

# Intersectionality in International Religious Freedom Policies

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This research note argues that the implementation of international Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) policies often lacks an intersectional perspective, which is problematic given that in local struggles religion often intersects with other categories of difference, such as class and gender. Using the case of Asia Bibi, a poor Christian woman in Pakistan sentenced to death for blasphemy, as a case study, the analysis illustrates the one-dimensional focus on FoRB and discusses some of its causes and consequences. It argues that overlooking class and gender dimensions of the case was a missed opportunity to explore more inclusive strategies. The main objectives of this research note are to harness the concept of intersectionality for future research on the international promotion of FoRB and urge foreign policy authorities to give greater attention to the diverse lived experiences of religious minorities when advocating on their behalf.

Esta nota de investigación argumenta que la implementación de políticas internacionales en materia de libertad de religión o creencias carece, con frecuencia, de una perspectiva interseccional. Esto resulta problemático debido a que en las luchas locales la religión, a menudo, se solapa con otras categorías de diferencia, como la clase y el género. Nuestro análisis utiliza el caso de Asia Bibi, una mujer cristiana pobre en Pakistán que fue condenada a muerte por blasfemia, como estudio de caso que nos permite ilustrar el enfoque unidimensional en la libertad de religión y creencias y debatir algunas de sus causas y consecuencias. Argumenta que el hecho de pasar por alto las dimensiones de clase y género de este caso representó una oportunidad perdida para poder estudiar estrategias más inclusivas. Los principales objetivos de esta nota de investigación consisten en intentar aprovechar el concepto de interseccionalidad de cara a futuras investigaciones en materia de promoción internacional de la libertad de religión y creencias e instar a las autoridades competentes en política exterior a prestar una mayor atención a las diversas experiencias vividas por las minorías religiosas cuando intenten defenderlas.

Cette note de recherche affirme qu'il manque souvent une perspective intersectionnelle dans la mise en œuvre des politiques internationales relatives à la liberté religieuse ou de croyance (LROC). C'est une situation problématique parce qu'au niveau local, les luttes pour des questions religieuses se recoupent fréquemment avec d'autres catégories de différends, comme la classe ou le genre. S'appuyant sur une étude du cas d'Asia Bibi, une chrétienne pauvre du Pakistan condamnée à mort pour blasphème, l'analyse illustre la focalisation unidimensionnelle

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sur la LROC et traite de quelques-unes de ses causes et conséquences. Elle affirme qu'en omettant les dimensions de classe et de genre dans l'affaire, l'on n'a pas pu envisager des stratégies plus inclusives. Cette note de recherche vise en premier lieu à l'exploitation du concept d'intersectionnalité dans les travaux de recherche ultérieurs sur la promotion internationale de la LROC. Par ailleurs, elle conseille vivement aux autorités de politique étrangère d'accorder davantage d'attention au vécu des minorités religieuses lorsqu'elles les défendent.

## Introduction

Reacting to the worldwide escalation of discrimination and violence against religious minorities ([Pew Research Center, 2021](#)), many Western governments have introduced the protection of the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) into their foreign policies ([Toft and Green, 2018](#); [Barker, Bennett and Farr, 2019](#); [Bettiza, 2019](#); [Foret and Markoviti, 2021](#); [Wolff, 2021](#)). We argue that the lack of attention for the intersection of religion with other identity markers, such as gender, race, and class, in the implementation of these policies is problematic given the emerging evidence of the intersectional nature of local struggles about FoRB (e.g., [Phillips, 2009](#); [Razavi and Jenichen, 2010](#); [Hurd, 2015](#); [Ghanea, 2017](#); [Petersen, 2020](#); [Tadros, 2020](#); [Brown et al., 2021](#); [Fazaeli and Yildirim, 2021](#); [Jenichen, 2021](#)).

At the policy level, a few international initiatives have started to acknowledge the importance of such intersections. Most prominently, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB issued two reports—one in 2013 and another in 2020—on the links between FoRB and gender equality and organized a series of seminars on the topic.<sup>1</sup> The European Union's 2013 Guidelines on the promotion and protection of FoRB mention women, sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>2</sup> The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom started to brief the US government and Congress on women and FoRB in 2018.<sup>3</sup> The United Kingdom released a statement on FoRB and gender equality in 2022.<sup>4</sup> At the level of civil society, there is the network on Gender and Religious Freedom (GRF)<sup>5</sup> and the FoRB Women's Alliance<sup>6</sup>, which are networks of primarily, but not exclusively, British and North American activists and organizations that champion a gender-specific focus on religious freedom and seek to advance FoRB for women. Despite these welcome developments, we have not seen a systematic integration of the concept of intersectionality yet, neither in international FoRB research nor in political practice. Policies championing international gender justice similarly ignore the freedom of religion of women ([World Watch Monitor, 2019](#)).

