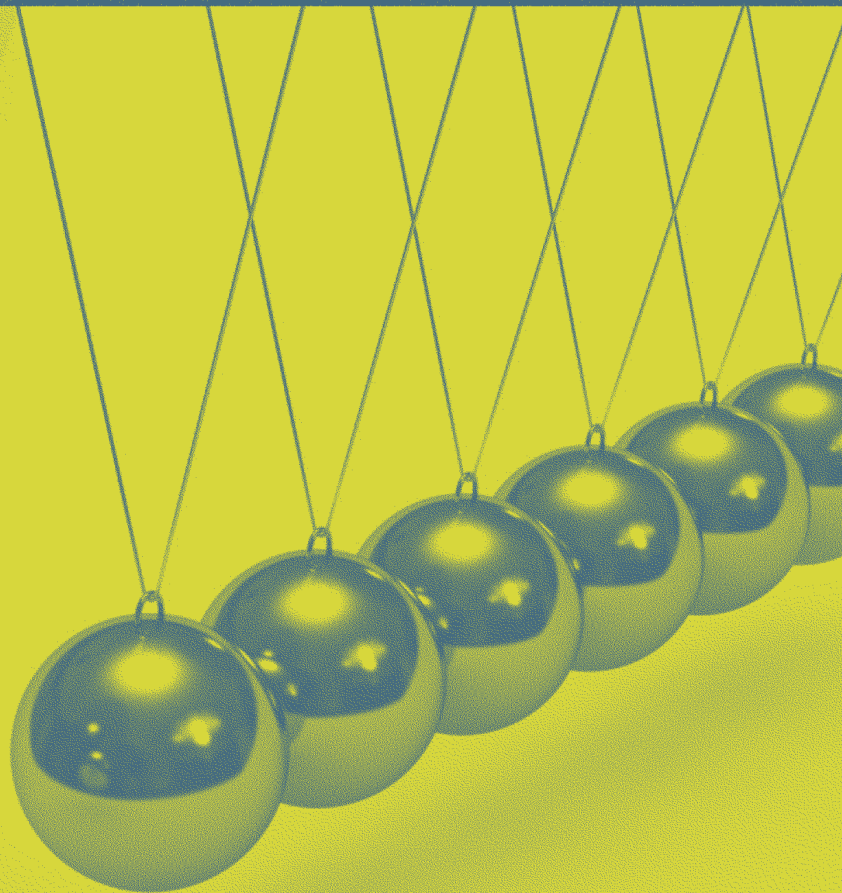




# Towards a Future without Fundamentalisms

Analyzing Religious Fundamentalist Strategies  
and Feminist Responses

by Cassandra Balchin





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### A RANGE OF VOICES

This publication draws on the responses of more than 1,600 women's rights activists to a 2007 online survey on religious fundamentalisms and women's rights, interviews with 51 key experts, and a series of case studies commissioned by AWID to document feminist strategies to counter fundamentalist movements. Together, these women's rights activists represent a broad range of experiences. They vary in age from under 16 to over 65 years of age; they focus on different regions and issues; and they are affected by religious fundamentalist movements in the world's major and minor religions. They work at local, national, regional and international levels, and they operate within a wide range of organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), governments, multilateral agencies, religious organizations and academic institutions. Their experiences of religious fundamentalist strategies, and of feminist strategies of resistance and challenge, are highlighted here.

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Introduction:

# Why Look at Religious Fundamentalist Strategies and Feminist Strategies of Resistance and Challenge?

According to more than 76% of women's rights activists surveyed by AWID, the strength of religious fundamentalisms has increased globally over the past 10 years. Sixty per cent also feel it has increased in the context of their work. What is it that religious fundamentalists do and say that seems to make them so successful?

As highlighted in AWID's publication, *Religious Fundamentalisms on the Rise: A case for action*, religious fundamentalisms are not only found in every region and religion, but they are also becoming increasingly visible at the international level in, for example, the international human rights system. Given this global prevalence, a global comparative analysis of how religious fundamentalisms work and grow may provide important insights. Are there underlying similarities in the ways religious fundamentalisms work in different regions and within different religious traditions? Have the factors leading to their emergence been the same or different in, for example, Peru, Poland and Pakistan? Do religious fundamentalists campaign on different or similar issues? And most importantly, what do the answers to these questions mean for building movements of resistance and challenge?

An earlier report (*Shared Insights: Women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms*) identified a number of characteristics common to religious fundamentalisms based on definitions provided by women's rights activists: they are absolutist and intolerant; anti-women, patriarchal and anti-human rights; about politics and power; literalist and outmoded; and violent. Further, religious fundamentalisms were commonly characterized as ideological movements that contradict democratic politics and the vision of an egalitarian society. Religious fundamentalist actors were seen as being local as well as global, "secular" as well as "religious", and elites as well as followers.

How are these characteristics manifested in fundamentalist strategizing? And how does our understanding of the characteristics of religious fundamentalisms help us analyze their strategizing?

In the experience of 8 out of 10 women's rights activists, religious fundamentalisms have had a negative impact on women's rights. This impact is felt in terms of reduced rights in the areas of health and reproductive rights, sexual rights and freedoms, women's participation in the public sphere, family laws, economic rights, as well as a general reduction in women's autonomy; and increased violence against women. Two-thirds of activists surveyed also regard the impact of fundamentalisms as more obstructive of women's rights than other movements. It is not surprising, then, that women have played a leading role in resisting fundamentalisms. Indeed, 79% of women's rights activists feel that women's rights organizations and movements have actively been trying to challenge religious fundamentalisms.

Religious fundamentalisms have also had a negative impact on the rights of men and boys. Like women, men are pressured into following fundamentalist norms of behaviour. They can be expected to enforce the fundamentalist vision of a patriarchal, heterosexual family, support or join militaristic action, and to visibly demonstrate their commitment to religion through public prayer and following dress codes. And because of fundamentalist influences on educational policies, boys, like girls, are denied sex education and made to feel ashamed of their bodies. Greater understanding of the impact of religious fundamentalisms on boys is needed. This report, however, focuses on fundamentalisms from the angle of women's rights. We chose this angle because of how significant the impact of religious fundamentalisms has been on women's bodies, sexuality, and autonomy, and because of AWID's identity as a women's human rights organization.

