

# Diving Deep *into* Cambodia's FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

An Exploration of  
Community Hopes and Collective Hurdles



JUNE 2024

# Diving Deep into Cambodia's Freedom of Religion and Belief: An Exploration of Community Hopes and Collective Hurdles

A Participatory Action Research collaboration  
In partnership with Peace Bridges Organization, Continuing Learning Organization, and Danmission Cambodia

## WPM Research Team

Kry Suyheang, Ly Rattanak, Yoeum Yet, Sim Somnyrak, Phuong Sothiny

### Community Researchers:

Chea Samnang  
Chhim Sokha  
Hav Sreymak  
Hean Sotha Panhchapor  
Kheng Kho  
Khin Mey  
Kong Sokha  
Ouch Ratha  
Plang Samreth  
Sem Sanghorn  
Soufiyan Toyep  
Yem Yeat

### Authors:

Rev. S. P. Bhagwat (Raju) & Ly Rattanak

### Copy Editing:

Laura Rickard & Joseph Mayer

### Cover by:

Malia Imayama & Moly nin Khleang

### Layout Design by:

Malia Imayama

**This edition first published in Cambodia 2024**

**By Women Peace Makers**

[www.wpmcambodia.org](http://www.wpmcambodia.org)



© Women Peace Makers 2024  
Phnom Penh

The views expressed in this report come directly from research participants who shared their perspectives, the action researchers who reflected on the findings, and the authors who translated it into written form. They do not necessarily reflect the position of Women Peace Makers (WPM) or any organisation or partner involved in the implementation or publication of this work.

All respondents provided informed consent for their participation, they were fully aware of the project's scope and the plans for publication of the information they shared.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of certain individuals.

We would like to thank the respondents from each community and all those who participated in this research. We would also like to thank the CSO partners, namely Danmission Cambodia, Peace Bridges Organization, and Continuing Learning Organization, for their guidance, collaboration, and input to the research development and its ongoing implementation. We are particularly indebted to the community members, volunteers, and all the supporters of this initiative for their contributions to ensuring this study went smoothly. Special thanks go to all of the community researchers for co-leading, co-designing, and co-implementing this study with great enthusiasm and dedication which profoundly enriched the research and the overall initiative.

This work and publication were carried out and made possible through the generous support of the Center for Church-Based Development.



# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.1. The Religious Context of Cambodia</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.2. Legal Aspects Concerning FoRB</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>II. Literature Review of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cambodia</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>III. Research Methodology</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.1. Research Problem and Objectives</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.2. Research Design</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.3. Limitations of the Research</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.4. Ethical Considerations in Field Research</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>IV. Data Analysis</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4.1. Demographics of the Sample Database</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4.2. Demographic Sampling Bias</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>V. Research Findings</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5.1. Provision and Implementation of Legal Aspects of         FoRB Laws at the Local Contexts</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5.2. FoRB Status of Different Religious/Belief Communities</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>5.3. FoRB Status Inside Own Religious/Belief Communities</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>5.4. Inter-Faith Connections</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>5.5. The Essence of FoRB Promotion</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>VI. Recommendations</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>6.1. Foundational Principles of Strategy for FoRB</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>6.2. Recommendations for Action</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>73</b>

# Executive Summary

The report titled “*Diving Deep into Cambodia’s Religious Freedom: An Exploration of Community Hopes and Collective Hurdles*” provides a comprehensive analysis of the status of freedom of religion and belief (‘FoRB’) in Cambodia, focusing on the historical context, constitutional provisions, contemporary status and challenges, and implications of FoRB for diverse religious groups. Despite the constitutional guarantees and Cambodia’s commitment to international human rights treaties, significant challenges persist, particularly for religious minorities. This research investigates how access to legal support is facilitated and hindered within the FoRB community; it examines how legal frameworks are applied at the local level, considering both inter-religious connections and the internal dynamics of the FoRB.

Cambodia’s religious landscape is predominantly Buddhist, with approximately 95% of the population practicing Theravada Buddhism. Minority religions, including Islam, Christianity, the Bahá’í Faith, and Indigenous practices, constitute the remaining 5%. The historical presence of these religions is marked by periods of suppression, notably during the Khmer Rouge regime. Religious freedoms, despite being protected in the Cambodian Constitution, are often threatened in practice, particularly for religious minorities.

The legal framework in Cambodia, supported by the Cambodian Constitution and international treaties such as the ICCPR, ICESCR, CEDAW, CRC, ICERD, and CAT, theoretically guarantees freedom of religion and belief. However, practical implementation reveals significant disparities. Religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims, report incidents of discrimination, harassment, and restrictions on religious activities. The Cambodian Government favours Theravada Buddhism which indirectly limits the rights of other religious groups, creating an environment where FoRB is not fully realized for all citizens.

The literature review highlights issues such as prohibiting non-Buddhist religious instruction in public schools, restrictions on proselytization, and challenges faced by minority religious groups in practicing their faith openly. These policies reinforce the dominant position of Buddhism and limit the religious education and rights of students from minority

religious groups. Furthermore, the destruction of sacred sites and land clearance by powerful individuals and companies exacerbate the difficulties faced by Indigenous communities in practicing their traditional beliefs.

The intersection of gender rights and FoRB reveals multifaceted challenges. Traditional and religious beliefs often perpetuate gender inequalities, limiting women's participation in religious and public life. Women from minority religious groups face compounding discrimination because of their gender and religious identity. For example, the lack of acceptance of female ordination in Buddhism greatly limits women's religious authority and reinforces broader societal gender inequalities.

Research findings from key informant interviews with provincial authorities, religious leaders, and community surveys reveal a recognition of constitutional guarantees for religious freedoms. However, these findings also highlight gaps in their practical application. Inconsistencies exist in the registration and construction of religious buildings, the promotion of religious beliefs, and the involvement of religious leaders in decision-making processes. Furthermore, challenges in interfaith relationships, such as a lack of understanding and communication between different religious groups, emphasize the need for interfaith dialogue and education to promote mutual respect and harmony.

Significant challenges stem from the impact of community religious practices and beliefs on vulnerable groups, particularly women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and indigenous peoples. Women often face restrictions in religious leadership roles and are subject to gender-biased inheritance rules. LGBTQIA+ individuals encounter limited acceptance and frequent discrimination. Indigenous communities struggle with the loss of sacred sites due to development projects and external interference, which affects their spiritual and cultural practices.

Religious leaders play a crucial role in fostering interfaith understanding, promoting mutual respect, and addressing conflicts within their communities. Their efforts are vital for enhancing community cohesion and harmony, contributing to a more inclusive and tolerant society. Despite these efforts, issues persist, such as the destruction of sacred sites, restrictions on religious education, and discrimination against vulnerable groups. This underscores the need for concerted efforts to support religious leaders in protecting and

promoting religious freedoms for all individuals.

Recommendations to enhance the protection and promotion of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) in Cambodia include the following:

1. Implement legal reforms to ensure the equal treatment of all religious groups.
2. Improve dissemination of information and ensure consistent enforcement of FoRB rights.
3. Address gender and LGBTQIA+ discrimination within religious contexts.
4. Foster interfaith dialogue and education.
5. Protect indigenous sacred sites.
6. Support the active participation of women and marginalized groups in religious and public life.

These steps are crucial for creating an inclusive and equitable society where all individuals can freely practice their faith.

In conclusion, while Cambodia's legal framework theoretically supports freedom of religion and belief, its implementation remains problematic. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach involving legal reforms, societal education, and robust international human rights advocacy. By fostering mutual respect and understanding, promoting inclusive religious practices, and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, Cambodia can become a more harmonious and resilient society that celebrates a diversity of religions and beliefs.





# I. Introduction

“Freedom of Religion and Belief” in Cambodia has seen significant shifts over the years. The Cambodian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but historically, there have been periods of religious suppression, notably during the Khmer Rouge regime. Since then, Cambodia has made efforts to safeguard religious rights but challenges persist, including social attitudes, political influences, and issues faced by religious minorities.

Cambodia’s history is marked by diverse religious practices. The protection of religious freedom, albeit enshrined in the constitution, has faced challenges throughout the nation’s history. This study aims to analyze the status of freedom of religion and belief in Cambodia, exploring its constitutional provisions, historical context, contemporary challenges, and implications for diverse religious groups.

## 1.1. The Religious Context of Cambodia

Approximately 95% of Cambodia’s population is Buddhist, most of whom practice Theravada Buddhism. There are an estimated 4400 monastic temples (wats, pagodas)

throughout the country. The remaining 5% of the population includes Muslims, Christians, Indigenous practices of Animism, Bahai’s, Jews, and Cao Dai adherents.

Cambodia’s religious landscape is predominantly influenced by Theravada Buddhism, which has been the state religion since the 13th century (except during the Khmer Rouge period). Approximately 95% of the population adheres to this tradition, with its roots dating back to at least the 5th century AD. Early forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism also existed in Cambodia, introduced through various streams, including influences from Mon kingdoms during the Angkor empire.

Islam has a historical presence in Cambodia, introduced by Muslim traders around the 12th to 17th centuries. The religion was further propagated by the Chams, and today, Muslims constitute around 3% of the population. The number of mosques has seen a rapid increase in recent years.

Christianity has had a more limited historical impact in Cambodia. The first Christian Catholic mission dates back to 1555-1556, but its influence remained minimal until the late 19th

century. Today, Christians make up only about 2% of the population, representing Catholics and 21 other Protestant denominations. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses have also had a presence in Cambodia since the late 20th century.

The Bahá'í Faith arrived in Cambodia in 1920 and has faced challenges, especially during the Khmer Rouge era. However, it has seen a resurgence in recent years, with growth noted in cities like Battambang. The first Bahá'í House of Worship was completed in Battambang in 2017.

Indigenous beliefs are also present among the highland tribal groups, characterized by local religious systems and animistic practices. These groups, collectively known as Khmer Loeu, believe in a world filled with various spirits and often resort to shamans or sorcerers for spiritual guidance and healing.

Lastly, Cambodia has a small Jewish community with over 100 members and a Chabad house established in Phnom Penh in 2009.

## **1.2. Legal Aspects Concerning FoRB**

The Cambodian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and belief

as a fundamental right, ensuring all religions are treated equally under the law and prohibiting discrimination based on religion. Cambodia's commitment to international human rights treaties further strengthens these protections. However, in practice, these rights are sometimes restricted or violated, especially impacting religious minorities.

Also, as a signatory to several international treaties, Cambodia is committed to upholding various rights and freedoms, including the freedom of religion and belief (FoRB). These treaties provide a robust legal framework that supports the protection and promotion of religious freedom. Each treaty outlines rights and principles that align with the broader goal of ensuring that individuals can freely practice their religion without fear of discrimination or persecution.

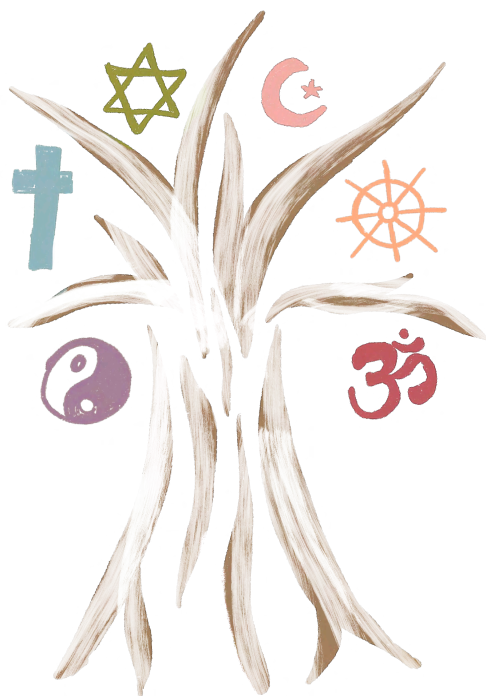
The following sections summarize how these key international treaties contribute to the support of FoRB practices in Cambodia:

1. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees a wide range of civil and political rights, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief. Article 18 of the ICCPR specifically highlights the freedom to

- manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching, either individually or in community with others. This treaty supports FoRB practices by ensuring individuals can freely practice and express their religious beliefs without fear of persecution.
2. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) focuses on economic, social, and cultural rights, such as the right to work, education, and health. The ICESCR does not explicitly mention FoRB, though the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion are indirectly supported through the broader context of cultural rights and freedoms. This allows for the promotion and protection of diverse cultural and religious practices.
  3. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) aims to eradicate discrimination against women in all areas of life. Although it primarily focuses on gender equality, CEDAW indirectly supports FoRB by promoting equality and non-discrimination, which includes freedom from discrimination based on religion or belief. This ensures that women can freely practice their religion without facing gender-based discrimination.
  4. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) outlines the rights of children to protection, education, health care, and other basic rights. While the CRC does not specifically address FoRB, it does promote children's right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities. This ensures that children can develop and express their religious beliefs freely and safely.
  5. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) aims to prevent racial discrimination and promote understanding among all races. While ICERD primarily focuses on racial equality, it indirectly supports FoRB by emphasizing equality, non-discrimination, and tolerance among different religious and ethnic groups. This creates an environment where diverse religious practices can coexist peacefully.
  6. The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) aims to prevent torture and other

cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. While CAT does not directly address FoRB, it supports the broader human rights framework, which includes freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right. This ensures that individuals are protected from torture and ill-treatment based on their religious beliefs.

Despite the legal support detailed in the Cambodian Constitution and within these international treaties, there have been instances where the right to FoRB has been restricted or violated in practice. Religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims, have reported incidents of discrimination, harassment, and restrictions because of their religious activities. Additionally, the government's favouritism towards Theravada Buddhism - the dominant religion - has been criticized for indirectly limiting the rights of other religious minorities. These practical restrictions highlight the gap between Cambodia's legal commitments and the realities faced by its religious minorities and create an environment where FoRB is not fully realized for all citizens of Cambodia.



# II. Literature Review of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cambodia

Freedom of Religion or Belief is a critical human right that ensures individuals can practice their religion without interference or discrimination. This literature survey reviews documents related to FoRB in Cambodia, analyzes the key issues, and provides insights for further research.

The legal framework in Cambodia theoretically supports religious freedom. The Cambodian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of belief and religious worship, recognizing Buddhism as the state religion.

*“The government promotes national Buddhist holidays, provides Buddhist training and education, and modestly supports an institute that performs research on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions”  
(Wikipedia, 2023).*

The law directs that all religious groups are required to register with the Ministry of Cults and Religions

to construct places of worship and conduct religious activities. Despite these requirements, there are no significant penalties for failing to register, except ineligibility for tax exemptions. The Directive on Controlling External Religions mandates registration to prevent religious groups from engaging in political activities or undermining national security (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

However, the legal framework and government policies significantly influence the practice of religion, particularly in public educational institutions. One prominent policy is the prohibition of non-Buddhist religious instruction in public schools. This policy mandates that while Buddhist teachings may be part of the public school curriculum, other religious teachings are not allowed. This exclusion can limit the religious education and rights of students from minority religious groups, such as Christians and Muslims, who may have to seek religious education outside the public school system.

*“Non-Buddhist religious instruction is prohibited in public schools but is allowed in private institutions. Non-Buddhist students in public schools may opt out of Buddhist religious instruction since it is not part of the core curriculum” (ACN International, 2023).*

*“Non-Buddhist groups cannot proselytize in public, but non-Buddhist religious literature can be distributed within their respective religious institutions” (U.S. Department of State, 2022).*

This policy ensures that Buddhist religious teachings dominate the public educational landscape, reinforcing the state’s endorsement of Buddhism as the national religion.

These legal constraints are designed to manage religious activities and ensure that they do not disrupt the predominantly Buddhist social fabric of Cambodia.

