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Concept Note

IRF Education and Training Initiative
<https://empowerwomen.media/2022-irf-forum/>

The purpose of this concept note is to highlight the need to coordinate **IRF education and training** for the Middle East in 2023. With adequate resources, we aim to provide inclusive training events for leaders to come away with a **tool kit** of options to support IRF in governments and civil society (bottoms-up and top-down approaches). A similar event was hosted at the National Press Club in DC, October 27-28. We are looking for co-sponsors to organize these historic IRF Training events in the Middle East in 2023. For more information about the event, go to: <https://empowerwomen.media/2022-irf-forum/>

Vision: To educate, equip and empower IRF advocates, and increase their participation across all IRF summits, ministerials, networks, declarations, and collaborative strategies focused on the MENA region.

For the Marrakesh Declaration anniversary, we aim to highlight high-impact IRF digital IRF training strategies to showcase the IRF movement already underway in the MENA region. Together, we will embolden government, civil society and faith leaders to support pluralism and religious liberty for everyone, everywhere.

Objectives:

- Increase education and training strategies across all IRF platforms
- Highlight women's inclusion in IRF summit, event, and networks
- Illustrate the power of IRF advocates in peace building and reaching sustainable goals
- Showcase IRF tools and digital strategies
- Identify IRF Champions for the Middle East
- Gather leaders to build IRF working groups
- Foster IRF movements for the MENA region already underway.

Context: Based on research, individuals are more entrepreneurial and contribute to society in positive ways when they are allowed to freely express their beliefs (whether religious or secular). However, millions in the MENA region face discrimination, and a variety of barriers to engaging equally in society because of ingrained cultural mindsets and organizational structures. Although there has been some inclusion of **IRF education and training strategies** at the IRF ministerials, roundtables, conferences and networks, there needs to be more intentionality. The MENA region is a melting pot of religious, women's and minority groups. Yet **there is currently no "allied IRF network" training IRF leaders across organizations for the MENA region.** At the same time, an increasing number of leaders are asking for IRF tools and strategies to help promote religious liberty in their communities. **As a result, we aim to build an allied network and robust strategy to intentionally provide IRF education and training at IRF summits, roundtables and collaborative projects in the MENA region.** We aim to share the rich benefits of IRF to promote peace building and multi-faith solutions to the challenges faced in the MENA Region. As women

and men collaborate, we can unleash the power of our combined gifts, resources and talents to support religious liberty worldwide.

IRF Gender Gap

- Women are absent or rarely appear on IRF platforms outside of performing in an emcee or facilitation role, or traditionally accepted administrative roles.
- Women's IRF messages or efforts are rarely highlighted in forums, marketing, and media.
- Women are rarely invited as plenary speakers or panel participants.
- Women are not included in decision-making and strategic planning sessions.
- Women are not challenged to share their approaches, solutions, and tools to advance IRF.
- Women are not included in funding decisions and allocation of resources.

IRF Plan of Action: (to move forward effectively)

- To increase IRF education and training across all IRF networks, roundtables and summits at all levels, with a special focus on inviting women and minorities who serve in the MENA region.
- Urge government, civil society, faith, and business leaders to support religious freedom education to promote peace and equal citizenship.
- Identify designated spokesperson(s) who will develop an action plan to invite, fund, and host IRF education and training events.
- Educate IRF leaders about their blind spots in integrating women advocates, and address the underlying taboos and gender dynamics that impede women's collaboration in IRF forums.
- Create practical tools to equip government, civil society and faith leaders to promote religious freedom and women's inclusion in their cultural context (e-courses, short films, social media, booklets, podcasts, newsletter, workshops...).
- Encourage exchanges between IRF women and men leaders to learn from each other and share practical approaches and tools.
- Highlight IRF leaders who are shifting the culture and advancing religious freedom in their communities.
- Set aside designated resource to allocate to women-led projects to advance IRF initiatives in the MENA region.
- Conduct more analysis on the power of women advocates and digital media strategies to support effective IRF programming in the Middle East.
- Encourage IRF organizations to share resources to expand our collective outreach in the MENA region.
- Engage in journalists and media outlets to encourage respect for religious freedom.

Tool Kit of Options <https://human-rights-and-religious-freedom-training.teachable.com/p/home>

Practical Tools to Equip IRF Women Advocates

Live What You Believe e-course (with Arabic and Farsi subtitles): <https://human-rights-and-religious-freedom-training.teachable.com/p/home>

Women's religious freedom short films: <http://empowerwomen.media/film-competition-winners-and-finalists/>

IRF Women's Facilitator: Shirin is Iranian-American and directs Empower Women Media. She is the author of *Muslims Next Door* and the co-author of *Islam and North America*. With a background in media cross-cultural training, Shirin assists multiple organizations in IRF initiatives. *The Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times*, *Detroit Free Press*, *NYTimes.com*, *Christianity Today* and *Jerusalem Post* have featured her work among Muslims and Christian advocates alike. Additionally, she serves as a mentor for female leaders in the MENA region through the George W. Bush Institute. She leads annual media trainings, a film festival and an online religious freedom learning platform, *Live What You Believe*. She is a graduate of the University of Washington and is fluent in English, French and Farsi and has two masters degrees focused on religious freedom and women's rights. www.empowerwomen.media