This report is designed to meet a need that was clearly expressed by women's rights activists in response to AWID's survey. Eighty-one per cent of activists said that in order to be able to more effectively challenge religious fundamentalisms, a top or major need is more information about the phenomenon. Eighty-four per cent also stated that a top or major need is for more information about women's strategies of resistance in other countries. Therefore, while previous AWID publications have addressed the impacts of religious fundamentalisms, this report concentrates on the strategies these movements use to influence society and politics as well as feminist strategies of resistance. Collectively and as individuals, women have long been resisting and challenging religious fundamentalisms through an immense variety of strategies. Although some of these have already been documented in other publications, including ones by AWID,<sup>1</sup> few have attempted a synthesis of feminist strategies across regions and different religious traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Building upon the views and experiences of women's rights activists across the world, the three chapters in this report examine the following:

1. The historical, economic, political, and social factors that help religious fundamentalisms grow and that set the contexts for fundamentalist strategizing as well as for feminist resistance and challenge;
2. The strategies used by religious fundamentalist actors: the discourses they use, how they build their movements, their use of violence, and their penetration into political and public arenas;
3. Feminist strategies of resistance and challenge, including activist analyses of different ways to enhance the effectiveness of feminist strategizing.

By presenting a cross-regional, cross-religion synthesis of religious fundamentalist strategies and feminist strategies, this report hopes to enable more effective resistance and challenge to fundamentalisms by women's rights activists and their allies in other movements. The synthesis points to areas where a shared, transnational feminist response may be most effective, and it identifies common challenges to effective feminist strategizing on religious fundamentalisms. It hopes to help strengthen feminist solidarity by creating greater awareness of each other's contexts and strategies, and it hopes to inspire and enliven local initiatives by sharing examples of resistance from a range of different contexts.

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1 [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

2 Women's rights activists from East Asia and the Pacific made up less than 1% of the survey respondents. This region is therefore under-represented in the cross-comparison of trends in religious fundamentalisms. Also, this report only discusses regional variations that are significant to feminist strategizing. If a region is not mentioned in the discussion of regional variations, this means that region showed no particular variation from the general trend.



## Chapter 1

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# The rise in religious fundamentalisms: Understanding the causes

# Introduction

To identify the most effective feminist responses to fundamentalist movements, we must first understand the underlying societal trends and developments that give rise to fundamentalisms. It is not enough to treat the symptoms of the problem; we must also address its root causes. As one women's rights activist notes, "If we combat only manifestations and what is on the surface, I don't think many things can change. We should know some of the reasons at least hypothetically [behind the rise of religious fundamentalisms] to combat what is at the core" (María José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil). These underlying global and local trends also shape the responses of other rights-based social movements. They determine both the opportunities and obstacles that we all face in our collective efforts to resist and challenge fundamentalist forces.

Determining the causes of religious fundamentalisms is a complex task. In this report, we understand "causes" to be factors at the global, regional, local or even individual level that arise irrespective of fundamentalist influence, and that serve as entry points for religious fundamentalist movements to emerge and expand.

In the experience of women's rights activists, no single factor stands out as being the "ultimate" cause of religious fundamentalisms. Instead, the factors behind their rise are multiple, interlinked and diverse. For example, war often has a role to play by both draining economic resources and creating the kinds of social upheaval that religious fundamentalisms thrive on.

To help the reader navigate through these complexities, this chapter groups the factors that have contributed to the rise of religious fundamentalisms into three broad and overlapping categories: economic, political, and social. Some of the complexities in understanding the causes of religious fundamentalisms are discussed at the end of the chapter. This includes their self-perpetuating nature and the question of whether or not they are merely a backlash against social and political advances.

The most favoured entry point for religious fundamentalisms varies from one local context to another, which indicates that fundamentalist actors are likely to respond opportunistically to the immediate situation. Nevertheless, each of the factors discussed below is present across regions and religions. This reveals that despite contextual diversities, there is an underlying pattern of factors that women's rights activists have identified as being critical to the rise in religious fundamentalisms.



# Economic Factors behind the Rise in Religious Fundamentalisms

## Poverty and inequality

For women's rights activists, particularly those focusing on sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>3</sup> national poverty is one of the most significant factors behind the rise of religious fundamentalisms. The connection can be explained in several ways. In some cases, joining fundamentalist movements may be seen as a survival strategy, because it promises some material benefit: "Because people are broke, if there's a little money [to be gained from joining] they are willing to shut down their ability to analyze and think" (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria). In others, absolute poverty leaves women without alternatives and thereby helps to perpetuate religiously justified patriarchy. A survey respondent working with Romani women in northeast Bulgaria, where the population is predominantly Muslim, notes that "women receive no education, do not go to work, never divorce and are the only ones who take care of the home and the children. Because of higher poverty and isolation, this style of living has [been] preserved over many generations" (survey respondent, Bulgaria). On its own, however, absolute poverty cannot adequately explain the rise of religious fundamentalisms—the grinding poverty prevalent in South Asia, for example, is not seen by local women's rights activists as one of the major factors behind the growth of fundamentalist movements.

By contrast, the growing gap between the rich and the poor (or relative rather than absolute poverty) is seen as a powerful factor behind the rise of fundamentalisms in all regions. This indicates that poverty as a cause of the rise in religious fundamentalisms is perhaps best understood not just as a purely economic factor that contributes to a lack of opportunity and unequal access to resources; it should also be understood that this inequality gives rise to a sense of injustice. As one women's rights activist puts it, "Some of what religious fundamentalists say resonates with people's feelings of injustice" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan).

## The failure of state institutions and services

The failure of state institutions and services is one of the most commonly identified factors behind the local presence of religious fundamentalisms. Among women's rights activists focusing on the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, it is by far the most frequently mentioned factor. As one women's rights activist notes, "If the resources of Nigeria were being used more efficiently and effectively and social amenities were available, I have a strong feeling religion would not play such a strong role" (Asma'u Joda, Nigeria).

In many countries, the diminishing involvement of the state in community education, for example, has left a vacuum often filled by religious fundamentalist groups. In Pakistan, well-funded private religious *madrasas*, many of which have a fundamentalist mission, provide schooling for children living in poverty. In sub-Saharan Africa, where states have been overwhelmed by the HIV and AIDS pandemic and have at times been unwilling to respond appropriately, well-resourced fundamentalist groups have stepped in to fill the gap in services. The failure of state institutions and services thus creates an avenue for fundamentalist influence, with regard to both recruitment and legitimacy.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this report, reference to regional variations is almost always derived from regional cross-tabulations of survey results, usually reinforced by the findings of the in-depth interviews conducted for the research.

## Neoliberalism and global capital

Several factors behind the rise in religious fundamentalisms —poverty, the growing gap between rich and poor and the consequent sense of inequality and discrimination, the failure of state services—can partly be attributed to the neoliberal policies of International Financial Institutions and to the globalization of capital. Both have undermined the role of the state, including its ability to act as an economic and social safety net, and both have contributed to the rise in religious fundamentalisms in other ways too.

The neoliberal privatization agenda has strengthened the economic and social power of religious fundamentalisms in two distinct ways. Firstly, public services in many contexts have been sold off to private companies or religious institutions strongly influenced by religious fundamentalists. This has given them significant power in relation to state policy. For example, in Mexico during the presidency of Salinas de Gortari of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), neoliberal policies of structural adjustment were expanded, “which meant that many public companies were privatized, acquired and are now controlled by companies belonging to ultraconservative groups” (Daptnhe Cuevas, Mexico). Secondly, privatization has given religious institutions greater reach and visibility in society.