When it comes to the FoRB right to propagation of religion, Cambodian law also imposes strict regulations on proselytization, which is the act of attempting to convert someone from one religion to a different religion. Non-Buddhist religious groups are particularly affected by these restrictions, as they are not allowed to proselytize in public spaces. Instead, they may only distribute religious literature within their respective religious institutions, which are required to be registered as such. This restriction aims to prevent religious tensions and maintain public order, but it also limits the freedom of religious expression for minority groups.

These prohibitive policies have a considerable impact on religious minorities in Cambodia. The prohibition of non-Buddhist religious instruction in public schools means that children from minority religious backgrounds must rely on private religious schools or community-based religious education. This can place additional financial and logistical burdens on families seeking to provide religious education consistent with their beliefs.

The U.S. Department of State’s 2022 International Religious Freedom Report highlights these restrictions:

Furthermore, the restrictions on proselytization limit the ability of minority religious groups to grow and practice their faith openly. This can lead to a sense of marginalization and hinder the expression of religious identity. The combination of these policies reinforces the dominant position of Buddhism in Cambodian society and underscores the challenges faced by religious minorities.

*“Based on these constitutional and legislative provisions, Cambodians generally enjoy a significant degree of religious freedom. However, restrictions on proselytization and religious instruction in public schools highlight the preferential treatment towards Buddhism” (ACN International, 2023).*

Cambodia’s societal dynamics show a high degree of religious tolerance, but significant challenges remain. The majority of the population practices Buddhism, with substantial communities of Christians, Muslims, and indigenous animists. These groups often face societal biases and limited resources for practicing their religion. For instance:

*On the morning of April 26, 2006, a Buddhist group knocked down and burned an unfinished church under construction in Kandal Province for lack of a construction permit as a religious building. Reportedly, provincial authorities had denied the Wesleyan Church permission to build a church, so the group built a house for religious teachers to be converted to a church at a later date. The district governor of the area reportedly negotiated a reconciliation agreement between the Buddhists and*

*Christians in the area, whereby the house could be rebuilt, and no charges pressed against those who participated in the riot (United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, 2007).*

The local church leader later confirmed that the house had not yet been rebuilt but they were planning to convert the property into a Christian school.

Rights groups have accused individuals and companies they consider “wealthy and powerful” of illegally clearing forests that are sacred to indigenous peoples for commercial purposes.

*“Indigenous rights groups accused individual companies granted concessions in protected forests, of illegally clearing forests that were religious sites for some indigenous peoples” (US State Department, 2023).*

The impact of illegal land clearances by wealthy and powerful individuals or companies on Indigenous religious sites is a significant concern. These actions not only threaten the physical sites but also the cultural and religious practices tied to them.

The government's role in religious freedom is complex. While the legal framework supports religious freedom, government policies sometimes infringe on these rights. For instance, the Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 imposed severe restrictions and disproportionately affected marginalized groups. Furthermore, proposed laws that criminalize political participation by religious figures (including Buddhist monks being threatened with being 'defrocked' for activism), pose a significant threat to the freedom of religious and political expression.

*"The proposed law would criminalize 'religious people' who participate in political acts, including 'organized activity against any political party'" (ACN International, 2023).*

In recent years, Cambodia has also faced criticism for the deportation of religious refugees, particularly targeting the Montagnard Christians from Vietnam and Uighur Muslims from China. These actions have raised significant human rights concerns.

Back in 2009, Cambodia attracted the attention of international human rights groups when 20 Uighur Muslims were rounded up by the Cambodian police and deported back

to China. The Uighurs had sought asylum in Cambodia to escape repression in China's Xinjiang region. Despite appeals from the United Nations and the international community, Cambodia proceeded with the deportation. The U.S. State Department expressed "grave concern" over the deportation, noting that

*"The deported Uighurs were likely to face severe punishment upon their return to China." (U.S. Department of State, 2009).*

Another notable incident involved the deportation of Montagnard Christians in 2017. The Montagnards, an Indigenous group from Vietnam's Central Highlands, fled to Cambodia seeking asylum due to persecution in Vietnam. Despite international pressure and appeals from human rights organisations, the Cambodian government forcibly deported several Montagnards back to Vietnam, where they faced potential imprisonment and further persecution. A report from Human Rights Watch highlighted that:

*"Cambodia violated its international obligations by returning refugees who faced a well-founded fear of persecution" (Human Rights Watch, 2017).*



These incidents illustrate a troubling pattern of Cambodia's disregard for international asylum protocols and human rights obligations, often influenced by political and economic ties with its neighbouring countries.

## **Gender and FoRB in Cambodia**

The intersection of gender rights and Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cambodia is multifaceted and encompasses legal, social, and cultural dimensions. This intersection influences the practice of religion, leadership by women in the religious sphere, and the status of gender equality in the country.

The Cambodian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on gender.

*“The constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious worship, as long as such freedom neither interferes with others’ beliefs and religions nor violates public order and security” (US State Department, 2023).*

However, the implementation of these legal protections can be inconsistent, particularly in the context of religious practices and gender norms. Religious freedom in Cambodia is generally respected,

but the influence of traditional and religious beliefs does sometimes perpetuate gender inequalities.

In Cambodian society, social and cultural dynamics and traditional gender roles are deeply intertwined with religious beliefs, particularly those of Buddhism, the dominant religion. Buddhist teachings often emphasize the importance of women fulfilling traditional roles as wives and mothers, which then can limit the participation of women in religious and public life. This can perpetuate gender stereotypes and restrict women's opportunities for leadership within religious communities.

The practice of Chbab Srey, a traditional code of conduct for women, reinforces these roles and expectations. It must be emphasized that although Chbab Srey is rooted in cultural traditions and not in religious doctrine, it significantly influences how gender roles are perceived and practiced within the context of religion.

*“Chbab Srey, a traditional code of conduct for women, reinforces expectations for women to be obedient and fulfil domestic roles, which can restrict their participation in religious and public life” (Cambodia Gender Assessment, 2014).*

Gender-related issues in religious practice often result in Cambodian women facing barriers to full participation in religious activities and leadership roles. In Theravada Buddhism the ordination of women as monks (bhikkhunis) is not widely accepted, limiting their religious authority and roles within the monastic community. This exclusion from involvement in religious leadership reinforces the broader pre-existing societal gender inequalities.

Additionally, women from religious minority groups, such as Muslims and Christians, may face compounding discrimination because of their gender and religious identity. This can manifest in restricted access to education, employment, and religious practices, particularly in rural areas where traditional and religious norms are more strictly adhered to.

*“The lack of acceptance of female ordination in Buddhism limits women’s religious authority and roles within the monastic community, reinforcing broader societal gender inequalities” (UN Women, 2016).*

### **Impact of Religious Policies on Gender Rights**

Government policies and societal attitudes towards religious practices can significantly affect gender rights.

For instance, the prohibition of non-Buddhist religious instruction in public schools and restrictions on proselytization can disproportionately impact women from minority religious groups, limiting their access to religious education and community support.

Moreover, the laws and policies that intersect with religious practices, such as those governing dress codes or participation in religious ceremonies, can also affect women’s freedom and autonomy. For example, women who practice Islam may face challenges related to wearing religious attire, such as hijabs, in public spaces or workplaces.

*“Government policies that restrict religious practices, such as the prohibition of non-Buddhist religious instruction in public schools, can disproportionately impact women from minority religious groups” (ACN International, 2023).*

The intersection of gender rights and Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cambodia is shaped by a complex interplay of legal, social, and cultural factors. While legal frameworks provide for religious freedom and gender equality, traditional and religious norms often perpetuate gender disparities. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive ap-

proach that includes legal reforms, societal education, and inclusive religious practices.

The literature review above clearly indicates some issues for further research.

In the context of Cambodia, more research is needed to explore the impact of legal frameworks on the practice of religious freedom. While the Cambodian Constitution guarantees religious freedom and recognizes Buddhism as the state religion, the practical implications of this dual recognition requires deeper examination. Investigating how these legal provisions are implemented and whether they create a de facto preference for Buddhism over other religions would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and fairness of Cambodia's legal framework for religious freedom.

A critical area for further research lies in the complex interplay between religious freedom and education policies in Cambodia. The current system, which permits Buddhist teachings but prohibits instruction in other religions within public schools, raises concerns about inclusivity and fairness. In-depth studies are needed to explore the impact of this policy on students from minority faiths by examining how this policy affects students' access to religious

education, the broader implications for social cohesion and inter-religious understanding, and the economics of education in private religious institutions in Cambodia.

The restrictions on proselytization and their effects on religious minorities also merit further study. Cambodian law limits the ability of non-Buddhist groups to proselytize in public spaces, which can hinder the growth and expression of minority religions. Research should explore the extent to which these restrictions affect religious minority communities, their ability to practice and propagate their faith, and the social dynamics between different religious groups. Understanding the balance between maintaining public order and ensuring religious freedom is crucial in this context.

Gender and religious freedom in Cambodia require further exploration. Traditional and religious norms, especially those rooted in Buddhism, can often confine gender roles that limit women's participation in both religious and public life.

Critical research is needed to examine:

- How do these gender norms affect women's opportunities within religious communities and broader society?
- What barriers prevent women

from achieving leadership positions within their faith traditions?

- How does the intersection of gender and religious minority status create compounded discrimination?

By answering these questions, we can gain valuable insights into creating a more equitable space for women within Cambodian society, particularly in religious spheres.

An increasing concern in Cambodia is the deepening relationship with China. China's growing financial and political influence in Cambodia raises serious threats to human rights and religious freedoms. Comparative research is crucial. By examining similar laws in both countries, we can identify parallels and differences between Cambodia's LANGO and China's regulations on religious practices. This will shed light on how international politics within ASEAN impact Cambodian domestic policies towards religious groups and ultimately shape the overall human rights landscape.

Lastly, the impact of government policies on religious minorities, particularly in the context of land rights and displacement, needs thorough examination. Reports of illegal land clearances affecting Indigenous

religious sites highlight a significant issue where economic and political interests intersect with religious rights. Research should focus on documenting these incidents, understanding the legal and social mechanisms that allow such actions, and proposing ways to protect the religious and cultural heritage of minority communities. This ties into the broader human rights concerns and the need for effective legal protections for vulnerable groups.

Strengthening Cambodia's religious freedom landscape requires in-depth research across several key areas. Examining the legal framework, educational policies, restrictions on proselytization, gender equality within religious practices, and China's growing influence in Cambodia will reveal necessary reforms to guarantee fair treatment for all religious groups.

This research can unlock significant benefits:

- Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding: By addressing disparities in religious education and the challenges faced by minority communities, we can foster a climate of mutual respect and understanding between diverse faiths.
- Enriching Cambodia's Cultural

Tapestry: Empowering women within religious practices enhances the spiritual landscape and fosters a more inclusive society. Dismantling barriers ensures all voices are heard, allowing traditions to flourish.

- **Building a Nation that Celebrates Diversity:** Protecting Indigenous religious sites goes hand-in-hand with safeguarding religious freedom. Striking a balance between economic development and respecting sacred spaces fosters a society that celebrates diversity and reduces discrimination.

In conclusion, while Cambodia's legal framework theoretically supports freedom of religion, significant challenges remain regarding its implementation. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach involving legal reforms, societal education, and robust international human rights advocacy.

Yet, given these issues, it is important to note that the Freedom House report of 2023 scored Cambodia as a "3 points out of a maximum possible 4, for religious freedom."

## **Legal Perspectives on Freedom to Practice or Believe any Religion**

In examining the state of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Cambodia, it's evident that while the legal framework ostensibly protects religious freedom, practical implementation reveals significant disparities. The Cambodian Constitution and subsequent laws generally uphold the right to practice religion, yet the experiences of various religious communities suggest unequal treatment and subtle restrictions. This analysis explores the complex challenges religious groups in Cambodia face, illustrating how discriminatory practices and administrative hurdles sometimes undermine legal protections.

In Cambodia, while there are no explicit legal prohibitions against practicing any religion, there is evidence of unequal treatment or recognition of different religions. Buddhism, as the state religion, enjoys certain privileges not granted to other religions. For example, Buddhist pagodas receive permanent registration with no need for re-registration, whereas Christian and Islamic places of worship are subject to time-limited registrations — ten years for Islamic pagodas and two years for Christian churches. Additionally, the selection and appointment of Buddhist

religious leaders involves a more formalized and transparent process, contrasted with the less formal processes for leaders in Christianity and Islam.

Despite legal safeguards for religious freedom, subtle and indirect challenges faced by religious communities can be exclusionary. Historical examples, such as restrictions on believing in supernatural beings during the Pol Pot regime, indicate periods where religious beliefs were confined, though these are no longer enforced today. Some communities suffer indirect restrictions on their religious freedoms, such as when development projects limit their access and attempts to preserve their sacred spaces. In regions with concentrations of specific religious groups, localized issues or biases may arise, although no overt discrimination is reported in survey findings. There are instances where discrimination against certain religious or socioeconomic groups results in a lack of aid distribution, which acts as an indirect block on religious practice.

There are no explicit legal prohibitions against freely assembling to worship, discuss religion, or teach it. However, some religious communities face challenges accessing or preserving sacred spaces due to development projects or restrictions by

authorities. Interviewees mentioned difficulties in practicing religious rituals, with police officers following and watching them, suggesting potential harassment or surveillance. These actions create an environment where religious freedom is indirectly hindered, despite the lack of explicit legal consequences.

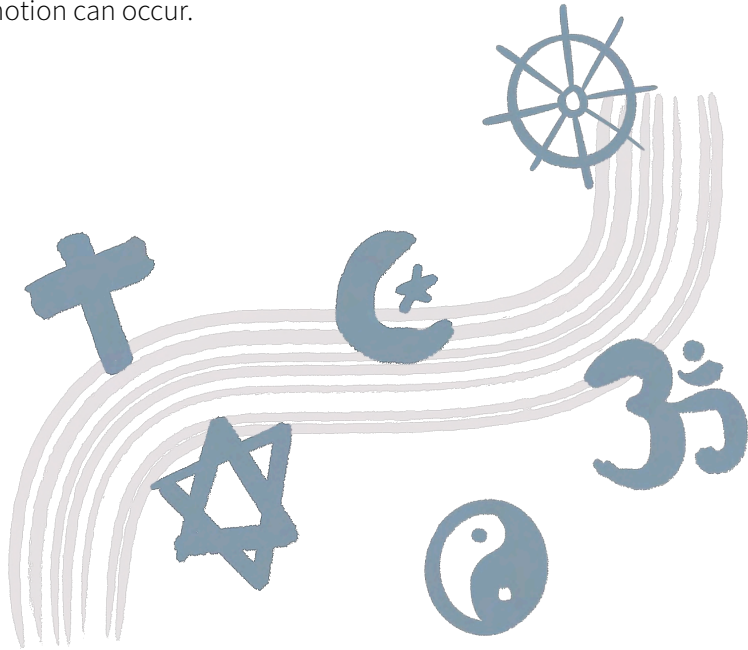
While our data doesn't definitively show how religious communities acquire places of worship, desk research suggests a mixed picture. Minority religions, particularly Christians, seem to face no hurdles in renting spaces for practices.

However, concerns regarding equality and fairness exist. The registration process appears uneven, granting permanent permits to Buddhist pagodas while Islamic and Christian houses of worship receive temporary registrations. Furthermore, there have been instances where sacred sites crucial to certain religious communities were destroyed for development projects. This can be perceived as harassment or infringement on their religious practices and spaces.