With this research note, we seek to intervene in the conversation on international FoRB policies. We argue that considering intersectionality, meaning the interaction between different categories of difference, such as gender, class, race, and religion,

<sup>1</sup><https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/freedom-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality>.

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/freedom-religion-or-belief\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/freedom-religion-or-belief_en).

<sup>3</sup><https://www.uscifr.gov/topics/women-and-religious-freedom>.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality>.

<sup>5</sup>GRF (<https://www.genderandreligiousfreedom.org>) is a task force of the Religious Liberty Partnership through which Christian organizations encourage and nurture collaboration among Christian organizations focused on FoRB (<https://www.rlpartnership.org/about/>). GRF was founded by women working for organizations such as Release International in the UK and Open Doors; current members include the World Evangelical Alliance, the Voice of Martyrs Canada, and the FoRB Women's Alliance; trustees also include members of the Church of England.

<sup>6</sup>The FoRB Women's Alliance is a group of primarily American activists representing different faiths that seeks to accelerate cooperation between individuals, organizations, faith communities, and networks across regions, countries and sectors working on issues relevant to women and FoRB (<https://www.forbwomen.org/>).

opens up new questions and alternative perspectives that otherwise remain hidden. It helps make previously invisible groups visible and consider policy alternatives previously not considered.

We illustrate this dynamic using a prominent case of international FoRB promotion: the international campaign to free Asia Bibi—a poor Christian woman in Pakistan who was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010 and acquitted in 2018. In light of previous, general critiques of a lacking intersectional perspective in related foreign policy practices (Hurd, 2015; Petersen, 2020; Tadros, 2020), the campaign is a least-likely case of neglecting intersectionality. Due to the overlap of religion, gender, and (low) socioeconomic status, the case offered an obvious opportunity to consider these intersections in the advocacy strategies of the governments and organizations involved in the campaign. It at least could have triggered a conversation about the intersection of FoRB with caste and gender discrimination. But it did not. Instead, the campaign maintained a one-dimensional view of the struggles that religious minorities face in Pakistan and thus, despite good intentions, played into the hands of Islamist hardliners.

We begin by defining the concept of intersectionality. We then discuss its application in foreign policy research in general and research on the international promotion of FoRB specifically to demonstrate that not only FoRB policies but also the research focusing on them lack an intersectional perspective. We then turn to the case study on Asia Bibi to reflect on the causes and consequences of disregarding intersectionality in foreign policy practice. Before delving into the case, we introduce our case study methodology and provide some context on the blasphemy laws in Pakistan. We conclude with a summary of our argument and some thoughts on its implications.

### Intersectionality and the International Promotion of FoRB

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced into the social sciences by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to draw attention to the ways in which intra-group differences, both among women and among people of color, are often overlooked to the detriment of Black women. Since its inception, the idea has been extensively debated in the social sciences, both as a research paradigm and to inform political practice (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). We draw here on the definition put forward by Ange-Marie Hancock who defines intersectionality as a research paradigm

“that emphasises the interaction of categories of difference (including but not limited to race, gender, class, and sexual orientation) ... recognising that these key components influence political access, equality, and the potential for any form of justice” (Hancock 2007, 63–64).

Research on international human rights law and advocacy has started to take intersectionality into account, analyzing, for instance, how the varying experiences and vulnerabilities of women of different ethnic backgrounds, of girls and boys, of disabled women and men, or female and male migrants are considered in international human rights governance (e.g., Bond, 2003; Taefi, 2009; De Beco, 2020; DeTurk, 2020). In foreign policy research, intersectionality has primarily appeared in research on women as foreign policy decision-makers (Yoder, 2011), and in research on feminist foreign policy (FFP)—a relatively new concept that prioritizes the promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment in foreign policy. Like on FoRB political practice, the concept of intersectionality has had only limited impact on FFP due to its inconsistent conceptualization by most governments, even though intersectionality is understood as one of the cornerstones of FFP (e.g., Morton, Muchiri and Swiss, 2020; Zhukova, Sundström and Elgström, 2022; Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023; Nylund, Håkansson and Bjarnegård, 2023).