The privatization agenda is giving religion a space because the state then wants to offload its functions onto religious institutions. Who has the capacity and resources? Religious institutions! When we have women who have no recourse to public funds, who is it who can give them shelter and food? The gurdwara [Sikh temple]! ...This is problematic for women.  
(Pragna Patel, United Kingdom)

The new power based on globalized oil money has also allowed the Gulf States, Iran and Libya to use this resource to promote a fundamentalist vision of Islam worldwide. But the triangle between capital, fundamentalist groups and authoritarian governments is not restricted to the Middle East or Islam. Religious fundamentalisms have been “good for business” and promoted by business elsewhere too: in Gujarat, India, for example, companies have used impoverished Dalits, who have been radicalized by Hindu fundamentalist groups, to replace higher-paid Muslim workers. This tactic has been supported by local governments that are dominated by Hindu fundamentalist parties.

The growing consumerism that has accompanied neoliberal policies has also helped strengthen fundamentalist trends. For women’s rights activists in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, neoliberal ideas about wealth accumulation have helped the flourishing of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that promise wealth to their followers.

Other economic factors have also indirectly caused a rise in fundamentalisms. The United States’ desire to control economic resources such as oil has led to intervention in the Middle East as well as its support for Israel. This in turn has been responsible for the local rejection of such concepts as women’s human rights, because of the “widespread hatred towards anything that is ‘western’...or even remotely related to the West” (Azza Soliman, Egypt).

# Political Factors behind the Rise in Religious Fundamentalisms

## Authoritarianism and the absence of political alternatives

The strength of religious fundamentalisms is linked to the overall health of a society's political life. When this overall political context becomes diseased through authoritarianism and an absence of political alternatives, it is not surprising that absolutist and intolerant movements benefit. One activist describes the connection:

Fundamentalist projects thrive where democracy is denied; where human rights are denied; where people are denied the right to participate in decision-making; where there is no ability to decide about matters relating to their own lives, their community's life, what they want their state to look like. And if such projects are gaining ground in the world at large it is because there is no democratic world order.  
(Farida Shaheed, Pakistan)

This global problem is manifested at the national level as authoritarianism, which occurs in secular as well as theocratic states. Indeed, for women's rights activists focusing on Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as well as the Middle East and North Africa, where both secular and theocratic states exist, authoritarian rule and the lack of civil liberties are more significant factors in the rise of fundamentalist movements than for activists in other regions.

Authoritarianism facilitates the emergence of religious fundamentalisms by crushing progressive political alternatives. For example, in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, leftist movements were annihilated with the result that in the post-Saddam period, fundamentalists presented the only visible opposition to the US-installed government. In Indonesia under Suharto, rights-based civil society institutions were systematically disempowered and trade unions co-opted, which left a lack of alternatives post-Suharto. In Central and Eastern Europe, "political transformation and [the] collapse of communism left a free space. In [Poland], it was the Catholic Church that immediately jumped in and took over the ideological side of society. In Russia, it was the Orthodox Church" (Wanda Nowicka, Poland).

By uniting all national opposition forces, authoritarianism can give previously isolated fundamentalist political parties greater space and visibility. In India, participation in the opposition to Indira Gandhi's authoritarian Emergency rule (1975-1977) gave Hindu fundamentalists the political respectability they had previously lacked.

Authoritarianism also brings about social changes that facilitate the rise of fundamentalisms. The increase in policing and control that has taken place in some contexts has often happened at the very same time that the state has withdrawn from providing services, making a powerful combination factor behind the rise of religious fundamentalisms. Young feminists note that human rights abuses by secular governments have led people to become more violent, within both public and private spheres. They believe that this normalizing of violence has made it easier for fundamentalisms to gain ground.

## The state's use of religion

Different types of states—theocratic as well as secular—may use religion as a means of increasing their political and social control and legitimacy.

In the case of fundamentalist theocratic states, the use of the state machinery to further promote religious fundamentalist agendas nationally and internationally is clearly visible. This is particularly effective when combined with the mobilizing power of nationalism against an external enemy, even if of the same religion. For the fundamentalist Iranian state, the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war “was a gift” because it galvanized national public support (and facilitated suppression of political opposition) in the face of a common enemy (Homa Hoodfar, Iran).

Less obvious, but as important, is when religious fundamentalisms are strengthened by the use of religion in public policy in other types of states. This includes formally secular states or states which have a state religion but are not fundamentalist.

Particularly in post-colonial North Africa, Asia and the Middle East, the secular state has often used religion as a means of easily mobilizing popular support to counter political opposition, especially from communists and socialists, as in the 1960s and 1970s in Algeria, Egypt and Sudan. Similarly but more recently, Indonesian President Suharto (1967-1998) created para-state religious organizations in the final years of his regime when he faced growing national opposition. Today in Egypt, the state may be battling religious fundamentalist groups but also welcomes their focus “on the external political situation, shifting attention from the corruption of the state” (Azza Soliman, Egypt). In such contexts, states may at times cynically even encourage fundamentalisms behind the scenes.

Despite the formally secular nature of the state in much of Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, nearly 40% of women's rights activists focusing on these regions regard the state's use of religion in building national identity as an important factor in the rise of fundamentalisms. In practice, this resembles the situation in formally theological states such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. The mobilization of religion is particularly common in post-conflict national reconstruction. In Cambodia, for instance, “the Khmer Rouge had deemed all faith and ideology as reactionary, so to bring back Buddhism, kingdom and religion was really important in the reconstruction. Cambodia's national slogan is state, religion, king” (Shalmali Guttal, India/Southeast Asia).

In certain socially secular countries of Western Europe, state policies of multiculturalism have promoted religious identity above shared citizenship, which has facilitated the growth of fundamentalisms:

**Minority communities are now constructed as faith communities. [So] religious identity [is] embedded in the way in which social policy is formulated. This gives space to the religious Right to dominate that agenda.**  
(Pragna Patel, United Kingdom)

Women's rights activists provide numerous examples of states using the support of religious institutions to boost their social and political legitimacy. After the opening up of China in 1979, the Chinese state encouraged the growth of Christianity (and more selectively Islam), which it hoped would help defuse growing social unrest and control rising crime.

In many contexts, the state both uses religion to its own ends but also takes an authoritarian approach to any political opposition that is expressed through religion. This is a dangerous combination that provides double fuel to fundamentalisms. In some states of Central Asia, for instance, the approach is ambiguous: “On the one hand, the government is scared of religious extremists. On the other hand, it supports [them] by constructing big mosques and mentioning that ‘we are Muslims’ on every stage and ‘we should only act in this way’” (women's rights activist, Central Asia).