While individuals have the right to practice their religion, there are restrictions on openly promoting their religious beliefs. A significant portion of responses indicates that individuals or groups wishing to

promote their religion must first seek permission or go through an administrative process, suggesting regulatory measures that require religious promoters to obtain official approval before disseminating religious materials or messages. In Takeo province, individuals who promote their religion without the necessary license or permission have faced problems and some penalties, implying consequences for unauthorized religious promotion. Even with permission, there are limitations, as individuals cannot go door-to-door to share their religious beliefs, indicating boundaries on the methods and places where religious promotion can occur.

In summary, while the Cambodian Constitution and subsequent laws generally allow freedom of religion or belief, there are indications of unequal treatment in implementing these provisions. There are potential hindrances in engaging in certain activities, such as challenges in freely assembling to worship and discuss religion, restrictions on the freedom to promote one's religion, and instances of harassment faced by worshippers and places of worship, particularly for non-state religions like Christianity and Indigenous belief systems.



# III. Research Methodology

Evaluating Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) in Target Communities is described below in detail. The step-by-step qualitative research methodology was entirely participatory, with representatives from each partner nominated to the core research team.

At every step of the research process, partners participated fully – deciding on the research methodology, determining the research problem, objectives of the research and the research questions, developing the survey questionnaire, training, supervision and guidance of community researchers, participating in the data coding, and the data verification process. The point person from WPM and the consultant checked in with each other regularly.

## 3.1. Research Problem and Objectives

The research problem for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Cambodia lies in the discrepancy between the constitutional and international legal frameworks that guarantee religious freedom and the actual experiences of religious minorities in the country. Despite

the constitutional provisions that ensure equality of all religions and prohibit discrimination based on religion, and Cambodia’s commitment to international treaties supporting FoRB, there are significant reports of discrimination, harassment, and restrictions, particularly against Christians and Muslims.

Additionally, the government’s bias towards Theravada Buddhism exacerbates these issues, leading to unequal treatment and limiting the rights of other religious groups, especially of the Indigenous minorities in the forest regions. This research aims to explore and document these discrepancies, examining the implementation and the extent of the FoRB practices at local levels, and understanding the social and political dynamics that influence religious freedom in Cambodia.

This research dives deep into the complexities of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Cambodia. It tackles five key objectives:

- **Examine the Legal Landscape:** This objective assesses the legal framework surrounding FoRB in Cambodia. It explores the legal support for



religious freedom and any existing restrictions. Additionally, it investigates how these laws are implemented at the local level.

- **FoRB within Communities:** This objective will explore the status of FoRB within individual religious and belief communities in Cambodia.
- **Intra-Community Violations:** This objective focuses on identifying and describing instances where the FoRB of members of each religious community may be violated.
- **Interfaith Connections:** This objective aims to identify and describe the current connections and interactions between different faith communities within Cambodia.
- **Role of Religious Practices:** This objective delves into the essential and inspirational contributions of religious practices within Cambodian communities.

In addressing these objectives, this research offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussions on religious freedom and human rights in Cambodia.

Given the outlined research problem and objectives as described above, the research will address several key research questions:

Concerning the legal aspects, the study will investigate whether the law allows freedom of religion or belief, whether it restricts such freedoms to specific religions, and if there are any restrictions on manifesting a religion or belief by law. By examining the implementation of this legislation at the local level, the research will explore whether these laws unduly favour certain religions, which religions are allowed to engage in what activities, if people can assemble freely to worship, discuss their religion, and teach it, and whether they can rent or purchase places of assembly without harassment.

We look at the personal practices of FoRB by individuals in local communities and explore if people can freely choose and change their religion, openly hold no religion or adopt a nonreligious belief, and if changing or relinquishing any religion involves a penalty or discrimination.

In examining intra-community practices of FoRB and their impact on gender and sexual orientation, the study will assess if women suffer discrimination on account of their religion, if they enjoy equal rights with men on issues like the right to inheritance or the right to divorce, and whether LGBTQIA+ individuals face discrimination rooted in religious beliefs. The research will also consider religious restrictions on

access to abortion and freedom to make decisions related to one's own body.

Furthermore, the study will delve into inter-religious relationships and practices of FoRB by examining inter-religious dialogue practices, the status of interfaith respect and harmony, and efforts to learn about each other's religious beliefs and practices. These research questions will guide the investigation, providing a comprehensive understanding of the state of FoRB in Cambodia.

Lastly, this research delves into the societal contributions of religious practices and values. It emphasizes their significance and underscores the necessity of freedom of religion or belief.

### **3.2. Research Design**

The research design for this study was cross-sectional, aiming to capture a snapshot of the state of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) in the target communities. The initial step involved comprehensive desk research, which guided the subsequent phases of the research process. We used an inclusive approach to understanding FoRB in these communities to ensure we had diverse demographics. Given the issues identified in the historical

and literature survey, an ethical framework for the field research was necessary.

#### **3.2.1. Sampling Strategy**

A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to receive representation from various demographic groups across the target communities. The sample size for the survey was determined based on the population size of each community, assuring that the data collected would reflect the broader population.

#### **3.2.2. Questionnaire Development**

The questionnaire was developed based on a model framework for evaluating FoRB, created through a partnership involving WPM, Peace Bridges Organisation, Continuous Learning Organisation, and Danmission. The questions were structured to assess various dimensions of FoRB, including legal protections, societal attitudes, institutional practices, and individual experiences. The questionnaire included closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing for quantitative and qualitative information.

### **3.2.3. Pilot Testing**

Before the main survey, the questionnaire underwent pilot testing with a small sample from the target communities and staff and surveyors from the partners themselves. Feedback from this pilot testing was used to refine the questionnaire, ensuring it was clear, relevant, and culturally sensitive. This was a crucial step for enhancing the reliability and validity of the survey instrument.

### **3.2.4. Data Collection**

Trained surveyors from the partner NGOs administered the questionnaire, either in-person or electronically, depending on the accessibility of the target communities. Efforts were made to ensure the participation of diverse groups within the communities, particularly focusing on women, minorities, and marginalized populations. Data collection was conducted within a specified timeframe of 60 days to maintain consistency and reliability.

### **3.2.5. Data Coding, Analysis, and Verification**

#### **Rigorous Data Analysis:**

Our survey yielded quantitative data, which we analyzed using software capable of both descriptive and inferential statistics. The data was then summarized and conclusions about the larger population were made.

For the qualitative data from open-ended questions, we conducted a thematic analysis. This approach helped us identify recurring patterns, themes, and valuable insights from the participants' words.

#### **Comparative Analysis and Verification:**

We further enriched the analysis by comparing findings across different demographic groups and communities. This helped us identify potential disparities and trends within the data.

To ensure the accuracy and completeness of our analysis, we presented initial findings to community researchers and partner NGO representatives in a dedicated data verification workshop. We incorporated their feedback, both verbal and written, into our final analysis to ensure the accuracy of our findings.

### **3.2.6. Thematic Interpretation and Reporting**

The research results were interpreted within the framework for evaluating FoRB and relevant theoretical perspectives. The report provides a comprehensive analysis of the state of FoRB in the target communities, highlighting strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. The later recommendations can be formed.

mulated to inform policy, advocacy, and programming initiatives by the partnering NGOs. This approach aims to provide actionable insights that support FoRB in the target communities.

The first step involved familiarising ourselves with the data. This meant transcribing audio recordings into text and then reviewing all the material. During this initial stage, we started to recognise potential themes and codes.

For example, we looked for mentions of specific religious groups (Christians, Muslims, Buddhists) and how participants expressed experiences of discrimination or acceptance related to those groups. This initial coding process was developed collaboratively with the researchers. This consultation ensured our coding decisions were systematic, transparent, and well-reasoned, laying the groundwork for a strong analysis.

Next, the focus shifted to identifying patterns or themes within the initial codes. As our understanding of the data evolved, themes began to emerge, such as “government favouritism,” “religious discrimination,” and “community harmony.” Subthemes were also identified, such as specific instances of harassment under the broader theme of “religious discrimination.” For

example, during this stage, patterns of harassment reported by Muslim communities regarding restrictions on their religious practices were noted. The codes were grouped and interpreted to form themes, aiding in the consistency and depth of the analysis.

Once the initial themes had been identified, they were reviewed and refined. This involved checking that the themes accurately reflected the data and ensuring no significant themes were overlooked. For instance, themes like “destruction of worship places of the indigenous people” were verified by specific examples in the data, such as reports of forest concessions being exploited by private companies. When themes appeared too broad, they were further categorised for a more precise analysis. The database documented the evidence supporting each theme and its relevance to the research questions, ensuring thorough and accurate data.

Finally, the themes were clearly defined and named in a way that accurately reflected their content. This involved detailed descriptions of each theme, ensuring they aligned with the research aims and questions. For example, the theme of “government favouritism” was refined to “favouritism towards Theravada Buddhism” to capture the specific nature of

the data analyzed. The emergent themes were presented to the field researchers in a half-day workshop, their feedback was incorporated, the necessary revisions were made, and the thematic analysis was thus saturated and verified at every step.

Through these carefully connected steps, the thematic analysis systematically organized and interpreted the data, providing meaningful insights into the status of religious freedom in Cambodia.

### **3.3. Limitations of the Research**

Despite the rigorous methodology employed in this study, several limitations were encountered during the field survey of target communities. These limitations impacted the overall reliability and validity of the research findings on freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) in Cambodia. Key issues include sampling bias, social desirability bias, the political sensitivity of the research topic, the reliance on self-reported data, and various contextual factors. These limitations are detailed below, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced and their potential effects on the research outcomes.

#### **3.3.1. Sampling Bias**

Despite efforts to employ a representative sampling strategy, sampling bias may still exist due to factors such as non-response or underrepresentation of certain demographic groups. The situation was further complicated by the completion of only 135 surveys instead of the targeted 280, and the loss of 15 completed surveys and a recording machine in transit. All efforts to recover these lost surveys and the recorder were unsuccessful, impacting the overall dataset.

#### **3.3.2. Social Desirability Bias**

Respondents who were fearful of consequences may have provided socially or legally desirable responses, leading to an overestimation of the prevalence of FoRB. There was some reluctance among respondents to disclose sensitive information, which could skew the findings. This bias reflects the challenges in obtaining accurate and candid responses on sensitive issues.

#### **3.3.3. Self-Reported Data and Contextual Influences**

The self-reported data comes from target communities already sensitized to 'rights' issues by the partner NGOs working in these areas over a significant period. This sensitization may influence the responses, potentially leading to biases. Additionally,

the accuracy of responses could be affected by memory recall errors, interpretation biases, or misinterpretation of survey questions. The dynamic nature of social, political, and cultural contexts within the target communities may further influence the interpretation of research findings and affect the generalizability of these results over time.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations in Field Research**

Conducting field research into the status of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Cambodia's target communities necessitates a robust ethical framework to ensure the integrity and respect of the research process. Given Cambodia's complex historical and religious landscape, it is imperative to approach this research with sensitivity and care. Ethical considerations must be essential to safeguard participants' rights and well-being, ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, and build trust between researchers and the communities involved. These considerations include obtaining informed consent, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, respecting cultural differences, and addressing power dynamics and social desirability bias. By integrating

these ethical principles, researchers can conduct field studies that yield valuable insights and uphold the dignity and rights of all participants.

#### **3.4.1. Informed Consent**

Due to Cambodia's historical and religious context, all participants must provide informed consent. This requires clearly explaining the survey's purpose, the nature of the questions, and how the data will be used. Participants must be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. Given the sensitive nature of FoRB issues, it is crucial to ensure that participants fully understand the implications of their participation

#### **3.4.2. Cultural Sensitivity**

The survey methodology will be culturally sensitive to accommodate the participant's religious and cultural practices. This involves designing questions that are considerate of different religious beliefs and practices. Survey administrators should be trained to approach topics sensitively, avoiding any language or behavior that could be seen as disrespectful or intrusive. Recognizing and accommodating cultural differences is crucial for gaining participants' trust and ensuring accurate and honest responses.

### **3.4.3. Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Given the political sensitivity of FoRB issues in Cambodia, maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of respondents is paramount. Measures should be in place to protect the participants' identities, such as anonymizing survey responses and securely storing data. Participants should be assured that their personal information will not be disclosed and that their responses will not be traced back to them. This is particularly important when individuals might fear repercussions for expressing their views on sensitive topics.

### **3.4.4. Addressing Power Dynamics**

The historical context of Cambodia includes periods of significant political turmoil and repression, which can influence how individuals perceive authority and power dynamics. Survey methodology should address these power dynamics by ensuring that participants do not feel coerced or pressured to provide certain responses. This is especially important when conducting group interviews or focus groups, where peer pressure might influence individual responses. Creating a safe and supportive environment for respondents to share their true opinions is essential for the integrity of the data collected.

### **3.4.5. Inclusivity and Representation**

Ethical survey methodology requires work to ensure inclusivity and representation of all demographic groups. Given the disproportions in the sample, particular attention should be paid to including underrepresented groups, such as women and certain ethnic or religious minorities. This may involve targeted outreach and additional support to facilitate participation from these groups. Ensuring diverse representation helps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of FoRB issues and avoids marginalizing any particular group.

### **3.4.6. Mitigating Social Desirability Bias**

Social desirability bias, where respondents provide answers they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true beliefs, is a significant ethical concern. To mitigate this, the survey methodology should include anonymity, providing a non-judgmental environment, and using indirect questioning techniques. Training survey administrators to recognize and address signs of discomfort or reluctance can also help obtain more genuine responses.

### 3.4.7. Feedback and Accountability

Ethical research practice includes providing feedback to the communities involved in the survey. Participants should be informed about the findings and how their contributions are being used. This can be done through community meetings, reports, or accessible summaries of the research. Maintaining accountability to the participants respects their contributions and fosters trust and transparency in the research process.

Integrating these ethical considerations into the survey methodology is crucial for conducting respectful, inclusive, and reliable research on FoRB in Cambodia. Addressing these aspects helps protect participants, enhance data quality, and ensure the research findings are credible and ethically sound.





# IV. Data Analysis

## 4.1. Demographics of the Sample Database

The demographic data collected from the surveyed individuals provides a detailed overview of the diverse characteristics within the target communities in Cambodia. This information is essential for understanding the varied perspectives and experiences related to freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) and ensuring that the study's findings are comprehensive and representative.

### 4.1.1. Gender

The gender distribution within the sample shows a predominance of male respondents, with 82 males compared to 44 females. This gender representation highlights the participation of both men and women in the survey, allowing for a balanced analysis of FoRB issues from both perspectives.

### 4.1.2. Ethnicity

The sample's ethnic composition reveals significant diversity. The majority of respondents identified as Khmer (75), followed by Indigenous People (33), and then Cham (18). This ethnic diversity is crucial for capturing the experiences of

different ethnic groups and understanding how FoRB issues vary across these communities.

### 4.1.3. Religion

Religious affiliation among the respondents varied widely, reflecting the religious diversity within the target communities. The largest group of respondents were Buddhists (56), followed by Christians (37). Additionally, there were 18 Muslims (Islam), 14 individuals practicing Indigenous religions, and 1 Bahai respondent. This religious diversity ensures the study includes a broad spectrum of religious experiences and perspectives.

### 4.1.4. Occupation

The occupational distribution of the respondents indicates a wide range of livelihoods. The majority were farmers (87), highlighting the agricultural nature of the communities surveyed. Other occupations included students (7), teachers (7), religious leaders or practitioners (8), and civil servants (4). Additionally, 13 respondents were classified under other occupations, including sellers, administrative officers, heads of monks, and ritual specialists. This occupational variety provides insights into how different professional roles and socioeconomic statuses intersect with FoRB experiences.

In summary, the demographic data from the sample of surveyed individuals highlights a rich tapestry of gender, ethnic, religious, and occupational diversity. This comprehensive representation is fundamental to the research findings, ensuring that the analysis of FoRB in Cambodia portrays different experiences and viewpoints within the target communities.