Research on international FoRB promotion, by contrast, has paid limited consideration to the concept of intersectionality. The few existing exceptions, such as Ghanea (2017), Petersen (2020), and Tadros (2020), focus primarily on identifying links between FoRB, gender equality and women's rights, on criticizing governments for not considering these, and developing recommendations for governmental activities. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015), in her critique of international FoRB policies, argues that Western governments simplify complex interactions on the ground by reducing them exclusively to religion and thus overlooking how they are "entangled in and shaped by specific sociohistorical, economic and political contexts" and "other forms of group identity such as gender, ethnicity, culture, and race" (Hurd, 2015, 31, 121). Even though Hurd does not draw on the concept of intersectionality herself, her approach resonates with intersectional theory (Rees, 2017).

We argue that international FoRB promotion would benefit from paying closer attention to intersectional issues: An intersectional perspective broadens the view of the disadvantages and privileges of groups that are defined not by a single category of difference, but by multiple categories that intersect; for instance, women from a religious minority or poor women. Intersectional theory, accordingly, opens up interesting questions about foreign policy priorities and their consequences. Membership in multiple, disadvantaged groups, for example, often leads to a "double jeopardy" and therefore marginalization (Beale, 1970); for instance, due to the combination of gender, ethnic, and class discrimination. In countries where state and society engage in religious "othering" and discrimination, women who are poor and belong to a religious minority often become targets of political and ideological struggles due to their disproportionate powerlessness (Tadros, 2020).

Overlooking the situation of intersectional groups is the greatest risk of a lacking intersectional perspective. Given the pervasiveness of gender discrimination, these often are minority women. Paraphrasing findings from research on political representation, without an intersectional perspective, there is the risk that FoRB policies primarily benefit religious minority men and women's rights policies primarily benefit majority women.<sup>7</sup> However, as Mügge and Erzeel (2016) point out in their research on women's political representation in Western democracies, minority women may also benefit from a "multiple advantage" if their dual identities fit the interests of decision-makers (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). Our research on the Asia Bibi campaign shows exactly that. Her dual identity as a Christian woman did increase international attention for her case, a degree of attention Muslim men charged with blasphemy seldom receive, because they do not match both foreign policy priorities of many Western states on religious minorities and women's rights, and due to international narratives perceiving Muslim men as perpetrators rather than victims (Dhamoon, 2009).

The absence of an intersectional perspective also prevents a more holistic approach that, for example, emphasizes possible synergies between the promotion of FoRB and of women's rights, based, for instance, on the non-discrimination norm that undergirds both, the role that FoRB could play in countering harmful practices against women in the name of religion, or the women's rights work done by religious actors whose religious freedom is thus directly linked to the rights of women (Ghanea, 2017; Bielefeldt and Wiener, 2020). Similar synergies may exist with other fields, such as class, or race, depending on the specific case.

<sup>7</sup>This is what Bird (2016) and Hughes (2011) found when they were looking at legislative gender and ethnic quotas, i.e., that gender quotas primarily benefit ethnic majority women and ethnic quotas primarily benefit ethnic minority men.

### The International Campaign to Free Asia Bibi

The mentioned reports on FoRB that reflect on the lack of an intersectional perspective have done so primarily from a general perspective. What is missing are empirical case studies that help take the conversation further. We, therefore, use the international campaign to free Asia Bibi as an exploratory case study, which helps identify new questions and hypotheses for future research and practice (Yin, 2018). The campaign is a least-likely case of neglecting intersectionality. Initially, we had chosen it because the overlap of religion, gender, and class promised to allow us to study how international governments and organizations navigate intersectionality. The puzzling finding that they did not led us to reflect on both reasons and potential consequences of this neglect.

To reconstruct the campaign, we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with American, European, and Pakistani diplomats, activists, and journalists. We complemented the interviews with the analysis of around 300 official governmental and parliamentary documents, almost 100 media reports in Western and Pakistani media, as well as Twitter (now X) trends, non-academic books, and documentaries. The triangulation of this variety of sources has allowed us to reconstruct the campaign in as much detail as possible to study whether and how those involved took intersectionality into account. We searched the mentioned documents for references of Asia Bibi's identity markers (religion, gender, and class) and used the interviews to learn about the involved actors' understanding and interpretation of the case, providing us with insights on the reasons why intersectionality was largely neglected and their views of potential consequences of the one-dimensional view taken. Given this is an exploratory case study, we cannot make any claims of causality, and whether the campaign would have been more effective in freeing Asia Bibi earlier remains hypothetical. Nevertheless, our analysis allows us to ask questions that, we hope, will pave the way for an intersectional perspective in the research on and implementation of international FoRB policy.