Even in states that are not formally theological, the head of state may use his position to promote a fundamentalist vision. “Efraín Ríos Montt [is the] messianic leader of the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG, Guatemalan Republican Front), responsible for the coup d'état in 1982, with the blessings of the Evangelical church and the US government. That period was one of the bloodiest during the war. [Today] even though Guatemala is a secular state, the political discourse embraces apocalyptic religious visions” (Maya Varinia Alvarado Chávez, Guatemala).

The situation in Kenya is remarkably similar: “[We have] a President who behaves as if, because he is Catholic, all people should be Catholic, and so he speaks against women's rights like the right to abortion, use of contraceptives like condoms, and such weighty matters from his authority as president, yet he is airing his religious views!” (survey respondent, Kenya).

## The promotion of religious fundamentalisms by political forces

It is not just the state that has a role to play. In the experience of women's rights activists, all national political forces, individual politicians, parties of the political Left and Right, secular parties, in power and in opposition, on occasion promote religious fundamentalisms for a variety of reasons.

Opposition politicians and armed movements have used the mobilizing power of religion in their effort to gain state power. In Sri Lanka, Buddhism was used in the service of Sinhala nationalism by the opposition Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP, People's Liberation Front), and in parts of Africa oppositional forces have mobilized around religion: for example the Bundu dia Kongo, a separatist ethnic-religious movement founded in the DRC in 1969, and the Mungiki, a movement (originating in the late 1980s) that blends African traditional religion with Kikuyu ethnic identity to make political claims against the Kenyan government.

For some women's rights activists, the promotion of fundamentalisms by political forces is a result of opportunism. During the 2006-2008 political crisis in Bangladesh, many women's rights activists were dismayed by the opportunistic approach of "mainstream political parties [who] in their headlong rush for power ... are actively seeking to be bedfellows" with religious fundamentalists (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh). In the United States, the political space granted to Christian fundamentalists in the early 2000s was the result of a manipulative approach by the country's political Right:

Christian fundamentalism was politicized in the 1970s and 1980s in a pretty cynical way by architects of the new Right who were trying to put together a popular movement and a bait to give them electoral power. (Mab Segrest, United States)

At other times, the rise of conservative governments can open a door to religious fundamentalisms. This was the case in the early 2000s in several European and North American countries (Spain – 2000; USA – 2001; Italy – 2001; France – 2002; the Netherlands – 2002; Canada – 2006). The accession of deeply conservative states such as Poland and Malta to the European Union in 2004 further widened the space for fundamentalist influence at the level of EU policy. The nature of the relationship between conservative and fundamentalist forces is not always easy to characterize, especially because neither conservatives nor fundamentalists nor the context are homogenous and unchanging. Nevertheless, whether it is a relationship of convenience or conviction or both, religious fundamentalisms tend to flourish more where conservative governments are in power.

Particularly in Latin America, the Catholic Church's considerable social legitimacy as compared to governments and political parties often leads to a "client relationship" where the government receives public support from the Church's hierarchy in exchange for protecting some of the Church's interests, including its ideological perspectives on the family and restricting women's sexual and reproductive rights. In Chile for example, the government has obstructed emergency contraception, while in formally secular Argentina, state subsidies for religious colleges mean they can charge lower fees and attract more students. This trend is also visible in Eastern Europe, where "it can be said that women's rights have been 'sacrificed' to maintain the good relations of a new state regime with the Catholic Church" (survey respondent, Poland).

Secular and Left forces have also played a role in the rise of religious fundamentalisms. Having a Left-leaning government does not guarantee the exclusion of fundamentalist influence on public policy. For example, in both Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, Left-leaning presidential candidates concluded pacts with the Catholic Church that entailed promises to severely compromise women's reproductive rights (by repealing the law permitting abortion in limited circumstances and amending the constitution to "protect life since inception" respectively) in exchange for the Church's support in national elections; both sides have upheld their parts of the bargain once the candidates came to power.



Many on the European Left have supported Muslim fundamentalisms as an apparently viable challenge to the hegemony of the United States. In Britain, the anti-war and anti-racist Respect alliance brought together members of the Socialist Workers Party and the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami. This enabled the latter to gain seats on London councils for the first time. As one women's rights activist observes, "From Right to Left, all are part of the fundamentalist game" (Marieme Hélié-Lucas, Algeria/France).

Finally, foreign political forces also have a role to play in strengthening religious fundamentalisms. For women's rights activists in South Asia (which includes Afghanistan), the global political role of the United States is the most significant factor behind religious fundamentalisms in their region. This experience pre-dates the current "war on terror": as part of the 1980s Cold War against the Soviet Union, the United States engaged in a cynical manipulation of religious fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan:

Pakistan's military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, with the help of the United States' intelligence service, used Pakistan's state run television and school textbooks to Islamize the nation and create a "jihadi/Mujahiddin" fervour. The result is what you see today: training camps for al-Qaida spread across the country. The US intelligence agency in the 1980s just considered Pakistan and the *Mujahiddin* a means to an end against the USSR, and left them to pick up after themselves. (Survey respondent, Pakistan)

## The absence of rights-based religious alternatives

Internal political diversity is a historical fact within all religions. But in recent decades those within religions who support universal human rights have either not been visible as a collective force or have been increasingly sidelined.

The presumption that as society progressed, religion would gradually lose its importance was a common feature of various strands of modernist thinking for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Europe and North America, including within feminist movements, but also among some post-Independence elites in the global South. The related presumption was that it was unnecessary to engage meaningfully with religion. "Religious progressives could have become a compelling counterbalance to religious conservatives and fundamentalists had they been better supported by the feminist community and better organized internally" (Jennifer Butler, United States). In Latin America, liberation theology was attacked by right-wing military regimes and internally by Pope John Paul II and the current Pope Benedict XVI (who at the time, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—previously known as the Holy Office). The persecution was such that by the 1980s it had lost considerable ground to Catholic conservatives in many places.

The shortage of religious alternatives that support human rights is found across all religions for a variety of reasons. In Islam, "there are some excellent Muslim scholars who have challenged the extreme interpretations, but unfortunately they don't draw the same crowds that the others do" (Alia Hogben, Canada); feminist alternatives are growing but still face challenges of acceptance even from other reformists. Within Buddhism, Hinduism and Orthodox Judaism, feminist alternatives or efforts to reclaim a more women-friendly history have only very recently emerged.