## **4.2. Demographic Sampling Bias**

The demographic distribution within the survey sample again clearly presented several limitations in comparison to the overall demographics of Cambodia that affect the generalizability and representativeness of the research findings on freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) in the country.

### **4.2.1. Gender Disproportion**

The sample shows a notable gender disproportion, with more male (82) than female respondents (44). In the general population of Cambodia, the gender ratio is more balanced. This overrepresentation of males may skew the findings, as it does not capture the experiences and perspectives of women regarding FoRB issues. Women's experiences, which can differ

significantly from men's, might be underrepresented, leading to an incomplete understanding of the FoRB landscape.

### **4.2.2. Ethnic Representation**

The ethnic composition of the sample also presents limitations. While the sample includes Khmer (75), Cham (18), and Indigenous People (33), the proportions do not fully align with the national demographics. The Khmer ethnic group constitutes the majority of Cambodia's population, whereas Indigenous Peoples and the Cham are minority groups. The overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the sample might disproportionately highlight their experiences and challenges, potentially overshadowing the broader context affecting the Khmer majority and other ethnic minorities.

### **4.2.3. Religious Affiliation**

The religious affiliation of the respondents indicates an overrepresentation of certain religious groups. For example, while Buddhism is the dominant religion in Cambodia, the sample includes a relatively high number of Christians (37) and Muslims (18), compared to their actual proportion in the national population. This disproportion might lead to an overemphasis on the experiences of these religious minorities, potentially skewing the

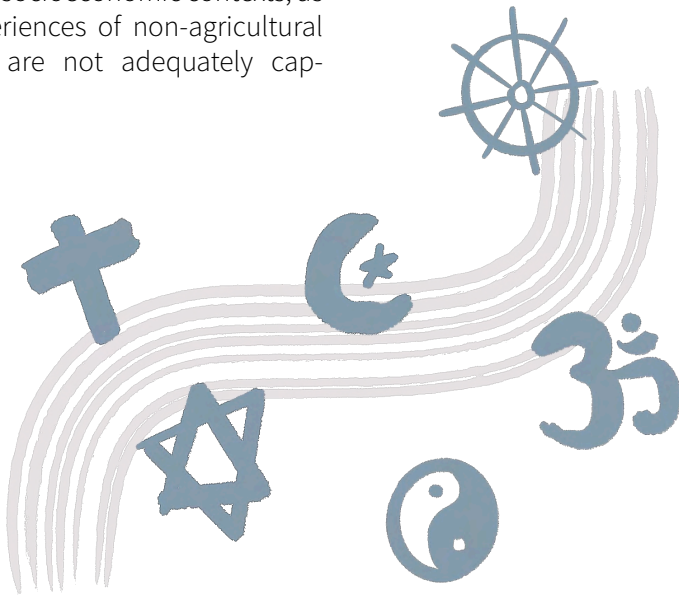
overall findings on FoRB. Having only one Bahai respondent further complicates the representation of religious diversity.

#### **4.2.4. Occupational Distribution**

The occupational distribution reveals a significant overrepresentation of farmers (87), which might reflect the agricultural nature of the target communities but doesn't accurately represent the occupational diversity of the entire country. Other important occupational groups, such as those in urban and industrial sectors, are underrepresented. This disproportion limits the study's ability to generalize findings across different socioeconomic contexts, as the experiences of non-agricultural workers are not adequately captured.

#### **4.2.5. Generalizability and Representativeness**

Given these demographic disproportions, the generalizability of the research findings is limited. The sample may not accurately reflect the broader population of Cambodia, leading to potential biases in understanding the state of FoRB. The overrepresentation or underrepresentation of specific groups can distort the overall picture, making it challenging to apply the findings universally across the country. These limitations necessitate a cautious interpretation of the results and highlight the need for more balanced and representative sampling in future research.



# V. Research Findings

This section’s key findings explore Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in several key areas. Firstly, it discusses the implementation of FoRB laws at the local level. Then, it examines the current status of FoRB in different religious or belief communities and explores the dynamics of FoRB within interfaith relationships. Lastly, it underscores the importance and necessity of promoting and safeguarding FoRB.

## **5.1. Provision and Implementation of Legal Aspects of FoRB Laws at the Local Contexts**

The key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted on the Freedom of Religion or Belief involved a sample of 11 provincial authorities from the Ministry of Cults and Religions, gathered from 6 different provinces. This group consisted exclusively of male participants, with a religious composition of 10 Buddhists and 1 Christian. In terms of ethnicity, 8 individuals identified as Khmer while the remaining 3 were indigenous persons. All participants were government

employees, reflecting their official roles within the ministry. The age range of the respondents spanned from 30 to 53 years, providing a diverse perspective across different stages of their professional careers. This demographic overview offers a comprehensive understanding of the sample group, highlighting their uniformity in gender and occupation while showcasing a mix of religious beliefs and ethnic backgrounds.

### **5.1.1. Practical Application and Awareness of Related Regulation**

The key informant interviews with provincial authorities demonstrate an understanding of the practice of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and reflect a nuanced and multifaceted perspective, deeply rooted in national regulations, provincial application, and practical experience.

At the provincial level, they recognize the constitutional guarantees for religious freedom. One leader succinctly stated, “The Constitution, article 43, states that Cambodian citizens have the right to believe in any religion and are equal before the law. This is our highest law.” This

demonstrates a foundational understanding that legal frameworks are in place to protect religious freedom.

Despite this constitutional recognition, gaps exist in the practical application of these laws. For instance, while regulations exist, they are not well-remembered or clearly defined among these provincial authorities. One respondent noted, “There is a law stated by the government, but I don’t remember,” indicating a disconnect between the legislation and its implementation or awareness at the provincial level.

The feedback is mixed on the construction of religious buildings or registration of religious institutions. While some report that no payment is required for registration, suggesting a supportive stance from the government, others indicate payments need to be made or express the need for clearer procedures. This inconsistency is highlighted by comments such as “no payment is needed” and “this information is unclear,” pointing to a lack of uniformity in how these regulations are communicated and enforced.

Promoting religious beliefs and financing for religious purposes also show varied experiences. While some respondents note that no payment is required for certain religious activities, there are instances

of confusion regarding the required processes. This suggests that while the legal framework might be supportive, the execution at the ground level may be problematic, as evidenced by the repeated mentions of “this information is unclear.”

With religious leadership and provincial participation, there is a general acknowledgement of inclusivity and support from the government. Respondents mention religious leaders can participate in decision-making processes, such as road construction and social services. This is illustrated by the quote, “Leaders from all religions can participate in decision-making processes such as decisions on road construction,” and “They can participate with activities like contribution to Red Cross, road constructions, and other social services, especially like support during Covid-19”, indicating a level of provincial integration and government support to all, irrespective of religious affiliation.

However, the enforcement of these rights at the local level shows variability. Some informants express confidence in the government’s support for all religions, as one noted, “The government helps all regardless of their religion.” Yet, other responses reflect uncertainty or lack of knowledge about certain provisions, indicating that while the

overarching laws are supportive, local enforcement and awareness can be inconsistent.

Overall, the thematic analysis reveals that while the national legal framework in Cambodia supports religious freedom and provincial participation, the practical application and awareness of these rights varies among authorities. This indicates a need for better dissemination of information and consistent enforcement to ensure that the principles of FoRB are uniformly understood and consistently applied across different religious communities.

### **5.1.2. Legal Aspects of FoRB and Its Implementation**

#### **A. Does the Cambodian law provide for the freedom of religion or belief?**

This is a foundational question for this research. The legal framework in Cambodia supports the freedom of religion or belief. The majority of interviewees affirm that people can practice their religion without explicit legal prohibitions and that constitutional and legal guarantees protect religious freedom and prevent discrimination based on religion. For instance, there are no legal barriers to conversion and individuals are generally free to practice the faith of their choice. The responses

from the provincial authorities of the Departments of Cults and Religions indicate this.

#### **B. Does the law restrict such freedoms to any specific religions?**

While no explicit legal restrictions target specific religions, there appears to be unequal treatment among different religions. Buddhism, as the state religion, enjoys privileges not given to other faiths. For example, Buddhist pagodas are granted permanent registration without needing to re-register; Islamic and Christian places of worship are subject to time-limited registrations of ten years and two years, respectively. The selection and appointment of Buddhist religious leaders are conducted through a more formalized process involving voting and institutional bodies, contrasting with the less formal processes for Christian and Islamic leaders. National holidays like Khmer New Year are widely respected yet religious festivals of non-state religions, such as Christmas, do not receive similar recognition, highlighting a disparity in the observance of religious holidays.

#### **C. Are there restrictions on manifesting a religion or belief established by law?**

Despite the legal framework safeguarding religious freedom, there

are subtle restrictions and challenges that religious communities face. Historical precedents, such as the Pol Pot regime's prohibition on believing in supernatural beings, indicate past limitations on religious beliefs, though these are no longer enforced. Access to sacred places can be problematic, as development projects sometimes encroach on or damage these sites, indirectly denying religious practices. Localized issues or biases may arise in regions with specific religious group concentrations, although overt discrimination is not commonly reported. Furthermore, confusion in aid distribution could inadvertently discriminate against certain religious or socioeconomic groups, acting as an indirect restriction on religious practices.

**D. Can people assemble freely to worship, discuss their religion and teach it?**

The application of legal provisions varies, with survey participants indicating bias in local law enforcement. While people can generally assemble freely to worship, discuss, and teach their religion, challenges remain. Some religious communities struggle to access or preserve sacred spaces, and there are reports of harassment during religious practices, with police surveillance creating an environment of intimidation.

**E. Can they rent or purchase places of assembly? Are worshippers and places of worship subject to harassment?**

Regarding the ability to rent or purchase places of assembly, minority religions, particularly Christians, face no legal restrictions and can rent premises for religious activities. However, disparities exist in the registration durations of buildings and organisations, with Buddhist pagodas enjoying permanent permissions compared to the time-limited registrations for Islamic and Christian places of worship. Harassment of worshippers and places of worship occurs, with sacred places being affected due to development projects. Many Christians in rural areas lack church buildings and meet in private homes, but these gatherings sometimes face restrictions because personal houses are not recognized as registered religious buildings. The government has not registered new Christian denominations or churches in recent years, and obtaining permission to build new church buildings is rare, often justified by census data dictating a limited number of religious buildings based on population percentages.

## **F. Do individuals enjoy the Freedom to Promote Religion?**

The majority of responses indicate that individuals or groups wishing to promote their religion must first seek permission or go through an administrative process. Groups and individuals face restrictions on advertising their religion, requiring permission from authorities to disseminate religious materials. In Takeo province, it was mentioned that individuals who promote their religion without the necessary license or permission have faced problems and some penalties. Even with permission, there are limitations on how and where religious promotion can occur, such as restrictions on door-to-door propagation of religion.

In summary, while provincial authorities understand Cambodian law to generally permit freedom of religion or belief, there are notable disparities in the treatment of minority religions and implementation of these laws, as already evidenced from the literature survey. Challenges include assembling freely for worship, promoting one's religion, and instances of harassment, particularly for non-state religions like Christianity and indigenous belief systems. These issues suggest that applying legal provisions may not be as equitable as the legal framework intends.

## **5.2. FoRB Status of Different Religious/Belief Communities**

This section evaluates the state of Freedom of Religion or Belief among diverse religious communities within the target groups. It assesses their access to social services, the availability of sacred spaces, and the accommodations for their religious and belief practices.

### **5.2.1. Equal Service and Support for Different Religious/Belief Communities**

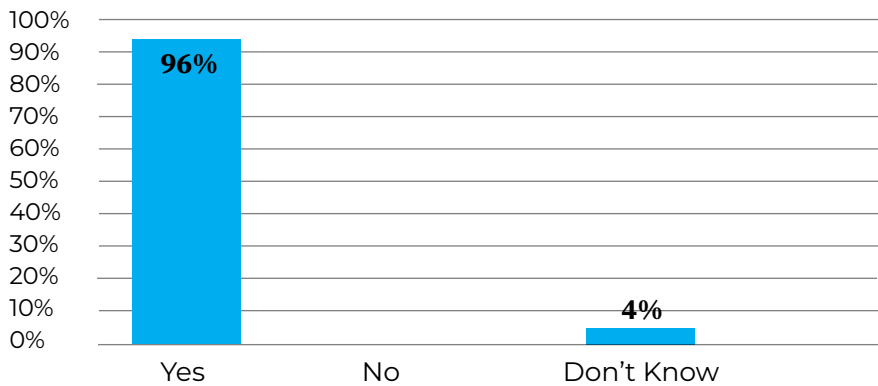
This section draws from the survey and the interviews with religious and community leaders examining access to social services and support among religious and belief communities.

The religious leaders highlighted several key themes regarding the relationship between people of different faiths in their communities and the challenges faced when practicing their religious beliefs. One prominent theme is the notion of equal service and support. The leaders acknowledged that individuals receive equal access to education, healthcare, and economic assistance, regardless of their religion.



96% of respondents reported receiving equal services compared with people of other religions including education, health care, and economic support. One respondent shared “We have access to social services alike whether we are Buddhists or Christians as long as we’re poor,” and another one said “We receive equal service. For economic support, there is no discrimination against any religions.” This indicates a foundational level of equality in essential services, which is crucial for maintaining social cohesion.

**Can people of your religion receive the following services fully as people of other religions including education, health care, economic support, ect?**



Some responses highlight improvements over time, particularly regarding economic support. This suggests that previous disparities are being addressed, leading to a more equitable distribution of resources across different religious communities. For example, initiatives to provide financial assistance to underprivileged groups have become more inclusive, reflecting progress in addressing economic inequalities that may have existed in the past. A respondent reported, “Unlike in the past, economic support is also given equally now.”

However, challenges with economic support are occasionally mentioned, indicating that access to financial resources are not always perceived as equal. Some respondents note issues such as unequal distribution or lack of clarity on how economic support is allocated. As one respondent said, “We receive equal service. For economic support, there is no discrimination about religions, but there is a small problem with those small groups who may get more support than others due to some relation”. These challenges highlight

areas where further efforts are needed to ensure that all community members benefit equally from economic assistance programs.

In summary, despite some challenges and uncertainties, many respondents expressed overall satisfaction with the level of freedom of religion or belief at the local level. They reported receiving equal services and support, which highlights a generally positive perception of the situation. This satisfaction reflects a broad sense of contentment with the efforts to uphold religious freedom and provide equitable access to services, reinforcing the importance of ongoing efforts to maintain and enhance these positive outcomes.

### **5.2.2. Freedom of Religion or Beliefs and Indigenous People (as described by Community Leaders)**

The Indigenous peoples in Cambodia's forest communities face profound challenges in practicing their traditional beliefs and rituals. The pressures of modernization, development projects, and external interference significantly impact their sacred spaces and cultural identity. The result of these developments is summarized in the words of a respondent,

*“There’s no sacred place to pray for the community; local people start to gradually lose faith in their ancestors; lose prestige, culture, and ancestors.”*

The survey data reveals the multifaceted nature of these issues, highlighting the threats to their religious freedom and the adverse effects on their spiritual well-being.

*“Climate change, loss of forest, wild animals will find habitat in other countries, and we are sad because we have no more sacred places where we can pray.”*

One of the most significant issues is the destruction of sacred forests and ponds, which are integral to the spiritual and cultural practices of Indigenous communities. This commentary showcases a sad picture, not only of the loss of forests but also of the spiritual devastation caused by the loss of sacred ponds and groves:

*“Change locations of (dwelling and sacred places) because we lose the forest.”*

*“It’s hard to change places and we lose a lot of sacred places,”*

as we also

*“Lose the statues of guardian spirits or change their sacred locations.”*

These sites are often targeted by criminal activities such as deforestation, removal of sacred sculptures, and land seizure. The involvement of elite groups, armed forces, police, and private companies exacerbates the situation, with Chinese companies frequently implicated in land-clearing activities that desecrate local sacred sites.

