces to articulate and negotiate their specific needs and interests, including women religious actors-led networks and organizations. These alternative communicative spaces allow women religious actors to establish unity in forming and articulating oppositional discourses and narratives. The spaces also enable agenda-setting, dialoguing, and mobilizing other women religious actors for specific causes, such as the Women in Faith Networks, strengthening FoRB initiatives in the East African region.

Gender mainstreaming in FoRB initiatives lays the foundation for gender equity and gender-responsive practices. Inclusive religious engagements are crucial in ensuring gender equality. While social and cultural norms, including those rooted in religion, can prevent the unbiased application of and access to basic human rights, it is increasingly evident that the voices of religious actors can drive constructive dialogues to enhance the status of women and girls in their respective communities.

The significance of gender mainstreaming in FoRB initiatives in promoting diversity, equality, and inclusivity was expressed by a participant:

We have operationalized gender in our organizations. We examine how gender-sensitive our activities are, ensuring that we consider the needs of both men and women, as well as boys and girls, during project implementation. We carefully understand the outputs we measure, which are also gender-sensitive. For example, in one of our activities – dialogues in the Town Hall - we analyzed the structure and content of that town hall discussion. For example, did these Town Hall dialogues address the needs, including the religious complexities and gaps that women face? Did it respond to the issues young men encounter? Did it cater to the needs and interests of the young women in that community? We also developed a checklist for gender-sensitive reporting and research. During our evaluations, we look at specific issues that strengthen the positions of women as religious actors and the positions of minority groups and communities. So, what does this mean? We focus on diversity, equality, and inclusion (Workshop Participant, November 2024).



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Promote gender-inclusive approaches, interpretation, and scholarship within religious and belief communities.** Combat stereotypes and promote positive female leadership representation in religious engagements and FoRB initiatives. Address stereotypes and misinterpretations of religious texts using locally accepted, credible leadership within religious communities.
2. **Institutionalize positive leadership advocating for women’s leadership in religious spaces.** Promote positive masculinity in religious spaces where male allies support women’s leadership in faith spaces. This entails engaging religious leaders who advocate for women’s leadership roles.

‘We don’t want to see religious leaders who should be protecting us to incriminate us, but rather protect us.’

– Dr. Ashah Mwanga Mastullah

3. **Capacitate women to be engaged and take leadership in religious engagements, to enable the protection of the right to FoRB.** Highlight the contributions of women in leadership, factored to represent the contextual history, religion, and cultural specifics of local communities. Further, looking at various elements of how religion has been used as a tool to victimize, subjugate, and exclude women, it becomes a necessity to empower women in religious and FoRB literacy.

Dr. Hala Al Karib concluded her presentation by reflecting on the importance of empowering women in religious leadership. She reiterated a quote from Dr. Ziba Mir Hosseini: ‘Religion is way too important for women not to be engaged in. It’s critical for our existence, well-being, and humanity, and we shouldn’t let go of that as we go through the struggle.’

4. **Ensure diversity of women and girls in communities when planning, designing, and implementing FoRB initiatives.** Consider the concept of intersectionality within the context of Horn and East Africa, where projects and initiatives that are sensitive to religious and cultural factors address the needs and safety of women. These initiatives should empower women by enhancing their ability to move freely (for instance, addressing guardianship issues) and by providing essential skills such as leadership, confidence building, and public speaking. These skills extend beyond freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) and religious literacy.
5. **Incorporate Gender-Inclusive Frameworks into FoRB initiatives.** Develop policies and practices to mainstream gender concerns where marginal voices are prioritized, ensuring their needs, insights, and experiences shape every phase of FoRB-supported peace and development initiatives, from planning to implementation.
6. **Strengthen legislation to support the protection of women’s rights, which is a precursor to religious peacebuilding and development.** In countries where authorities have failed to protect the rights of women and girls, efforts need to concentrate on developing legislation or reinforcing the implementation of existing legislation. Promoting the right to FoRB is complex in environments where women’s rights are not supported.
7. **Fund Local Women-Led FoRB Initiatives, opening up discursive spaces for dialogue and action.** Prioritize funding for grassroots, women-led FoRB initiatives that enhance community resilience, conflict resolution, and social justice. Support capacity-building programs that enable marginalized female voices to lead these initiatives sustainably.

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The policy briefs aim to generate reliable, relevant, timely, and actionable analysis and recommendations on the Right to FoRB in selected countries of the Horn and the East African region. This publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or mechanical methods, with due attribution.

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