Context-specific factors also play a role. The state control of religion in the Soviet Union stunted the growth of a progressive Islam in Central Asia because it led to "an information gap, a systemic lack of religious education in the existing state institutions, ignorance and scepticism towards feminist interpretations of Islamic values" (survey respondent). In China too, state-run denominations have suffered from a lack of legitimacy and instead "house churches"—informal congregations of up to 25 members, often dominated by Calvinists, Pentecostals and other Evangelizing groups—have mushroomed; the country is soon set to become the world's largest Christian nation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the global rise of faith is changing the world*, Allen Lane: London, 2009

# Social Factors behind the Rise in Religious Fundamentalisms

## The link between religion and religious fundamentalisms

As already discussed in other publications produced by AWID's Challenging Fundamentalisms Initiative, women's rights advocates do distinguish between religion and religious fundamentalisms. Some work with religious groups or from a religious perspective because they believe religion can advance women's rights and autonomy. But both historically and more recently, a rise in religiosity and religious practice seems to have been accompanied by deeply discriminatory agendas. So some activists are asking if there is something about religion itself that helps contribute to the rise of religious fundamentalisms.

As an institution, religion has a valued position in many societies. For example in Peru, "the Catholic Church in particular is the most recognized institution in the country and is highly valued" (Silvia Roxana Vasquez, Peru). Religious institutions at times play a positive mediatory role in society and politics, as for example in Mexico, where the Bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas helped mediate between the Government and the Zapatista Army for National Liberation in the 1990s. Similarly, in Uganda, the inter-faith Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative mediated between the Lords Resistance Army and the Government.

Even when religion has been part of a challenge to the status quo, it has not always ultimately been as liberating as liberation theology. The world's religions have often been used in the service of discriminatory agendas and to preserve dominant power relations. For example, many Muslim fundamentalists in the Middle East and Indonesia today trace their ideological lineage to 19<sup>th</sup> century religious modernists who challenged the power of the traditionalists. The modernists represented the emergence of a new dominant economic class and used religion in the process of replacing one set of patriarchal forces with another. There is also a specific gender dimension: "the historic hostility towards women and sexuality in religion" (Frances Kissling, United States) has meant dominant interpretations of religion are closely in tune with the anti-women and patriarchal aspect of fundamentalisms. In other words, religion has proved to be a highly effective mobilizing tool for discriminatory forces that seek social and political power, so a rise in religious practice may open a door to a rise in fundamentalisms.

## The rise in religiosity and religion's promise of certainty

Although difficult to measure, it appears that religiosity ("being religious" or at least choosing a religious identification) has increased globally in recent decades. In an increasingly complex world, with the rapid pace of globalization and the upending of social relations, there is a social and psychological need for certainty and a sense of meaning and community. Religion can prove responsive to these needs, which may explain the rise in religiosity.

As a concept, certainty promotes what is familiar and discourages the leap into the unknown. Feminism and rights-based interpretations of religion, on the other hand, by their very nature reject the old certainties and embrace the opportunity for change. Political ideologies that reject absolutism and instead embrace pluralism, diversity and contextual variations similarly do not respond to the nostalgia for certainty. Thus the rise in religiosity tends not to be associated with egalitarian interpretations of religion but instead with more conservative interpretations. Moreover, dominant forms of religion and fundamentalist interpretations present a Grand Narrative that provides explanations for the entire range of human experience. The human rights framework, on the other hand, "is a very legalistic framework that cannot provide the explanations, emotional as well as psychological, that fundamentalist movements do" (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom). Some fundamentalist movements, especially those which present themselves as modern and target the young, appear to reject the "old ways" of their parents' "traditional" form of religion. However, the vision they offer is invariably framed in black and white terms and just as effectively responds to a need for certainty.

Most importantly, religion offers comfort and hope. One women's rights activist describes the rise of the Evangelical Church throughout Latin America, and the sense of solace it offers in the midst of struggle: "War, conflicts, earthquakes, tidal waves... People need to believe in something" (Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua).

Religion, as a moral code, also offers a space to articulate concerns about social problems. Given the weak position of rights-based religious interpretations and of political alternatives to authoritarianism in many contexts, the space is opened up for these concerns to be articulated through a highly conservative lens, which is more favourable to a fundamentalist vision. As one women's rights activist from the United States notes, the Christian Right is currently the only political force speaking from the heart and about "moral fibre".



## The global rise in identity politics

Identity politics means privileging just one aspect of our multiple identities (age, ethnicity, class, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) above all other aspects; all politics and policies are expected to be centred on that one identity. Religious fundamentalism, which emphasizes religious identity to the exclusion of all other identities, is clearly part of identity politics.

The sense of alienation and a loss of local influence that is experienced due to current worldwide socio-economic changes has led many people to retreat into the comfort of a narrowly defined community—usually based on religion and/or ethnicity. According to women’s rights activists, “people are trying to defend their identities because of the onslaught of globalization” (Fray Gonzalo Ituarte Verduzco, Mexico). The rise in religious fundamentalisms is part of this global trend, where people are “asserting defensive community identities” (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom/Israel).

Defensive identities have also emerged in part as a response to racism. Particularly in migrant contexts, religious fundamentalists have used the alienation produced by racism to recruit. “After 9/11 children were being taunted and called ‘Osama’, so it should not surprise us that these children grow up and may join extremist groups” (Alia Hogben, Canada). One in five women’s rights activists focusing on Western Europe, North America, and Australasia—all regions with a high proportion of immigrant populations—see racism as a significant factor in the rise of religious fundamentalisms, although they are more likely to see poverty and the failure of state institutions as causes.

Racism has been a factor in intensifying identity politics and religious fundamentalisms in other contexts too. The experience of racism in sub-Saharan Africa under western colonialism has led many in the region to assert a more “African” identity, which has included favouring evangelizing independent African churches (overlooking the paradox that some of these Evangelical forms of Christianity were originally exported to the region by non-Africans). In Israel, “after World War Two, many talented *Sephardi* [oriental Jewish] boys became educated in Lithuanian *yeshivas*, and took on all the trappings of Lithuanian Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodoxy. But [back in Israel] they found they were being discriminated against because they were Sephardim. So in the early 1980s they formed their own political party, Shas. Most of its voters were not Ultra-Orthodox themselves but voted an Ultra-Orthodox party into existence because the party stood for ethnic pride” (Debbie Weissman, Israel).

Although states sometimes use religion in the construction of national identity, the global rise in identity politics can also transcend and conflict with national identities; Muslim fundamentalist youth groups in Australia, for example, urge local Muslims not to identify as Australian. Alternatively, religion-based identity politics can reinforce sub-national (often ethnically-linked) identities that also obstruct the emergence of a unified national identity, as for example in Nigeria and India. Thus religious fundamentalisms may appear both as part of and in contradiction to national identity.