*“Deforestation is caused by the elite including armed forces, police forces, private companies, authority.”*

The encroachment of sacred places leads to social disorder and conflict within these communities. The seizure of community land, including cutting down sacred trees, results in the loss of crucial cultural and religious spaces. This not only disrupts the physical landscape but also erodes the cultural identity and traditions of the indigenous people. The resulting social tensions are further heightened by harassment from others, adding another layer of conflict and stress.

Indigenous communities also face significant challenges in practicing their faith due to external factors. The obstruction of traditional cer-

emonies and spiritual practices is a direct consequence of deforestation and development activities. Illegal land clearance by private companies for purposes of cultivation not only impacts the environment but also devastates sacred spaces, making it difficult for communities to access these areas for religious purposes. Disputes over land ownership further obstruct access to sacred sites, impeding the celebration of traditional ceremonies and the maintenance of spiritual practices.

The loss of access to sacred sites and the impact on traditional ceremonies have a profound effect on the spiritual well-being of these communities. The unlawful destruction of sacred sites and the lack of access to them hinder the ability of Indigenous people to perform their religious rituals and maintain their cultural heritage and identity. This loss of cultural and religious spaces contributes to a broader sense of cultural and identity loss, affecting the community's cohesion and spiritual resilience.

*“Sometimes we fall sick because we missed doing our ritual ceremonies for the guardian spirits. We could only worship in mind, but we don't have particular places to worship them.”*

It is not only the destruction of their natural habitats that results in the loss of practicing their religion. In addition, indigenous peoples in forest communities also experience specific FoRB-related issues, particularly concerning their traditional beliefs and practices. These communities often rely on animistic or ancestral worship, which is being marginalized by mainstream religious practices. Development projects frequently encroach on sacred spaces, disrupting their religious practices and connection to sacred land. Additionally, government policies and broader societal attitudes sometimes dismiss indigenous beliefs as primitive or backward, further undermining their religious freedom. Indigenous groups may find some support from legal protections or advocacy by non-governmental organizations; these measures are often insufficient to counteract the pervasive pressures of modernization and religious homogenization. As respondents reported,

*“We change places and lose our sacred forest”*

These challenges are compounded by the involvement of powerful external entities and the resulting social disorder, highlighting the urgent need for protective measures to preserve the cultural and religious integrity of communities by protecting their sacred sites.

### **5.2.3. Challenges of practicing belief of people of different faiths (as described by local adherents)**

This section examines the perspectives of local adherents from various faiths regarding the challenges they face in practicing their religious beliefs and rituals. These insights reveal significant issues that were not highlighted by community leaders, shedding light on the daily struggles of individuals in maintaining their religious practices and the cultural heritage of their communities.

#### **A. Lack of Access to Places of Worship:**

Many respondents express concerns about the lack of adequate places of worship, which creates difficulties in conducting special religious ceremonies and regular religious gatherings. This shortage forces some individuals to seek alternative, often unsuitable, locations for their religious activities, leading to a sense of displacement and frustration. For example, in some villages, religious activities are restricted when held in private homes not registered as official religious sites, further complicating the ability to practice their faith.

*“Losing statues of guardian spirits and changing their locations.”*

## **B. Destruction and Loss of Sacred Sites:**

The destruction and loss of sacred sites due to deforestation and land clearance by companies, (described as criminal acts by the indigenous people) are recurring themes in the responses. These losses not only hinder religious practices but also deeply impact the cultural and spiritual identity of the affected forest communities. For instance, clearing forests for development projects has led to the desecration of sacred ponds and forests, which are integral to the spiritual life of indigenous communities.

*“These activities (deforestation and land clearance) affect our beliefs and we would lose our culture and identity. The places that we use to worship are destroyed. We lose the sacred forest, sacred lake, and ancient temple fences. Only small hills remain... Sometimes we had fever which could result from missing ritual ceremonies for the guardian spirits. We could only worship in mind, but we don't have particular places to worship them.”*

*“[...] We could only worship in mind, but we don't have particular places to worship them.”*

*“Our praying is not as effective as it was previously.”*

## **C. Challenges in Practicing Rituals:**

Significant obstacles in practicing religious rituals include restrictions imposed by authorities or interference from external factors. These restrictions prevent communities from fully engaging in their religious traditions, causing disruptions and a decline in the vibrancy of their cultural practices. Several respondents mention efforts to seek assistance from local authorities or take legal action to address the protection and preservation of sacred sites. This reflects the ongoing struggle to preserve these important cultural landmarks.

*“We are allowed to go worship at sacred sites that are not under strict control but for some places, we are not allowed to go there so we can't worship there.”*

## **D. Impact on Community Well-being:**

The impact of losing sacred sites and traditions on the community's well-being is profound. Respondents report sadness, frustration, and concern about the decline in faith and cultural identity. The erosion of these spiritual and cultural foundations affects the overall morale and cohesion of the community, leading to a sense of loss and disconnection from their heritage.

*“We are sad because we have no more sacred places to worship ... I regret not only the loss of forests but also the loss of minerals in the ground. I’m really sorry.”*

### **E. Environmental Concerns:**

Environmental concerns, such as deforestation and climate change, further complicate the challenges faced by religious communities. These factors threaten sacred sites, making it increasingly difficult to protect and preserve these areas for future generations. The degradation of the natural environment that houses these sacred sites exacerbates the difficulties in maintaining traditional religious practices.

*“Trees are cut down by private companies, resulting in the loss of forests.”*

*“Climate change, loss of forest, wild animals will find habitat in other countries.”*

*“Lose sacred places and the identity of indigenous people; the places where we used to pray are gone; the places where we used to let our cattle graze on are gone. We lost many places where we used to extract latex. We lose our livelihoods; we do farming because we have land and we cultivate many*

*types of vegetables; but now we have nothing to rely on.”*

The data highlights issues adherents face in preserving their religious freedom and protecting their sacred sites. The responses emphasize the need for collaborative efforts between communities, religious leaders, and authorities to address these challenges. By working together, these groups can help ensure that religious practices and cultural identities are respected and preserved for future generations.

In conclusion, the assessment reveals that Freedom of Religion or Belief enjoys relatively high levels when considering the equality of social services provided to each religious or belief group. Religious leaders in Cambodia report that people of all faiths receive equal access to essential services like education, health-care, and economic support. While there have been improvements in financial support, occasional issues with resource distribution persist. Overall, there is a positive perception of religious freedom and equal support at the local level. However, regarding access to sacred spaces, the Freedom of Religion or Belief of Indigenous communities face significant challenges. Modernization and development projects destroy sacred sites, disrupting cultural identity and religious practices,

leading to social conflicts and loss of cultural heritage. Followers of various faiths also struggle with inadequate worship spaces, restricted rituals, and environmental impacts on sacred sites, highlighting the need for collaborative efforts to preserve religious freedom and cultural heritage.

### 5.3. FoRB Status Inside Own Religious/Belief Communities

This section evaluates the Freedom of Religion or Belief among adherents of various religions or beliefs by examining their rights to conversion, bodily autonomy, and gender roles within their religious or belief practices.

#### 5.3.1. General Practices: Choice of Conversion, Dress Code, Body Decision

##### A. Choice of Conversion

Changing one’s religion of birth and accepting another faith is documented in the literature survey. 66% of the respondents reported they feel free to convert to another religion.

As some respondents mentioned *“Some Buddhists change to believe in Christianity”* but *“there is no hostility toward those who convert to other religions”*. Hence, people can freely choose and change their religion and hold on to the religion or beliefs of their personal choice. The respondents were clear that this choice is a personal matter. Family and friends may counsel for or against it, but the right to ‘convert’ is a matter of personal belief and choice. *“It’s their preference, so we can’t force them”* and *“If there are people who convert to another religion, we try to talk to them about God so that they return to our religion without being forced,”* said two respondents.

Q: Do members of your community feel free to convert to another religion?	Christianity	Buddhism	Islam	Ethnic minority & Buddhism	Total
Yes	24	34	8	13	79 (66%)
No	11	11	7	2	31 (26%)
Don't know	0	8	1	0	9
Total	35	53	16	14	119

From the survey, factors influencing religious conversion range from personal beliefs and experiences to economic conditions and the influence of others, reflecting a broad spectrum of individual motivations and community attitudes.

## B. Dress Code

Q: Does your religion or belief set any necessary dress code?	Christianity	Buddhism	Islam	Animism & Buddhism	Total
Yes	1	25	17 (94%)	5	48 (39%)
No	34	28	1	9	72 (59%)
Don't know	0	1	0	0	1
Total	35	54	18	13	121

The data reveals a prevailing theme of personal freedom across various religious and cultural contexts. In terms of dress, there are some guidelines, such as modesty recommendations, especially in Islamic communities. As shown in the table, 94% of the respondents reported having a necessary dress code set in their religious practice. As stated by a respondent “For Islam, women cannot wear shorts. Women need to wear clothes that cover all the body except her eyes” and another “When there is any ceremony, we wear Khmer dress like silk skirts, and traditional white embroidered shirts. For those who perform spiritual possessing need to dress in white.”

However, the overarching sentiment, 59%, emphasizes individual choice. Traditional and cultural attire are valued for special occasions, but there is a general acceptance

of diverse clothing preferences. As respondents shared “In my religion, people have the freedom to wear according to the occasion” and “In [public] events, we want to promote our culture, so we wear round-necked shirts with two pockets, or tube shape shirts. But not everyone wears it like this. In worship ceremonies, they wear normal clothes.”

## C. Body Decision

There is a spectrum of beliefs from religious leaders concerning personal decisions about one’s body in the KII interviews. While some religions have clear stances on issues like abortion and birth control, others leave room for individual choice, especially when considering health and family planning. Autonomy and personal circumstances are consistently highlighted throughout the survey responses. Below are several



responses from different religious and belief groups illustrating the range of beliefs.

*“In our religions, abortion is not allowed, because this is an act of killing,” said a respondent.*

*“Birth control is allowed to protect people’s life. Prophet Mohamad said the first is ok for the mother. However, with the third child, the mother is getting sick (Diabetes) and sometimes the mother needs surgery for baby delivery. It is very dangerous for the mother. That is why birth control is allowed for the mother.”*

*“According to Kouy’s belief, Kouy people are allowed to use birth control.”*

*“The religion allows someone to get an abortion.”*

*“Birth control use depends on the family and their financial situation.”*

*“Abortion is allowed, there is no problem.”*

In summary, the survey paints a picture of societies where personal freedom in dress, bodily decisions, or religious beliefs, is valued and respected across diverse religious and cultural backgrounds.

### **5.3.2. FoRB and Gender Aspects**

The impact of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) on vulnerable groups within Cambodian communities reveals a multifaceted and often challenging dynamic. This section focuses on the specific experiences of women, persons with different sexual orientations/LGBTQIA+, and Indigenous peoples. Each group encounters unique issues influenced by the interplay of religious teachings, cultural norms, and societal attitudes. Together they shape their rights and acceptance within their communities.

#### **A. FoRB and Women**

#### **Gender and Religious Leadership in Cambodia:**

Cambodian women navigate a complex landscape within religious contexts. Across various faiths, their access to leadership roles remains limited, reflecting deeply rooted gender biases.

## Unequal Paths:

- Buddhism: Despite its emphasis on equality, women face challenges reaching leadership positions equivalent to monks.
- Islam: Here, restrictions are even stricter, often prohibiting women from leading prayers or holding prominent roles like Imam or Hakim.
- Christianity: Similar trends prevail, with women barred from becoming pastors and often seen as holding less religious authority than men.
- Animism: While tradition reserves community leadership for men, interestingly, the role of spirit mediums and diviners is exclusively female.

These leadership restrictions are accompanied by gender-biased inheritance rules that favour men, further entrenching economic disparities. Yet there is a ray of hope at least regarding inheritance laws for Muslim women:

*“In terms of inheritance, sons get a little more than daughters, as I remember. But we have discussed if we can revise this rule or not. The later generations who get higher education are now discussing that we should revise this rule so that the sons and daughters inherit equally.”*

*This idea is discussed also based on the fact that sons normally serve parents less than daughters do”*

Additionally, traditional beliefs discourage women from pursuing education, limiting their opportunities for personal and professional development. Globalization and changing societal norms have resulted in a gradual change in attitude, however, progress remains uneven and slow across the different religious communities. Respondents said,

*“[Access to education between boys and girls] has not been equal yet. I think girls should not study more.”*

*“[In my religion, people] hold the [mindset that] women should do housework and take good care of their children.”*

While some religions show signs of evolving beliefs influenced by globalization and changing societal norms, progress is inconsistent. Additionally, the interplay of cultural beliefs and religious teachings further complicates the landscape of gender roles and rights, making it difficult for women to achieve true equality and inclusion within their religious communities.

As respondents put it,

*“In my religion, such a change of [gender-biased] mindset has already taken place. In Islam, women can play the role of district councils, and commune councils, and some women have a role in the National Assembly.*

*This is because women are highly educated. But [educated] women are less than [educated] men”*

*“I think men are more valued because men can walk farther than women safely. But women find it harder to go outside than men because women are deprived of the freedom to go out.”*

*“Women don’t have the right to fully do what they want to. Example: men can work or hand out at night but women can’t due to safety concerns.”*

In summary, the FoRB landscape for vulnerable groups in Cambodia highlights significant inequalities and challenges. Women face entrenched gender biases that limit their roles and rights within religious contexts. There are variations in the degree and nature of gender discrimination across religions and common patterns of inequality and restrictions persist. The interplay of

religious teachings, cultural norms, and evolving societal attitudes reshapes the landscape of gender roles, rights, and acceptance within religious communities. LGBTQIA+ individuals encounter profound discrimination and marginalization, and indigenous peoples struggle to preserve their religious practices in the face of external pressures and societal disregard.

Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the interplay between religious teachings, cultural norms, and evolving societal attitudes. Concerted efforts also need to be made to promote inclusivity and protect the rights of all individuals within these communities.

## **B. FoRB and LGBTQIA+**

The survey data reveals a complex landscape of attitudes and practices towards LGBTQIA+ individuals within different religious communities in Cambodia. These attitudes, influenced by traditional religious teachings, often result in limited acceptance, discrimination, and unequal treatment, reflecting deep-seated biases that challenge the rights and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals. In Christian communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals face limited acceptance, with some respondents expressing tolerance but not full acceptance or

equality. Traditional interpretations of Christian teachings often lead to restrictions on LGBTQIA+ participation in religious practices. Many respondents view being LGBTQIA+ as a serious sin, which can result in severe consequences, including rejection, violence, and even the refusal to bury deceased LGBTQIA+ individuals, reflecting a profound lack of acceptance and respect.

“Sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage are regarded as falling short of God’s purpose in the Bible for human beings”. Belief aside, community response may vary:

Islamic communities exhibit similar patterns of limited acceptance towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. While some respondents may tolerate LGBTQIA+ individuals, full acceptance is rare. Efforts to promote women’s rights and equality often coexist with continued inequities based on gender and sexual orientation. A minority of respondents acknowledge that LGBTQIA+ individuals face discrimination, violence, or expulsion within their communities, highlighting the significant risks and challenges they encounter.

*“No! Homosexuals are not valued. If they treat each other like friends and relatives, they value them, but if they love each other as a couple, they do not value them.”*

*“There are people who love the same sex in my community. But in religion, this is seriously prohibited.”*

In Buddhist communities, traditional teachings might be used to explain gender disparities, such as the exclusion of women from becoming monks. This doctrinal approach extends to attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals, where the emphasis is often placed on education and understanding rather than outright acceptance or rejection. This approach can lead to a more nuanced but still limited acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals, where education about LGBTQIA+ issues is encouraged, yet full inclusion remains elusive.