#### *The Blasphemy Case Against Asia Bibi*

Aasiya Noreen, or popularly known as Asia Bibi, is a Christian Pakistani woman who was accused of blasphemy in rural Punjab in 2009. While working on a berry farm, Asia Bibi had a feud with one of her Muslim neighbours over the use of the same drinking pot and later was accused by the same woman of insulting the prophet. A few days later she was assaulted by a mob in her village (Bibi and Tollet, 2013, 35–37) and eventually arrested by the police of the village based on Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

The blasphemy laws are part of chapter XV of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). Introduced by British colonial rule to protect religious rights and reduce hostilities between Hindus and Muslims (Jalal, 2014, 283), Pakistan retained them after independence and partition from India, initially as a means to safeguard all religions, places of worship and places of burial (Rumi, 2018, 324). However, by the 1980s several amendments had been made to the blasphemy laws under the presidency of General Zia-ul-Haq as part of his Islamisation policies (Hashimi, 2014). Under these provisions use of any derogatory remarks towards the Prophet Muhammad were punishable by a fine and death, or a fine and life imprisonment. General Zia used the toughening of the blasphemy laws to build his reputation and political supremacy among conservative Muslims projecting himself as the protector of Islam (Ahmed, 2021, 277–278). Subsequent governments have reacted to political and often violent pressure from Islamist parties, caused by the frustration of these parties about their limited electoral success, by further restricting the blasphemy laws, including dropping life imprisonment as a penalty and thus making the death penalty compulsory (Abbas, 2013). In January 2023, the National Assembly adopted



amendments to the laws further increasing punishment for insulting Prophet Mohammed's companions and family members from three to ten years of imprisonment, along with a hefty fine. Human rights groups have expressed their concerns that these amendments will fuel further rights abuses against religious minorities (CSW, 2023).

The draconian blasphemy laws have not only impacted minority non-Muslims but also Sunni Muslims accused of deviance, as well as Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims, who have had challenging and at times conflicting relations with the Sunni Muslim majority. One purpose of the law was to create a disconnect and distance between the Ahmadi sect and orthodox Islam.<sup>8</sup> In fact, post-independence the first person accused of blasphemy was of the Ahmadiyya faith, who was stoned to death by a mob in the Quetta district of Pakistan in August 1948 (Nafees, 2021). Since General Zia's amendments, the number of accusations of blasphemy and related vigilante killings saw a significant increase (Rumi, 2018, 325). Most of these blasphemy cases, though, are used as a backdrop to settle personal disputes and to act out power by radical leaders (Jalal, 2014).

Asia Bibi's case has been one among many. According to the data compiled by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), between the years 1947 and 2021, there were 701 blasphemy cases and 1,306 accusations with 89 people extrajudicially killed and 30 injured (Nafees, 2021). Most of the accused were Sunni and Shia Muslim men (600 and 309, respectively); among religious minority groups, most accusations and extrajudicial killings targeted Christians (men and women) and Ahmadis (primarily men); among women, Christian women were the ones most likely to be targeted (57 of the 107 accusations, and 10 of the 17 extrajudicial killings between 1947 and 2021) (Nafees, 2021). The actual numbers, however, are believed to be higher because not all blasphemy cases get reported in the press, and that is where organizations documenting cases get their data from. The [US Commission on International Religious Freedom \(2023\)](#) estimates that in 2023 there were 215 arrests under blasphemy charges, more than 500 individuals imprisoned for blasphemy, and 40 on death row.

Asia Bibi's case was heard for the first time in a local court in the Lahore district. Based on the witness statement and without any in-depth investigation, Asia Bibi was given the death sentence in 2010 on charges of blasphemy. Throughout her case, Asia Bibi refuted all the charges and pointed out that the law was used against her to settle a personal vendetta. She later made an appeal to the Lahore High Court which retained the verdict, and in 2015 the case went to the Supreme Court of Pakistan. After several delays, Asia Bibi was finally acquitted of all charges in 2018. After her acquittal, her family had to go into hiding and her lawyer had to flee out of the country to protect themselves from violent threats. In 2019, Asia Bibi and her family were granted asylum in Canada (Bibi and Tollet, 2013; Ahmed, 2021; Kakar, 2022).