In some instances, those forces that could have resisted religious fundamentalisms historically failed to identify the importance of identity politics and respond:

[Many progressives] forgot these communal identities. They saw caste as a cultural issue and part of Hindu identity instead of discussing it as a part of a discriminatory structural system. The inequalities and racism and bigotry [were] never challenged. (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom)

# Complexities in Understanding the Factors behind the Rise in Religious Fundamentalisms

## The self-perpetuating nature of religious fundamentalisms

Although at the beginning of this chapter we defined “causes” of fundamentalisms as factors that arise irrespective of what fundamentalist actors do, in practice most “causes” do not exist entirely independently of religious fundamentalisms; war and conflict can be both a *cause* of religious fundamentalisms as well as a *result* of fundamentalist politics, sometimes in a seemingly never-ending cycle.

For example, national conflict in the Congo, Kenya, Lebanon and Former Yugoslavia has promoted and been promoted by religious fundamentalisms. “Religious leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church continued to support the nationalistic, aggressive denial and justification of the war” (survey respondent, Serbia). The “war on terror” deserves particular mention. Like other conflicts, it was both caused by and has been a cause of religious fundamentalisms. Since the 9/11 attacks, religion has been routinely used as a justification for aggression both on the part of the United States and its allies, and its opponents in the form of al-Qaida, the Taliban and parts of the Iraqi opposition.<sup>5</sup> As a backlash to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, fundamentalist coalitions gained unprecedented strength and won provincial elections in Pakistan in 2002, and reformists in Iran lost out to conservatives as the conflict in neighbouring Iraq worsened in 2004. The “war on terror” has also increased racism and prejudice, especially impacting migrant communities in Europe and North America, but also affecting Muslims more generally. This has in turn exacerbated religious identity politics and fuelled a cycle of local and global violence. Finally, the “war on terror” has contributed to the growth of authoritarianism—already seen as a factor contributing to religious fundamentalisms. Using the argument of post-9/11 “security”, civil rights have been severely undermined in many countries of Europe and North America and a global atmosphere of impunity for human rights violations has prevailed<sup>6</sup>, while allied authoritarian or military governments, as in Uzbekistan and Pakistan, have been supported by the US-led coalition.

The central role of conflict in the cycle of fundamentalisms is illustrated by the fact that women’s rights activists from regions strongly affected by or involved in some of today’s hottest supposedly “religious” conflicts are more likely than activists from other regions to see conflict as a major factor behind the rise in religious fundamentalisms in the past decade. The regions involved are the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Western Europe and North America, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

Fundamentalism in one religion undoubtedly fuels fundamentalism in others. This pattern is visible in the case of majority-minority tensions such as in Chechnya; Israel and Palestine; and Hindu, Muslim and Christian fundamentalisms in India. It is also visible in Chiapas where both Evangelical and Catholic fundamentalisms fuel each other in the midst of the on-going conflict. Competition between different religious fundamentalisms for the public space can also result in mutual reinforcement, as in Brazil where “in reaction to an alliance of Evangelical political groups, the Catholics formed an alliance of Catholic political groups; this did not exist in Brazil before” (Maria José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil).

Conflict is not the only example of how it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between the causes of fundamentalisms and fundamentalist strategies designed to perpetuate themselves. For instance, when a Ministry of Education rewrites all history textbooks so as to present a version of history that privileges one religion or one religious interpretation, that fundamentalist worldview becomes “naturalized” for the next generation, there is less space to challenge it and it is more likely to be reproduced and perpetuated. Also, many fundamentalist communities pursue pro-natalist practices and tend to have very large families, which ensures a constant growth in their numbers. Demographics have played a role in the growing political strength of Ultra-Orthodox/Haredi Jews in Israel and across the world, and Christian sects such as the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) in Canada and the United States.

5 Michael Dickinson, “Blessed are the warmakers: Billy Graham’s final crusade,” *CounterPunch*, 6 July 2005. <http://www.counterpunch.org/dickinson07062005.html>;  
Jim Lobe, “Conservative Christians biggest backers of Iraq war,” *InterPress Service*, republished by *Common Dreams*, 10 Oct. 2002, <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines02/1010-02.htm>

6 See *Catching the Wind*, International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, 2007 pp. 13-15 [http://www.ichrp.org/files/reports/4/133\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.ichrp.org/files/reports/4/133_report_en.pdf)

## A backlash against progress in women's rights and sexual rights

Dividing the factors behind the rise in religious fundamentalisms into economic, political and social categories somewhat helps to unravel the complexities in understanding these causes, although in practice most factors to a greater or lesser extent combine all of these categories. The complexity of the roots of the phenomenon also calls for a combination of various types of activism in resisting and challenging religious fundamentalisms: women's and feminist movements are crucial actors but these complexities point to a need to combine their efforts with those of other rights-based movements, a matter discussed in Chapter 3.

One factor that women's rights activists consider significant is a particularly complex phenomenon. For 32% of women's rights activists, one of the five most important factors behind the rising presence of religious fundamentalisms today is the backlash against women's increased autonomy, which has brought profound economic, political and social changes in society. According to one women's rights activist, "what makes religious fundamentalism different from patriarchy is that it seems to be reacting to the increasing social, legal and moral recognition and emancipation that women have acquired in recent decades" (Angélica Peñas, Argentina). Backlash analysis thus draws a strong link between religious fundamentalisms and patriarchal institutions, such as the family. Indeed, where states have attempted to advance family law, fundamentalist movements have emerged with great strength (Chetan Bhatt, United Kingdom).

The 1990s United Nations conferences for the first time secured global acceptance of "women's rights as human rights" (Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, 1993), agreed basic sexual and reproductive health rights (Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, 1994), and emphasized women's rights and autonomy in all spheres of life (Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995). These advances in women's autonomy and women's human rights at the international level have brought a backlash at both the international and national levels. Since then, religious fundamentalist actors have constantly sought to undermine and reverse the gains made in international human rights standards. At the national level, religious fundamentalists "evaluated the advances made by progressives, the ones they considered 'dangerous', and launched strategies to defend their positions" (Roxana Vásquez Sotelo, Peru).

Although the backlash against women's increased autonomy is seen as significant on a global scale, this view is more pronounced in some regions—for example East Asia and the Pacific, Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. For Latin America and the Caribbean, it stands out as by far the most significant factor contributing to the local presence of religious fundamentalisms.

Beside a focus on sexual and reproductive rights, there have been other forms of fundamentalist backlash. For instance, in former socialist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics, the backlash has targeted socialist-era values, which has affected formal gender equality provisions, for example in employment.

Globally, about 15% of women's rights activists see visible expressions of sexual diversity as one of the top five factors contributing to the recent rise in religious fundamentalisms. Just as some activists feel that advances in women's autonomy have threatened the status quo and led to a fundamentalist backlash, so too the increasing confidence of LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) people and improvements in their formal human rights have given rise to a religious fundamentalist backlash.