*“[...] in the village, there are lesbians. Villagers accept and value them without discriminating.” And,*

*“We cannot use violence against them or dismiss them. It is their right to love someone of the same sex.”*

Encouraging and socially inclusive responses notwithstanding, persons with different sexual orientations and LGBTQIA+ individuals face profound challenges within religious communities. Many religions view non-heteronormative identities through a lens of moral disapproval,

leading to social ostracism and discrimination. This manifests in various ways, including exclusion from religious rituals and community events, and in extreme cases, verbal or physical abuse. The intersection of religious condemnation and cultural stigmatization creates a hostile environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals, limiting their ability to express their identities freely. Some communities might tolerate LGBTQIA+ members if they remain discreet, but open expression of their orientation often results in significant social penalties. Efforts to promote acceptance and understanding are sporadic and generally lack the support of religious institutions, making advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights within these contexts particularly challenging.

As one respondent states,

*“[People in my religion] criticize [LGBTIQ individuals]. Men can’t be in love with men, and women can’t be in love with women.”*

Overall, the survey data underscores that religious teachings and practices in Cambodia significantly influence attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals, often resulting in limited acceptance and significant challenges. These religiously rooted biases contribute to a climate where LGBTQIA+ individuals struggle for recognition, equality, and respect

within their communities. The interplay of traditional beliefs and modern societal pressures continues to shape the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals, highlighting the need for ongoing dialogue and advocacy for greater inclusivity and understanding.

In conclusion, the Freedom of Religion or Belief of individuals in the study tends to be well guaranteed when looking at the choice of conversion and decision on their body. Most respondents feel free to convert to another religion without facing hostility, emphasizing personal choice. While family and friends may advise, the decision to convert is ultimately individual. Dress codes vary, with some religious guidelines like modesty in Islam, but overall, the most majority of respondents highlight individual freedom in clothing choices, with traditional attire often reserved for special occasions. Beliefs on bodily decisions, such as abortion and birth control, differ among religions. Some strictly oppose abortion, viewing it as killing, while others accept birth control for health reasons, underscoring personal autonomy. Women in Cambodian religious communities face significant gender biases, limiting their roles in leadership across Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Animism. Cultural norms and inheritance laws further entrench eco-

conomic disparities, despite some progress from changing societal attitudes. LGBTQIA+ individuals experience limited acceptance, discrimination, and social ostracism within religious communities. Traditional teachings often lead to exclusion from religious practices and social penalties, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity and advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights.

## 5.4. Inter-Faith Connections

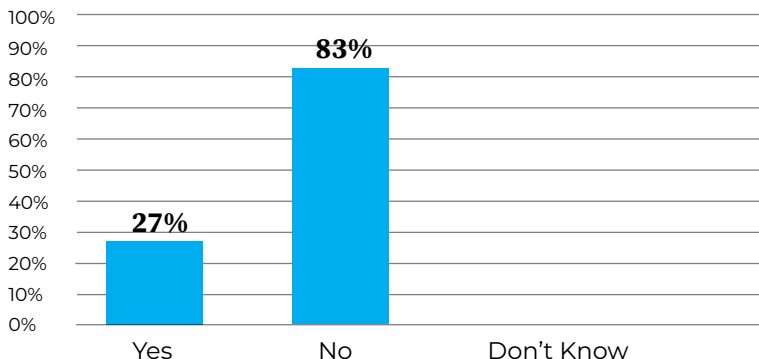
This section explores the interconnections among various religious or belief groups, focusing on their relationships, interactions, and connecting factors such as traditional beliefs, practices, and receptivity to mutual learning of each other’s values.

### 5.4.1. Inter-faith Relationships in Communities

Interfaith relationships in Cambodian communities reveals a complex but largely positive dynamic, marked by efforts to engage in dialogue, foster mutual respect, and learn about one another’s religious practices. Despite challenges, the overarching sentiment is collaboration, shared goals, and a desire to contribute to community cohesion. Yet there is evidence from religious leaders (KII) to demonstrate that there is room for concern around tolerance.

As this graph shows, except for Islam, all other minorities indicated that they face some harassment, with the most troubled being those who practice

#### Is there religious harrassment from other religions or faiths toward your religion or faith?



animism. Almost 27% of respondents had experienced religious harassment or discrimination.

### **5.4.2. Traditional Beliefs and Practices**

However, traditional beliefs and practices remain integral to many communities, serving as important cultural and social gatherings. These ceremonies are vital for communication and planning within the community, reinforcing the social fabric through shared cultural heritage. For instance, when interviewed, many religious leaders said that religious ceremonies and celebrations, such as funerals, and Christma, are crucial in bringing religions together. As one religious leader said,

*“[...] and sometimes the community organized ceremonies during the New Year and the birth of Buddhism and invited all religions to come together. For example, when people of different religions come together, they can pray in their own way.”*

### **5.4.3. Interfaith Practices of Dialogue**

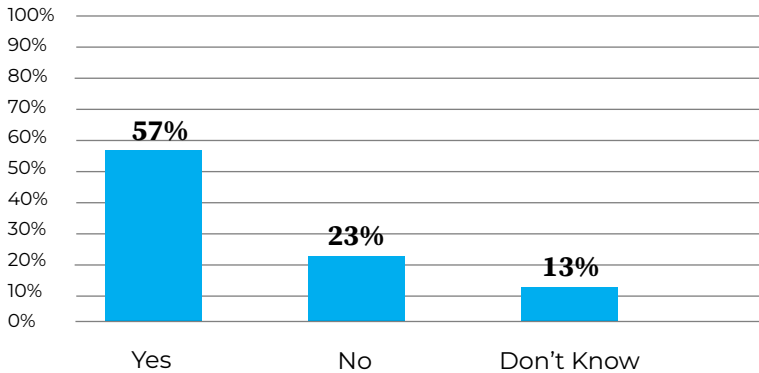
Interfaith programs and discussions bring together members of different religions to discuss community issues, social concerns, environmen-

tal challenges, and religious topics. These programs create platforms for mutual learning and dialogue, allowing participants to explore and compare religious teachings, such as the differences between Pali theory and the Samray language. Additionally, community members often collaborate on shared activities to address common goals related to training, education and health, emphasizing the values and objectives that unite people of diverse faiths. “Yes, we had a program called *Interfaith*, we invited different religions so that we could talk and understand each other regardless of one religion. From the past until now, we organize programs, we always invited other religions to join together without discrimination and we could even form a group,” reported a religious leader. Another said, “We want to have an interfaith festival talking about each religion so that everyone can understand it.”

### 5.4.4. Interfaith Respect and Harmony

Despite some harassment or discrimination, participating in each other’s religious festivals is not uncommon, and 57% of the religious leaders surveyed discussed their participation in festivals of other faiths. This celebration of festivals other than those of one’s religion, especially when modelled by religious leaders, is crucial to developing inter-faith harmony and preventing harassment and discrimination.

#### **In your community, do people from different religions attend each other’s religious festivals?**



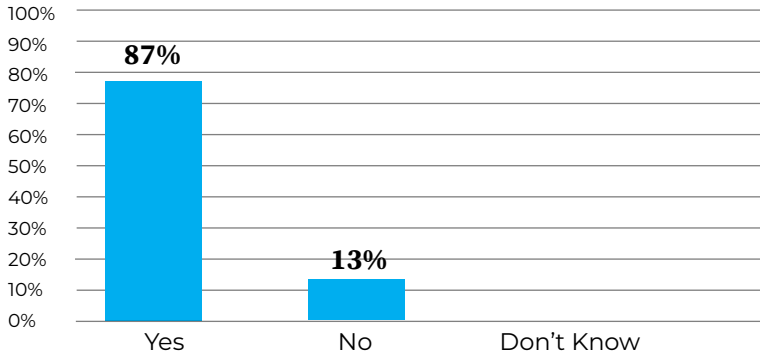
Mutual respect is a prevailing theme in these communities, where individuals from different religious backgrounds coexist without prominent discrimination. This respect is evident in the frequent collaboration and support for each other’s events, which fosters understanding and strengthens interfaith relationships. Shared festivities, including exchanging food items or gifts during religious festivals, further illustrate the deep-seated respect and participation in each other’s traditions. One respondent says,

*“Activities that bring people of different religions together are planting trees together, workshops, fish release programs, human rights programs, and women’s rights. Anything can be done if we have money.”*



### 5.4.5. Learning About Each Other's Religious Beliefs and Practices

**According to your religious principles, can you learn about other religions?**



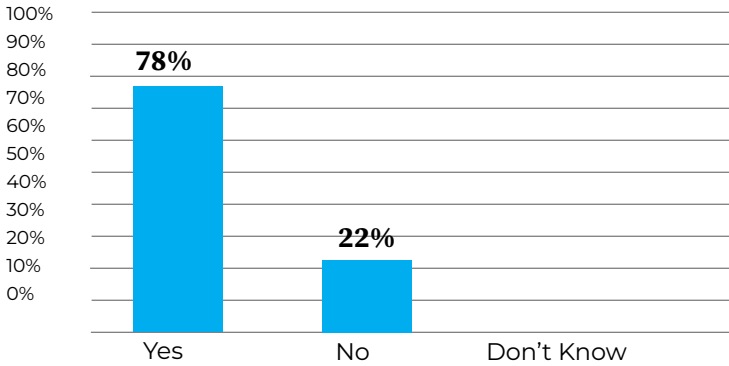
There is an open willingness among community members to learn about other religions, driven by a desire to understand different beliefs, practices, and their underlying reasons. Educational initiatives, such as training programs open to individuals of all religions, highlight this commitment to interfaith learning. Some community members also participate in each other's religious rituals and festivals, providing opportunities for first-hand learning and deeper understanding. 87% of the leaders declared that their faith did not prevent them from learning about the religion and beliefs of others, thus demonstrating an openness to inter-faith learning opportunities. As one respondent reported,

*“When we talk about Jesus, he (a man) asked who is Jesus? Then he came to the church to worship because he wanted to know how believers of Jesus worship. When he came, he saw how friendly the believers were. Eventually, he also believed in Jesus.”*



### 5.4.6. Learning Religious Values and Its Impact on Local

**For yourself, do you want to learn about other religions?**



#### **Communities**

The impact of religious values on local communities is significant, contributing to community building and social development. Religious ceremonies and events often serve as occasions for collaborative efforts, such as road construction and pure drinking water initiatives, demonstrating the positive influence of religious values on community welfare. Each one of the participating leaders understood that each religion promotes doing good deeds, understanding, respect, and cooperation, which underscores the broader societal benefits of interfaith respect and harmony, and 78% expressed their open willingness to learn of, and from religions other than their own. As some respondents reported,

*“Firstly, humanitarian work, secondly, there is the construction of roads, so there is a joint inspection and assistance from the Muslim Brotherhood as well as Buddhism, so that the road can be made public.”*

*“If there were any occasions that need money to be collected, they will join with their money. Whenever we collect money to build a bridge or something else, they will join us.”*

In summary, the analysis of interfaith relationships in Cambodian communities highlights a landscape where dialogue, mutual respect, and a willingness to learn about each other’s beliefs are central themes. These efforts and the positive impact of religious values on commu-

nity welfare, reflect a strong foundation for fostering interfaith understanding and collaboration. While challenges remain, the desire among community members to build stronger relationships across religious lines is a testament to the resilience and potential of these interfaith dynamics.

### 5.4.7. Lack of Understanding and Communication:

Despite these positive aspects, we still see misunderstanding and miscommunication between different religious groups. This knowledge gap can lead to misunderstandings or communication difficulties, particularly between Muslims and Buddhists. As one respondent emphasized about another religion,

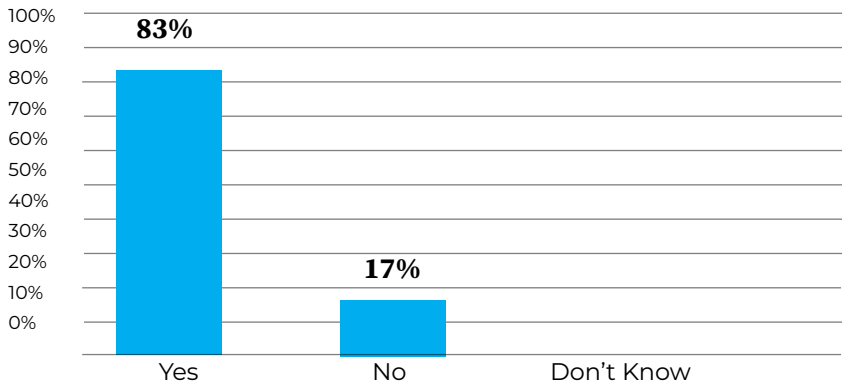
*“Because it’s against our belief; we do not follow superstitious beliefs”*

Attitudes to personal religion ranged from,

*“Belief and practice don’t affect anyone” and “This is the right of personal religious belief,” as well as the other extreme,*

*“Cut off that person; don’t mind; but follow your own beliefs”*

### Do you want to resolve that religious conflict?



Religious leaders recognize that this lack of interfaith dialogue and awareness can exacerbate tensions and misunderstandings within communities. However, they also emphasize ongoing efforts to resolve these conflicts through dialogue and communication. Many leaders advocate for interfaith programs and direct conversations to promote understanding and respect among religious groups. As shown in the table, 83% of the religious leaders interviewed demonstrated willingness to address religious conflict in their community. *“I want to learn about the religious beliefs of others, to know more,”* said a respondent. Another reported,

*“We’ve been involved in inter-faith events. Sometimes the community organizes ceremonies during the New Year and the birth of Buddhism and invites all religions to come together. For example, when people of different religions come together, they can pray in their own way”*

Overall, the perspectives of religious leaders reveal both the challenges and the proactive measures being taken to address issues related to religious beliefs and rituals within their communities. While there are obstacles to interfaith relations, there is also a concerted effort to foster dialogue, understanding, and

cooperation among diverse religious communities at the local level. These efforts are crucial for building a more inclusive and harmonious society where religious freedoms and rights of all individuals are respected and protected.

In conclusion, interfaith relationships in Cambodian communities are generally positive, with efforts to foster mutual respect and understanding through dialogue and shared activities. However, challenges remain, particularly with harassment faced by religious minorities, notably animists. Traditional ceremonies and festivals are key in bringing religious groups together, promoting cultural cohesion and community planning. Interfaith programs help different religious groups collaborate on shared goals in education, health, and social concerns. Participation in each other’s religious festivals and events is common, highlighting a significant level of mutual respect. Educational efforts and openness to learning about other faiths further strengthen interfaith harmony, with many leaders expressing a willingness to learn about different religious beliefs and practices.

## 5.5. The Essence of FoRB Promotion

This section aims to inspire and motivate the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief by highlighting the positive aspects of religious practices, teachings, and values. It explores their societal impact, the influential role of religious leaders, and how religious practices contribute to conflict resolution.

### 5.5.1. Benefits to Community by the Practice of Religion and Belief

*“Taking care of each other. In society, [religion] educates people to do no harm to others, educates people to have morality and to not discriminate.”*

This section highlights the numerous benefits religion or belief brings to local communities, as reported by leaders and community members. The responses illustrate how religious practices contribute positively to community life, promoting good deeds, respect for beliefs, human rights, and environmental protection, benefiting the whole community, regardless of individual religious affiliations.