The case received a lot of international attention. Asia Bibi became "a global icon almost" (Interview, April 21, 2022) and "the face of the blasphemy law in Pakistan" (interview, August 12, 2022). Several factors, according to our interviewees, explain why her case specifically received more attention than the many other blasphemy cases occurring in the country. First, she was the first woman in Pakistan to be sentenced to death for blasphemy, suggesting a "multiple advantage" in terms of Western foreign policy agendas. Furthermore, two high-level Pakistani politicians were assassinated in 2011 for supporting Asia Bibi's mercy petition and speaking out against the blasphemy laws in Pakistan. In January 2011, Salman Taseer was assassinated by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri. Two months later, Pakistan's first Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated, presumably by

<sup>8</sup>Section 298-B of the law bans Ahmadis from using titles and epithets associated with their founder and spiritual leaders, which hold significance in Sunni Islamic tradition.

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a radical militant group (BBC News, 2011). These two cases attracted international attention from different states to the Asia Bibi case and to the draconian penalties for blasphemy in Pakistan.

### *Intersectionality in the International Campaign*

In the campaign, several international governmental actors were involved, most notably the US government, Canada, the EU, Italy, and the Holy See, engaging primarily in “quiet diplomacy” with the Pakistani government. Government officials brought up the case during diplomatic visits, and the EU always included the case in the annual human rights dialogues with Pakistan (interviews, April 21, 2022, and July 11, 2022). Pope Benedict XVI, during a weekly meeting in 2010, called for the release of Asia Bibi and highlighted the discrimination against Christians in Pakistan (BBC News, 2010). This sparked interest from the international media in the case. Several Christian interest groups advocated for Asia Bibi’s release. In 2011, for instance, the Voice of Martyrs launched a global petition that gained 400,000 signatures, including those of Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis (Murashko, 2011). Other organizations, such as Aid to the Church in Need, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, followed the case and included it in their press releases, reports, and advocacy.<sup>9</sup>

Given the religious background of blasphemy charges, it is not surprising that the case triggered an international response in the context of FoRB policies. The international campaign, however, also was exemplary for the common disregard of intersectionality in the application of these policies to specific cases. Despite occasional descriptions of Asia Bibi as a “poor Christian woman,” we did not find any references to women’s rights or caste and class issues in documents issued by governmental and non-governmental organizations on the case.<sup>10</sup>

Our interviews too highlighted that focusing on the case from a FoRB perspective was a reaction to her conviction based on the blasphemy laws. We also found that government officials and non-governmental representatives involved in the matter did not extensively consider alternative perspectives beyond FoRB. When we questioned governmental and non-governmental interviewees about the lack of inclusion of a class or gender perspective, they expressed surprise and were unable to provide a clear answer. However, they acknowledged that involving women’s rights resources or considering a class perspective might have been a promising strategy.

There are possible explanations for this lack of an intersectional perspective beyond the immediate connection between blasphemy charges and FoRB. On the one hand, this one-dimensional perspective was most probably reinforced by the swift involvement of religious, specifically Christian, actors and interest groups in activities to call for Asia Bibi’s immediate release. Moreover, no women’s rights or social justice groups got involved that would have brought in a different perspective.<sup>11</sup> Our research of the case confirms the prevalent disconnect between FoRB and women’s rights groups (Phillips, 2009; Ghanea, 2017). We are not aware of any attempts to connect in the case of Asia Bibi. For Pakistani civil society organizations, furthermore, applies what some of our interviewees stressed: They are reluctant to get entangled into the toxic debate on blasphemy in Pakistan because speaking out

<sup>9</sup>Interviews and email conversations with (former) representatives of some of these organizations; review of their reports and websites.

<sup>10</sup>With one exception: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, in a press release in 2010, pointed out that “Asia Bibi’s experience behind bars is made worse by the fact that she is a Christian, a woman, and a blasphemy defendant—each of which increases the likelihood of abusive treatment” (CSW 2010).

<sup>11</sup>The only involvement of a women’s rights group we came across was an urgent appeal on behalf of Asia Bibi from Amnesty International forwarded on Facebook by the Women’s Rights Defenders Network, a branch of Amnesty International Canada.

on blasphemy “puts a target on your back” and jeopardizes the rest of their work (Interview, August 12, 2022).

Potentially, it could have been a deliberate strategy by governmental and non-governmental actors involved in the campaign to keep the policy fields separate due to fears that attention to women’s or social rights in addition to FoRB might have been counterproductive. Or this could have been an issue of an intentional division of labor in the context of limited resources. However, we did not find any evidence for that. Our interviews suggest that the lack of an intersectional perspective in the campaign was not a deliberate strategy. Instead, participants took it for granted that focusing on religious minority status suffices when dealing with blasphemy charges and discrimination against religious minorities.