## Not just a backlash?

While acknowledging the contribution of all of the above factors to the rise in religious fundamentalisms, women's rights activists call for them to be analyzed not just as a reactive response or backlash to global and national developments. Instead, they urge analysis also to consider religious fundamentalisms as a pro-active force that has its own dynamic. "To ignore their own political visions and attempt to recreate not only the national social order but the international social order in a particular way would be a mistake" (Chetan Bhatt, United Kingdom).

A historical perspective is helpful here. Most of the groups that women's rights activists identify as religious fundamentalist emerged long before post-1970s neoliberal economic policies (which contributed to the collapse in state services), globalization and globalizing technologies such as the Internet. They also pre-date the changes in society and international human rights law from the 1960s onwards that led to greater rights for women and LGBTQI people. The coincidental emergence of religious fundamentalist organizations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century indicates that certain global socio-economic processes undoubtedly facilitated their rise but also that these processes are older than many women's rights activists assume.

Beginning with Christians who opposed theological liberalization in the United States and started calling themselves "fundamentalists" in the early 1900s, other religious fundamentalist movements emerged in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the World Agudath Israel (World Jewish Union) was founded in 1912 in Poland; the Hindu fundamentalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteers Organization) in 1925; the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, and the Catholic Opus Dei in Spain the same year. The Kimbanguist Church, a Baptist off-shoot which some women's rights activists from present-day Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) identify as fundamentalist, was founded by Simon Kimbangu in 1921. The global instability of the 1940s was another historical period that brought a boom in fundamentalist organizations including the Legionnaires of Christ, founded in Mexico in 1941, and the Jamaat-e-Islami, founded the same year in India.

Although religious fundamentalisms at times appear as a backlash against the modern world, they are also paradoxically a sophisticated phenomenon that is "very comfortable with the post-modern world" (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom).

Conservatism and religion are coming back as something in opposition to what has been for many years. So what is seen as conservative and traditional and old has become a new, modern option. Many conservatives are technically skilled and able to use technologies. Progressives, on the other hand, sometimes do not keep up with the newest technological advancements. The old, the new...it is more about political moments that have been so successfully used by religious fundamentalisms.  
(Wanda Nowicka, Poland)

Religious fundamentalisms are not passive or purely reactive movements but pro-actively seek to exist and expand themselves; if any factor is absent in a particular context, religious fundamentalisms will simply seek other factors to exploit and facilitate their expansion. Thus, religious fundamentalisms have their own internal ideological and expansionist dynamic. Arguably, some countries such as the United States and Saudi Arabia have deliberately created religious fundamentalisms as part of a hegemonic project. Rather than asking what are the factors that "cause" religious fundamentalisms, it might be more accurate to ask: what are the factors that make the active efforts of religious fundamentalisms to exist and expand successful?

## Conclusion

The analysis above largely focuses on factors *external* to religious fundamentalisms themselves and is a harsh critique of global realities and the failings of national governments and civil society. These are factors that push people towards religious fundamentalisms as well as factors that enable religious fundamentalisms to become more influential. Factors behind the existence or expansion of religious fundamentalisms that are *internal* to these movements are discussed in the following chapter on religious fundamentalist strategies.

When women's rights activists are asked to identify the landmarks in the rise of religious fundamentalisms in their contexts, the events that they mention reveal the diversity and complexity of the underlying trends involved. These landmarks cover a wide historical period, some more recent than others; can be local, regional or global in origin; and are economic, political and social. In some instances, the lines between these categories are quite blurred, illustrating how the causes are often interlinked. For instance, the 9/11 attacks on the New York World Trade Centre were both global and local, and their causes and consequences can be linked with almost all the factors identified by women's rights activists.

Landmarks from recent history mentioned by women's rights activists include the economic crisis in Southeast Asia, which brought grave economic and social uncertainty to the region. Another recent historical event was the collapse of the Soviet Union, which not only brought these uncertainties but also left a political vacuum. Older landmarks include the establishment of Israel and the legacy of colonial rule in much of Africa and Asia in the 1940s-1960s, where the state used religion in the formation of national identity. In the case of Latin America, colonial rule is in many ways an even older landmark as it established the pre-eminence of the Catholic Church, sweeping aside indigenous alternatives, and ensured the deprivation and subjugation of the majority of the population—both identified as factors behind fundamentalisms. In more recent history in the region, the dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of the 1960s to 1980s, many of which were actively supported by the Catholic hierarchy, were another landmark in the rise of fundamentalisms.

Global landmark events include the UN conferences of the 1990s that brought greater formal recognition of women's human rights, while more local examples include the electoral triumph of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) in India in the 1990s, which brought fundamentalists directly to state power and which had its origins, among other causes, in rising identity politics and the failure of political alternatives. Regional landmarks are also mentioned, such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which delivered the final blow to secular pan-Arab nationalism. Some landmarks emerge locally but have global impacts, such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1973 oil price rise, which fuelled the emergence of well-funded fundamentalist groups abroad. Similarly, the destruction of the Babri Mosque (a site that was claimed as the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama and a major flashpoint for fundamentalist conflict in India) by Hindu fundamentalists in 1992 fuelled a cycle of Muslim and Hindu fundamentalisms both locally and globally for more than a decade. Women's rights activists also mentioned the impact of the victory of conservative forces in Rome under Pope John Paul II against liberation theology in the 1980s. In parts of Latin America this left a vacuum in progressive religious alternatives which several years later allowed a new fundamentalism to gain a footing in the region:

**One important change is the Catholic Church's loss of absolute hegemony of religious fundamentalist thought and action which had been in place since the conquest of the Americas and the genocide of the indigenous people here. The Catholic Church distanced itself from the masses and left a gap to be filled by the neo-Pentecostal churches. (Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani, Argentina)**

While women's rights activists see religious fundamentalisms as both self-perpetuating and mutually reinforcing, most of the factors behind their rise are essentially factors that open the gates through which fundamentalisms can then flood in. These are some of the entry points that religious fundamentalist groups consciously, and perhaps unconsciously, take advantage of in their strategizing, discussed in the following chapter.



## Chapter 2

# Strategies of religious fundamentalists

Religious fundamentalists draw on a wide range of strategies to promote their vision and strengthen their social and political power. Although these strategies are often inter-linked, in order to facilitate analysis this report will examine them within the following broad categories:

- *Religious fundamentalist messaging*: the discourses fundamentalists promote, how they shape the content and form of their messages for maximum effect, and the methods they use to communicate;
- *Building fundamentalist movements*: how religious fundamentalists mobilize and recruit, resource and manage their movements, and use violence strategically;
- *Fundamentalist penetration of political and public arenas*: how religious fundamentalists attack secularism and capture public policy, including through entering mainstream politics, making tactical alliances and undermining opponents.

Many of the steps that religious fundamentalists take to build their movements—for instance focusing on recruitment, communications and on gaining social and political legitimacy—are broadly shared with other political forces of the Right and the Left, including feminism and human rights activism. This commonality underscores the fact that religious fundamentalisms are, above all, an ideological force that seeks to use the political arena, among other arenas, to advance their cause.