### A. Promotion of Good Deeds and Human Rights:

Religious practices significantly promote good deeds and human rights within communities. Many religious groups emphasize actions that protect the environment, support the poor, advocate for gender equality, and educate people about morality and respect. Many respondents across different religious and belief groups provided instances of community members distributing gifts to the needy, participating in environmental conservation efforts, and organizing educational programs to foster moral behaviour and respect for human rights. *“Based on the teaching from the god, we value people equally, and people have equal rights,”* as respondent said.

### B. Respect for Beliefs:

Respect for individual beliefs is another crucial benefit derived from religious practices. Communities uphold the rights of individuals to hold their own beliefs and participate in religious activities without facing discrimination. Activities such as peace-building initiatives and educational programs are common and aimed at promoting understanding and tolerance among different religious groups. These efforts help to create an inclusive environment

where diverse beliefs are respected and valued. Responding to a question about how their religion contributes to the protection of human rights, a respondent raised *“Respect the rights of beliefs of others;”* and another said, *“Based on the teaching from the god, we value people equally, and people have equal rights.”*

### **C. Rights to Education and Life:**

The recognition of rights to education and life is strongly reflected in religious practices. Communities actively support education, work to prevent violence, and protect natural resources to ensure the well-being of present and future generations. For instance, religious groups might run educational programs, advocate for non-violence, and engage in environmental conservation projects, thereby enhancing the quality of life within the community. A respondent said, *Religions promote the rights to study or get an education, and the rights to live a life.”*

### **D. Protection of Community and Environment:**

Protection of the community and the environment is a central theme in many religious practices. Planting trees, preventing deforestation, and supporting wildlife conservation are common. These efforts highlight the role of religious beliefs in fostering a

sense of responsibility towards the environment and the broader community, ensuring sustainable practices that benefit all. For instance, one respondent said, *“Celebrating the guardian spirit ceremony can help protect people from illness and help them to be safe from anything, and protect forests, vegetables, and fruits for the later generations.”*

### **E. Values and Morality**

Religious teachings guide community members in adhering to moral principles, avoiding harmful behaviours, and promoting positive actions that benefit society. *“All religions have their values and benefits for people. Without religions, people may not have the direction of what is good or bad,”* reported a respondent. These teachings provide a moral framework that encourages individuals to engage in activities that support the common good. Examples include community service projects, moral education programs, and initiatives to prevent violence and promote peace.

In summary, while there are areas where further improvement and interfaith dialogue may be needed, the practice of religion or belief benefits local communities. The data reflects diverse practices and beliefs, emphasizing goodness, respecting rights, and protecting the well-being

of individuals and the environment. These contributions underscore the positive impact of religious practices on community life, fostering a sense of unity and shared responsibility.

### **5.5.2. Impact of Religious Teaching and Values**

Religious teachings impact value formation and the manifestation of these values within local communities. The data reveals that religious values are pivotal in guiding individuals toward positive behaviour, fostering mutual respect, and contributing to societal well-being. The influence of religious teachings is evident in various aspects of community life, demonstrating their significance in shaping ethical behaviour and promoting community cohesion.

Religious teachings are powerful in promoting good deeds and encouraging acts of kindness and charity. Individuals across different faiths believe that their religions guide them to follow the right path and engage in altruistic behaviours. For example, community members participate in charity work, inspired by their religious principles, to help those in need. This widespread commitment to performing good deeds underscores the role of religion in cultivating a culture of compassion and generosity.

The openness to community education and sharing reflects a willingness to learn from each other's religious beliefs and practices. Educational sessions and sharing gatherings help individuals gain insights into diverse religious traditions. This mutual learning fosters a deeper understanding and respect for different faiths, promoting harmony and reducing religious conflicts. For instance, interfaith dialogues and community meetings enable people to appreciate the common values shared by various religions, strengthening community bonds.

Religious values are actively translated into actions that benefit society, demonstrating the practical application of these teachings. Community members engage in activities such as environmental conservation, support for education, and other charitable works motivated by their religious beliefs. This contribution to society highlights the transformative power of religious values in driving positive social change. Examples include religious groups organizing clean-up drives, supporting local schools, and providing aid during crises, all rooted in their faith-driven commitment to societal welfare.

Respect for diversity is another significant outcome of religious teachings, with individuals recognizing the value of all religions in

contributing to personal and societal well-being. People from different religious backgrounds show respect for each other's beliefs and practices, fostering a culture of inclusivity and mutual respect. This respect for diversity helps create a more cohesive and tolerant community where differences are celebrated rather than feared.

Guidance and moral uprightness derived from religious teachings provide a framework for leading an ethical life and addressing community challenges. Religious principles encourage individuals to make positive contributions to their communities, reinforcing moral values and ethical behaviour. For instance, religious leaders often emphasize principles such as honesty, integrity, and compassion, guiding their followers to embody these values in their daily lives. This moral guidance helps individuals navigate complex social dynamics and contribute positively to their communities.

Overall, the data highlights the critical role of religious values in shaping the behaviour and actions of individuals within local communities. These values foster a sense of unity, promote altruism, and contribute to the betterment of society, demonstrating the enduring impact of religious teachings on community life. Integrating these values into

everyday actions underscores the importance of religion in building ethical, compassionate, and cohesive communities.

### **5.5.3. Contributions of Religious Leaders to Their Communities**

Religious leaders play a pivotal role in shaping beliefs, practices, and interfaith relationships within their communities. Their influence extends beyond spiritual guidance to fostering mutual respect and understanding among diverse faith groups. The data highlights various aspects of leadership, from educational initiatives to conflict resolution, emphasizing the leaders' contributions to community cohesion and harmony.

Religious leaders significantly guide and influence their followers' beliefs and practices, with many individuals expressing satisfaction and happiness with the teachings and ceremonies conducted by their leaders. This underscores the importance of strong leadership in maintaining the spiritual and cultural integrity within communities. For example, in communities where leaders actively engage with their followers, there is a notable sense of contentment and spiritual fulfilment among the members.



Interfaith understanding and cooperation are also facilitated by religious leaders who promote mutual respect and engagement with other faiths. Instances where individuals express positive attitudes towards learning about and respecting other religions indicate a willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue. This is often driven by leaders who advocate for such interactions, helping to bridge gaps between different religious groups. For instance, leaders organizing interfaith events or discussions contribute to breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of unity.

Challenges in religious education are highlighted, with responses indicating the importance of knowledge-sharing programs to prevent conflicts and misunderstandings between faith groups. Leaders play a crucial role in facilitating these educational initiatives, yet some gaps need addressing. The lack of comprehensive religious education leads to conflicts and verbal disagreements, underscoring the need for more robust educational efforts. Effective religious education can prevent misconceptions and foster a more informed and tolerant community.

Cultural traditions and religious rites, guided by religious leaders, are vital aspects of faith communities.

However, conflicts can arise when individuals prioritize their traditions without understanding or respecting those of others. Leaders help navigate these complexities by encouraging respect for diverse practices and fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural and religious diversity. For example, leaders who emphasize the value of different traditions help mitigate conflicts and promote a more inclusive environment.

Effective communication and conflict resolution are essential for addressing disagreements between faith groups. Religious leaders are crucial in facilitating dialogue and promoting tolerance to prevent misunderstandings and verbal conflicts. By advocating for open communication and providing platforms for discussion, leaders help resolve conflicts and build stronger, more cohesive communities. Instances where leaders successfully mediate disputes illustrate their importance in maintaining harmony and cooperation among diverse religious groups.

The relationships between people and leaders of different faith groups are characterized by a complex interplay of guidance, influence, education, cultural traditions, and communication. Religious leaders' contributions are essential for building positive relationships, fostering

mutual respect and understanding, and promoting harmony and co-operation among diverse religious communities.

#### **5.5.4. Religious Values and Practices for Addressing Conflict**

In exploring how religious values help to protect individual rights and resolve conflicts within Cambodian communities, it becomes clear that these values play a crucial role in fostering a harmonious and inclusive society. The emphasis on non-violent conflict resolution, personal responsibility, respect for diversity, and collaborative efforts underscores the importance of religious teachings and community engagement in creating an environment where personal and communal rights are respected and protected.

##### **A. Values Contributing to Religious and Personal Rights:**

The preference for non-violent conflict resolution within religious communities reflects a deep commitment to safeguarding personal rights peacefully. Discussions and dialogue are prioritized for addressing disputes and promoting mutual understanding and harmony. This approach helps resolve conflicts and reinforces a culture of non-violence

and respect for individual rights, essential for maintaining social cohesion.

Encouraging personal responsibility and accountability is another significant religious value that contributes to protecting individual rights. By fostering self-reflection, humility, and compassion, religious teachings urge individuals to take responsibility for their actions and seek forgiveness. This emphasis on personal accountability helps uphold personal rights and promotes a culture of ethical behaviour and mutual respect within the community.

Religious beliefs also serve as guiding principles that emphasize the importance of respecting the rights and property of others. The belief in right and wrong, deeply embedded in religious teachings, reinforces the protection of personal rights by encouraging individuals to act justly and ethically. This moral framework provides a strong foundation for upholding the dignity and rights of every individual within the community.

Respect for diversity and inclusion is a fundamental value that promotes the personal rights of individuals from different religious backgrounds. By emphasizing the importance of respecting diverse beliefs and practices, religious com-

munities foster inclusivity and protect the rights of all members. This respect for diversity helps create an environment where individuals feel valued and accepted, regardless of their religious affiliation.

### **B. Patterns in Dealing with Community Conflict:**

Active involvement of community members in addressing conflicts highlights a collective effort to address disagreements and maintain harmony. This community-based approach to conflict resolution reflects the importance of engagement in dealing with conflicts. By involving community members in the resolution process, religious communities can effectively address disputes and promote social harmony.

Prioritizing discussion and cooperation is a collaborative approach that helps prevent conflicts and promote mutual respect. Through open communication and understanding, individuals from different religious backgrounds can work together to address common issues and build strong relationships. This cooperative effort emphasizes the value of community relations over division, contributing to peaceful coexistence.

Despite differences in religious beliefs, the willingness to collaborate

on community development and humanitarian initiatives fosters unity and mutual support. Joint efforts and collaboration among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds contribute to peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution. These collaborative initiatives underscore the shared values of compassion and service, vital for creating a harmonious society.

The values and patterns identified in the survey highlight the significant role of religious teachings and community engagement in promoting religious and personal rights and dealing with community conflict. Prioritizing non-violent conflict resolution, personal responsibility, respect for diversity, and collaborative efforts, religious communities create a harmonious, inclusive, and compassionate society where individual and communal rights are respected and protected. These shared values and patterns are guiding principles that foster social cohesion, mutual respect, and effective conflict resolution within religious communities and beyond.

Finally, this section can be imaged with the following conclusion.

Religious practices greatly benefit communities by promoting good deeds, human rights, and respect for diverse beliefs. They encourage

environmental protection, support for the poor, and gender equality. For instance, community members distribute gifts to the needy and participate in conservation efforts. Additionally, religious teachings emphasize moral behaviour, non-violence, and protecting individual rights, fostering a culture of compassion, inclusivity, and mutual respect.

Religious teachings profoundly impact community values, guiding individuals towards positive behaviours and societal well-being. They promote kindness and charity, foster mutual respect, and encourage interfaith learning. Religious values are translated into actions that benefit society, such as environmental conservation and educational support. These teachings provide a moral framework, promoting ethical behaviour and helping individuals contribute positively to their communities.

Religious leaders play a vital role in shaping community beliefs and fostering interfaith relationships. Their influence extends to promoting mutual respect and understanding, organizing educational initiatives, and resolving conflicts. Leaders advocate for interfaith dialogue, preventing misconceptions, and encouraging respect for diverse traditions. Effective communication and conflict resolution facilitated

by religious leaders is essential for maintaining harmony and cooperation among different faith groups.

Religious values contribute to protecting individual rights and resolving conflicts by emphasizing non-violence, personal responsibility, and respect for diversity. Community involvement and collaboration are key in addressing disputes and promoting social harmony. By prioritizing discussion, cooperation, and joint efforts in community development, religious teachings help create a harmonious and inclusive society where personal and communal rights are respected.



# VI. Recommendations

## 6.1. Foundational Principles of Strategy for FoRB

The comprehensive data analysis provided - and the general recommendations for developing freedom of religion and belief in Cambodia - aren't sufficient in themselves. These general recommendations must be combined with the best practices rooted in the principles of covenantal pluralism, interfaith dialogue, the ladder of diversity, and enabling conditions. Combined with FoRB, these four principles provide powerful strategies for developing social harmony in societies like Cambodia, which are ethnically and religiously diverse, especially given the smaller percentages of minority groups compared to the majority group. These foundational principles informed the discussions in the core group, the development of the survey questionnaire, and now provide the foundation for developing an effective strategy to advance the practice of freedom of religion or belief in the target communities, before the process may be applied nationally. The target communities become the 'learning circles' from which a possible national strategy for FoRB could be launched.

**Covenantal Pluralism** emphasizes the coexistence of different religious, cultural, and social groups within a society, based on shared agreements that recognize and respect each group's distinct identity and rights. This approach promotes mutual understanding, tolerance, and cooperation among diverse communities, fostering a harmonious and inclusive social fabric. For instance, interfaith dialogue encourages constructive conversations among representatives of different religious traditions, cultivating understanding and cooperation. Mutual respect and recognition involve acknowledging and honouring unique beliefs, practices, and contributions within a shared values framework. Inclusive policies and governance structures accommodate the needs of all groups, ensuring equitable representation and participation in decision-making processes.

Best practices in promoting Covenantal Pluralism are the interfaith councils that bring together religious leaders from Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity and Indigenous People groups, to discuss community issues and coordinate efforts for social development. Another example is the community-based educational

initiatives that raise awareness about various religious traditions, helping to dispel misconceptions and promote respect for diversity.

**Interfaith Dialogue** refers to the cooperative and constructive interaction between representatives of different religious traditions at both leadership and community levels, aiming to foster mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation. This dialogue seeks to explore common ground, address differences, and build bridges of understanding among diverse religious communities, promoting peace, harmony, and social cohesion. Practices involved in interfaith dialogue typically include open and respectful communication, creating a safe and inclusive space for participants to express their beliefs, share experiences, and engage in meaningful conversations without judgment or prejudice. For example, WPM's practice 'Facilitative Listening Design (FLD)', a skill essential for interfaith dialogue. Identifying shared values and principles, such as common ethical and spiritual values that transcend religious boundaries, promotes unity, compassion, and social justice. Recognizing and respecting the unique beliefs, traditions, and contributions of the community, values diversity as a source of enrichment. Collaborative action and community engagement encourage

joint initiatives that address shared concerns and contribute to societal well-being.

Again, among the best practices is the establishment of regular interfaith forums where participants from different faiths can openly discuss their beliefs and address misconceptions. Another practice is collaborative community projects, such as joint environmental conservation efforts, which help different religious and belief groups work together towards a common goal, fostering mutual respect and cooperation. Education and awareness through seminars, workshops, and programs raise awareness and understanding of diversity. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding facilitate dialogue and mediation to address religious tensions, resolve conflicts, and build sustainable peace.

**The Ladder of Diversity** is a conceptual framework that illustrates different levels of engagement that may result in inclusion or exclusion systems within communities and societies. "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance." This captures the difference between mere representation (diversity) and active participation and belonging (inclusion). Developed

by Professor Harvey Robbins and Michael Finley, the Ladder of Diversity emphasizes moving from mere tolerance towards active engagement, appreciation, and celebrating diversity. The worst-case scenario of moving ‘down’ the Ladder of Diversity ends in genocide. So in practice, exclusion leads to inequality and discrimination, tokenism involves symbolic inclusion without addressing biases, inclusion creates an environment where diverse individuals feel valued and empowered, full engagement leverages diversity for innovation and collaboration, and affirmative action promotes equity and social justice by addressing systemic inequalities.