The question of whether a more holistic approach would have been more effective in solving the case more quickly remains hypothetical. But we do argue that the lack of an intersectional perspective was a missed opportunity to deliberately explore alternative strategies and broaden the conversation on the situation of religious minorities. For example, a few observers have argued that the Asia Bibi case was as much about caste as it was about religion because “her handling of a drinking vessel was seen to pollute the water inside because she belonged to an ‘untouchable’ Hindu caste that had converted to Christianity” (Devji 2018). Although still very much alive in Pakistan, official Islamic discourse rejects the idea of caste differences, discredited as part of the colonial, Indian past (Singha, 2022). Therefore, the incident could not be defined in terms of caste and thus was labeled religious. Indeed, according to Singha (2022, 494),

“the Blasphemy Law is one of the easiest ways to enact religio-political discrimination towards impoverished Christians (and Hindus) from Dalit ancestry. Because these communities lack the resources and ability for self-protection, blasphemy charges can be—and are—utilised to steal land, remove people from jobs, resolve personal conflicts and disrupt upward mobility and prosperity.”

She argues that extricating “caste from the discrimination dialogue in Pakistan is to disavow these experiences by silencing voices that are already marginalised by majoritarian narratives” (Singha, 2022, 489).

A similar argument applies to gender discrimination. Disproportionately high levels of poverty and illiteracy among religious minority women make them particularly vulnerable (Tadros, 2020). Asia Bibi herself emphasized that her illiteracy had robbed her of control over her situation in court and prison (Bibi and Tollet, 2013, 6, 44). Due to her poverty, she did not have access to proper legal assistance during her first trial in the local court (Hussain, 2022, 141). In general, there is growing anecdotal evidence that the blasphemy laws are used to oppress women and to punish them for “deviant” behavior (Jenichen and Deka, 2023).

Considering the caste and gender dimensions of the case would have allowed international actors involved in the campaign to develop a more holistic approach to FoRB and to draw in more resources from other policy fields. Whether such a strategy would have been more successful in the specific case cannot be answered retrospectively. But at least, it could have triggered a broader conversation on the multifaceted discrimination faced by religious minorities. Instead, focusing the support for religious minorities exclusively on religion plays into the hands of Islamist hardliners, who, in the case of Asia Bibi, used the case to create violent backlash and to build momentum for their movement and in support of the existing blasphemy laws (interview, November 23, 2022; Kakar, 2022).

## Conclusions

Our main objective in this research note was to raise awareness of the concept of intersectionality in foreign policy research and practice, especially international FoRB



promotion. We have used the case study of the international campaign to free Asia Bibi to empirically explore the disconnect of the practice of international FoRB promotion from perspectives beyond religion, undergirding so far more general concerns expressed by a few scholars and practitioner reports (Hurd, 2015; Petersen, 2020; Tadros, 2020). We do not mean to argue that a more holistic approach always is better. But we assert that the lack of awareness of intersectionality is an issue because it makes the privileging of certain axes of analysis, like religion, and the exclusion of alternative perspectives invisible, thus preventing policymakers from taking informed, strategic decisions that are bespoke to specific cases and situations.

Research on international FoRB promotion, we contend, can support developing better-informed strategies by providing more evidence on the importance and effectiveness of an intersectional perspective. More research is needed that focuses on specific intersectional groups, including, but not exclusively, poor religious minority women, and on the question of whether and how they benefit (or not) from international FoRB promotion. This way, we will find responses to the question of what the specific consequences are of neglecting intersectionality in international FoRB campaigns. Whether and under which circumstances they, for instance, lead to overlooking the rights of specific groups or, contrarily, the marginalization of groups that do not fit the foreign policy priorities of Western governments, such as Muslim men accused of blasphemy. An intersectional perspective assists us not only in making intersectional groups visible but also in discerning varying dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in international advocacy and foreign policy practice.

Another question refers to the decision on how to frame the situation of specific groups and which policy resources to draw on, respectively. It may not always be the best strategy to focus directly on religion if that leads to violent protest from fundamentalist groups, as in the case of FoRB in Pakistan. The situation of religious minorities always is multifaceted and there may be ways to approach it differently in ways that reduce violent politicization. Only a perspective that takes intersectionality into account allows for strategic consideration of whether a more holistic approach or the focus on a single axis of difference, and which specifically, is more promising. More empirical research is urgently needed to inform policy choices in this regard.

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