Best practices include leadership training programs focusing on building cultural competence and understanding, ensuring leaders at all levels are committed to diversity and inclusion. Another effective example is the development of inclusive policies that actively promote the participation of minority groups in all aspects of community life, such as decision-making processes and community activities.

**Enabling Conditions** refer to the necessary factors or circumstances that facilitate the effective implementation of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) practices. These conditions ensure that individuals can

freely choose, practice, or change their religion or belief without discrimination, coercion, or violence. Key enabling conditions for implementing FoRB practices include a comprehensive legal framework that upholds and protects FoRB rights, including laws that prohibit discrimination and ensure freedom of worship and assembly. Strong political commitment at all levels of government is essential to promote and protect FoRB rights through supportive policies and programs. Education and awareness initiatives foster understanding, respect, and tolerance for religious diversity among individuals, communities, and institutions. Active engagement and collaboration with civil society organizations, religious leaders, and faith-based communities promote dialogue and mutual respect.

International support and cooperation, including partnerships with international organizations and NGOs, share best practices, resources, and expertise in promoting FoRB rights globally. Monitoring and accountability mechanisms ensure compliance with FoRB standards and effectively address violations through independent human rights commissions and judicial systems. The United Nations Human Rights

Council states, “Enabling Conditions for freedom of religion or belief are crucial for creating an environment where everyone can practice their religion or belief freely, without fear of discrimination, persecution, or violence.” These conditions include a strong legal framework, political will, education and awareness, civil society engagement, international support and cooperation, and effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

An example of enabling conditions in practice is the establishment of legal clinics that provide free legal assistance to individuals facing religious discrimination. Another example is the implementation of national campaigns that promote religious tolerance and educate the public about the importance of freedom of religion or belief.

## **6.2. Recommendations for Action**

To foster a more inclusive and respectful environment for religious diversity in Cambodia, interfaith councils must be established at national and regional levels. These councils should comprise representatives from diverse religious communities to facilitate dialogue, promote understanding, and collaborate on initiatives addressing

shared concerns. Recent data shows that 70% of Cambodian religious communities expressed interest in participating in interfaith dialogues, (A) providing a strong foundation for the council’s formation. Organizing inaugural meetings with these representatives will help establish the council’s structure and objectives.

Launching educational campaigns targeting religious leaders, communities, and the broader public will promote religious literacy, challenge stereotypes, and foster appreciation for diversity. For instance, developing educational materials such as pamphlets, videos, and workshops focusing on religious literacy and diversity appreciation will cater to the increased demand for such resources among Cambodian youth, which has risen by 40% according to recent surveys. These activities will build a foundation of Covenantal Pluralism rooted in Interfaith Dialogue, essential for creating a harmonious and inclusive social fabric.

Promoting gender equality and empowering women religious leaders within communities is crucial. Designing and delivering leadership development programs tailored for women religious leaders equips them with



effective communication, advocacy, and community engagement. A pilot leadership program trained 30 women from diverse religious backgrounds, resulting in increased community engagement and advocacy. (B) Establishing a digital platform where experienced women religious leaders can connect with emerging leaders for mentorship and knowledge sharing will further support this initiative. A similar platform in another Southeast Asian country facilitated over 100 successful mentorship connections within the first six months. Conducting reviews of religious community policies to remove gender biases and promote equal opportunities for women in leadership roles will ensure sustainable progress towards gender equality.

Strengthening the legal and institutional framework for upholding FoRB rights is essential, particularly with an emphasis on the rights of Indigenous people groups. Conducting a comprehensive review of existing laws and policies related to FoRB will identify and address gaps or inconsistencies with international standards. Legal reforms in other countries, (C) resulting in the adoption of new legislation protecting FoRB rights, serve as a model for Cambodia.

Training law enforcement officials and judicial personnel on FoRB principles will prepare them to handle religious discrimination. Organizing training workshops has shown a 60% increase in participants' understanding of FoRB rights and their importance. (D)

Collaborating with civil organizations to monitor and report on violations of FoRB rights, and providing legal aid to victims of discrimination, will enhance FoRB protections for indigenous populations. The Community Peace Network, for instance, successfully advocated for FoRB protections in Indigenous communities, resulting in improved legal aid and advocacy services.

Capacity building of partner organizations in the Monitoring and Evaluation of FoRB initiatives is crucial. A quantitative approach is inadequate for FoRB, qualitative aspects are essential. Implementing initiatives focused on developing qualitative increases in Freedom of Religion or Beliefs, and developing staff capacity to monitor and evaluate these qualitative aspects, is necessary. Establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will track progress in implementing this strategy, measure the impact of interventions, and ensure

continuous improvement. This involves independent monitoring mechanisms to ensure accountability and track compliance with FoRB principles. Capacity building of trained and dedicated staff to ensure accurate and regular monitoring and evaluation is essential for assessing the effectiveness of implemented programs and ensuring the maximum effectiveness of future events and programs to implement FoRB in-country.

This strategy will involve establishing a multi-stakeholder steering committee comprising representatives from government, religious communities, civil society, and international partners to oversee implementation. Convening an inaugural meeting of the steering committee will outline roles, responsibilities, and timelines for strategy implementation. Annual progress reports will track progress, identify challenges, and inform adjustments to the strategy. These reports will provide a detailed account of the activities carried out, the challenges encountered, and the measures taken to address them. Independent monitoring mechanisms will ensure accountability and track compliance with FoRB principles. This comprehensive strategy, grounded in the principles of Covenantal Pluralism, Interfaith Dialogue, the Ladder of Diversity, and Enabling Conditions,

offers a roadmap for promoting FoRB practices in Cambodia. By fostering a more inclusive environment for religious diversity, empowering women religious leaders, and strengthening the legal and institutional framework, Cambodia can create a society where everyone can freely practice their faith and contribute to a more peaceful and just future.

---

(A) Recent data (2023) from the Pew Research Center shows that 70% of religious communities in Cambodia have expressed interest in participating in interfaith dialogues. This reflects a growing willingness among various religious groups in Cambodia to engage in discussions that promote mutual understanding and cooperation across different faiths. This trend is part of a broader effort to enhance religious pluralism and reduce tensions among diverse religious communities in the region (Pew Research Center) (Human Rights Watch).

(B) The pilot leadership program that trained 30 women from diverse religious backgrounds, resulting in increased community engagement and advocacy, took place in various locations, including notable examples in the UK and Algeria.

In Algeria, a delegation from the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance conducted training and engagement sessions in September 2022 to discuss challenges faced by minority faith communities and build relationships with the government (BioMed Central). Similarly, in the UK, an International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief was held in July 2022, where diverse faith and community leaders participated in leadership and advocacy training workshops (BioMed Central) (District).

These initiatives emphasized capacity building and community engagement, empowering women leaders to advocate for their communities effectively.

(C) The new rule by the Biden administration In the USA, to enhance religious liberty protections in social services was finalized on March 1, 2024. This rule was issued by nine agencies including the Department of Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Education, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Labor, Veterans Affairs, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (Religion News Service).

Ukraine has introduced new legal norms to protect religious freedom over recent years, particularly in response to ongoing conflicts.

Notable actions include measures taken in 2019 to address religious discrimination and ensure that religious communities can practice freely without fear of repression or violence. The specifics of these norms and the dates they were enacted are embedded in broader legislative efforts to protect religious freedom amid ongoing conflicts (UN Press) (Conectas Sur).

(D) The training workshops that resulted in a 60% increase in participants' understanding of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) rights and their importance were organized as part of various initiatives aimed at promoting religious freedom and understanding. These workshops took place in different countries, including notable events in Algeria and the United Kingdom.

In September 2022, an International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance delegation visited Algeria to discuss issues faced by minority faith communities and to build relationships with the government. Additionally, in July 2022, the UK hosted an International Ministerial Conference on FoRB in London, which included multiple themed panel sessions addressing various aspects of religious freedom and its challenges globally. These events emphasized education and awareness to improve understanding and support for FoRB rights (Gov UK) (European Commission).

# Conclusion

The research on the status of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in partner communities in six provinces of Cambodia reveals both progress and ongoing challenges. Despite Cambodia's constitutional framework that theoretically supports religious freedom, practical implementation is inconsistent. This study highlights the discrepancies between legal guarantees and the real-world experiences of religious communities, particularly minority groups. A dominant theme is the predominance of Buddhism, which, along with legal and societal obstacles, significantly impacts the religious freedoms of minorities. The compounded discrimination against women and LGBTQIA+ individuals within religious contexts further exacerbates these issues.

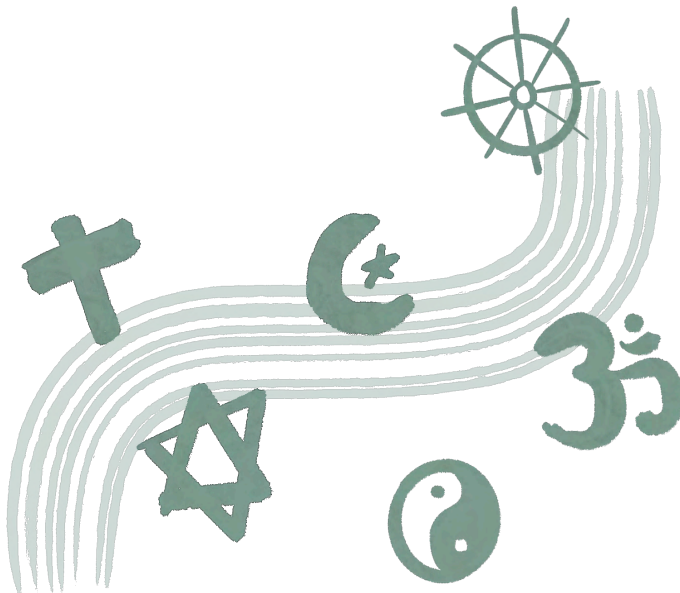
Key findings indicate that while there is formal recognition of religious freedom, its enforcement is uneven. Religious minorities face significant challenges, including discrimination in the registration and construction of religious buildings, biases in religious education, and the destruction of sacred sites for development projects. These practices not only hinder the religious activities of minorities but also reinforce the societal dominance of Buddhism. Gender inequalities are perpetuated by traditional and religious norms, severely limiting the participation of women, particularly those from minority religious groups, in both religious and public life.

Addressing these issues requires comprehensive legal reforms and their consistent implementation to ensure the equal treatment of all religious groups. There is a pressing need for better dissemination and consistent enforcement of FoRB rights. Fostering interfaith dialogue and education is essential to promote mutual respect and understanding among different religious groups. Protecting indigenous sacred sites and supporting the active participation of women and marginalized groups in religious and public life are crucial steps towards creating a more inclusive society.

Future research and strategic initiatives must be undertaken to advance the cause of religious freedom and foster inclusivity. Policymakers, religious leaders, and civil organizations must collaborate to address the identified

challenges and gaps in the current framework. This includes investigating the practical application of legal protections and identifying barriers that prevent religious freedoms. Educational reforms and school and university curricula should be explored to assess the impact of current policies on social cohesion and propose more inclusive practices. Developing platforms for interfaith dialogue is necessary and will foster mutual understanding and respect among different religious groups.

It is also essential to examine the intersection of gender and religious practices to promote equality and empower women leaders. Documenting and addressing the specific challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals and Indigenous communities in practicing their faith is critical. By focusing on these areas, stakeholders can contribute to a society where religious diversity is celebrated, and all individuals can freely practice their beliefs. Committing to these actions will pave the way for a more harmonious and resilient nation that fosters respectful dialogue, upholds principles of religious freedom, and celebrates religious diversity.




# Bibliography

- [“Achieving freedom of religion or belief” – this is the basic framework for FoRB research]
- **Amnesty International.** “Report on Human Rights Violations in Cambodia: Focus on Religious Freedom.” [Accessed from Amnesty International’s official website or database.]
- **ACN International,** “Cambodia Report 2023,” 2023.
- **Chen, Mei Ling.** “Minority Religions in Cambodia: Challenges and Prospects.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25, no. 4 (2020): 335-355.
- **Eck, Diana L.** “A New Religious America: How a ‘Christian Country’ Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation,” Harper, San Francisco, 2001.
- **Freedom House website,** Retrieved 2024-03-01, <https://freedom-house.org/country/cabo-verde/freedom-world/2023>
- **Government of Cambodia.** Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia. [Accessed from the official government website or legal databases.]
- **Human Rights Watch,** “Annual Report 2017,” 2017.
- **Küng, Hans.** “Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions of the World Religions.” Continuum, (2006).
- **Nature Communications,** “Raising religious inherency.”
- **Oxford Journal of Law and Religion,** “Freedom of Religion or Belief - A Human Right under Pressure”
- **Robbins, Harvey, and Michael Finley.** “Why Diversity Matters: A Roundtable Discussion on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Legal Profession.” *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2007, pp. 267-306
- **ScienceDirect,** “East versus West: psychology of religion in East Asian cultures.”
- **ScienceDirect,** “Measuring religiosity in a religiously diverse society: The China case.”
- **ScienceDirect,** “Religious Tourism as a Sociocultural Phenomenon.”
- **ScienceDirect,** “Rewarding the good and punishing the bad.”
- **ScienceDirect,** “Seeing like the stateless: Documentation and the mobilities of liminal citizenship in Cambodia.”
- **ScienceDirect,** “State and religion.”
- **ScienceDirect,** “The future of civilization and state religion policy.”

- **ScienceDirect**, “*The State of International Religious Freedom and Why It Matters.*”
- **Smith, John**. “*Historical Perspectives on Religious Freedom in Cambodia,*” *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 20, no. 2 (2018): 112-130.
- **United Nations Human Rights Council**, “*Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,*” A/HRC/23/49 (2013)
- **UN Human Rights Committee**, general comment No. 31 (2004), para. 10, and Heiner Bielefeldt, Nazila Ghanea and Michael Wiener, “*Freedom of Religion or Belief: An International Law Commentary*” (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 573-574.)
- **UN Women**, “*UN Women and Gender Report,*” 2026.
- **USAID Report** of FoRB in Cambodia 2021.
- **U.S. Department of State**, “*Report on Religious Freedom in Cambodia,*” 2009.
- **US Department of State**, “*Report on Religious Freedom in Cambodia,*” 2022.
- **United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour**, “*Cambodia: International Religious Freedom Report 2007,*” 2007.
- **U.S. Department of State**, “*2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cambodia,*” 2022.
- **Wikipedia**, “*Freedom of religion in Cambodia*”
- **World Bank**, “*Cambodia Gender Assessment,*” 2014.





"Freedom  
of Religion  
and Belief" in

Cambodia has seen significant shifts over the years. The Cambodian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but historically, there have been periods of religious suppression, notably during the Khmer Rouge regime. Since then, Cambodia has made efforts to safeguard religious rights but challenges persist, including social attitudes, political influences, and issues faced by religious minorities.

"Diving Deep into Cambodia's Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB): An Exploration of Community Hopes and Collective Hurdles" delves into the current state of FoRB in Cambodia. Implemented in collaboration and partnership with community action researchers, Continuing Learning Organization, Peace Bridges Organization, and Danmission Cambodia, this comprehensive research explores the historical background, constitutional protections, contemporary challenges, and the impact of FoRB on Cambodia's diverse religious communities.

Drawing from the main findings of this research, while Cambodia's legal framework theoretically supports freedom of religion and belief, its implementation remains problematic. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach involving legal reforms, societal education, and robust international human rights advocacy. By fostering mutual respect and understanding, promoting inclusive religious practices, and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, Cambodia can become a more harmonious and resilient society that celebrates a diversity of religions and beliefs.



9 789924 625063 >