Using “strategies” as a broad term to cover the various ways religious fundamentalisms work and grow, AWID’s survey examined the most important ways that fundamentalists have attempted to influence the public and private spheres over the past 10 years. Despite some variations across regions and religions, the statistical findings from the survey revealed that these strategies are remarkably similar across all religious fundamentalist movements. This analysis was reinforced by activist insights shared through the Initiative’s in-depth interviews and case studies.

## Fundamentalist Messaging: “The Family”, Gender Roles, and “Morality”

According to AWID’s survey, women’s rights activists in every region regard discourses around “the family”, gender roles and “morality” as a vital tool used by religious fundamentalists to secure and increase their power. Among the top three most important strategies in every region (see Table 1 next page) is the use of messages that blame social problems on a “decline in morality” or the “disintegration of the family”; and that present rigid gender roles within the family as “natural”.

There are two distinct dimensions to the fundamentalist emphasis on a “decline in morality”. The first refers to sexual conduct, particularly women’s conduct, and the second refers more broadly to the state of society. This second dimension may include comments about the conduct of politicians and those in public office, especially in comparison with idealized heroes from the past, or negative stereotyping of the conduct of foreigners, dissidents, or other religious communities. This report explores the first dimension here as part of the fundamentalist focus on family and gender roles; the second dimension is discussed in a later section which addresses fundamentalist messaging about cultural superiority and purity.

**Table 1**  
 Over the past ten years, how important have the following strategies been for religious fundamentalists in your work?

Where more than one strategy appears in any ranking, this means it was given equal weight by women's rights activists.

## Top five religious fundamentalist strategies

According to women's rights activists from different regions

	Sub-Saharan Africa	Southeast Asia	Central & Eastern Europe, Central Asia & former Soviet Republics	East Asia & the Pacific	Latin American & the Caribbean	Middle East & North Africa	South Asia	Western Europe, North America, Australia & New Zealand	Multiple regions
<b>Top most important RF strategy</b>	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural"	Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Mobilizing youth	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"
<b>2nd most important RF strategy</b>	Mobilizing youth	Mobilizing youth	Presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural"	Presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural"	Using alliances with the secular Right	Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity	Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity	Asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities	Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity
<b>3rd most important RF strategy</b>	Presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural"	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Mobilizing youth	Distorting human rights concepts and norms	Mobilizing youth	Presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural"	Presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural"	Asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities
<b>4th most important RF strategy</b>	Asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities	Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity	Asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities	Asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities	Presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural"	Providing basic services (health, education, housing, adoption, etc)	Asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities	Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity	Mobilizing youth
<b>5th most important RF strategy</b>	Providing basic services (health, education, housing, adoption, etc)	Asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities	Direct entry into mainstream politics	Providing basic services (health, education, housing, adoption, etc)	Forming NGOs/thinktanks to influence policy	Direct entry into mainstream politics	Blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family"	Forming NGOs/thinktanks to influence policy	Direct entry into mainstream politics
					Co-opting or distorting scientific discourses				
					Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity				





## Why fundamentalists emphasize "family"

In some contexts, religious fundamentalisms firmly support dominant socio-political forces, whereas in other contexts, and increasingly among socially mobile followers of Islam and Evangelical Christian churches, they may appear "revolutionary" by enabling a new class to gain economic and political strength against "tradition" and the status quo. However, when it comes to the institution of the family, fundamentalists in all contexts resist individual or collective challenges from women or LGBTQI people to the male-centred patriarchal, heteronormative family model. All alternative visions are rejected as "immoral", "unnatural" and "against God".

The notion of "family" features prominently in fundamentalist messages. For instance, it is used symbolically in the names of political parties and charities influenced by fundamentalisms and is a central topic on fundamentalist websites.

The patriarchal family is so important to religious fundamentalisms because it is the key mechanism for controlling human sexuality, especially women's sexuality. Yet the family is not just a site of individual social control: "For many people, but particularly for fundamentalists, [it] is the blueprint for all social structures beyond it" (Frances Kissling, United States). By restricting women's reproductive and socializing roles to within the framework of the family, fundamentalists gain the key to directing an entire society: this restriction ensures the family's "ownership" and control of children and adolescents, and when children are under control, it helps prevent challenges to the fundamentalist order from future generations.

The strategic emphasis on family is effective because it plays upon many of the factors identified as underlying the rise of religious fundamentalisms: the fear of social upheaval brought about by women's growing autonomy; sexual liberation and the growing visibility of LGBTQI people; as well as general nostalgia for a simpler world and the "traditional family" that supposedly once existed. Religious fundamentalisms take advantage of the impact of global economic trends on gender roles in recent decades. In India, for example, Hindu fundamentalisms exploit the pressures that globalization and neoliberalism have brought upon women, calling on women to give up their jobs in favour of unemployed men: "Women's roles in the home are glamourized as women's ultimate dream and working women are seen as an unfortunate reality in a global economy" (survey respondent, India). Fundamentalist movements play upon the threat that the changing economy has posed to masculinities:

[In a context where] the women have money and go to work now, and men feel completely powerless, there is often some kind of exchange relationship: [the fundamentalists say to the men] "We will make you feel good at home; you can control your environment, your women, your children," and then people will be willing to accept all the changes in society [that fundamentalists want to introduce]. (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom/Israel)



## The "God-given" family: patriarchal, male dominated and heterosexual

Families can take many forms, but the vision of family promoted by religious fundamentalists as being "God-given" and "natural" is strictly patriarchal, male-dominated and heterosexual.

This vision emphasizes the need for women to be submissive and not question their fate. In Thailand, for example, fundamentalist Buddhist monks say: "When your husband beats you, [it is] because [in your] previous life you did something to him, so you better not do anything bad; you have to accept the karma" (Ouyporn Khuankaew, Thailand). "Women are being told to stay in abusive marriages because God wills it so. Women are told that no matter that a man is HIV positive, a woman should not use a condom. They married for better or worse" (Hope Chigudu, Zimbabwe/Uganda). While different religious fundamentalists may engage in violence against each other, they often form alliances when it comes to promoting patriarchy. As regards Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, "the two religions are patriarchal so they are able to find commonalities and reinforce each other" (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria). Examples include common legislative positions against homosexuality and against restrictions on early marriage.

In fundamentalist discourse, the survival of the patriarchal family is dependent on the promotion of heterosexuality. On the website of the Christian fundamentalist Concerned Women for America ([www.cwfa.org](http://www.cwfa.org)), for example, the "Culture & Family Issues" section focuses almost entirely on critiquing homosexuality as "unnatural" and against the Bible. It also requires restricting women to their reproductive role, often through pro-natalist and anti-contraception messages. Thus for example the Serbian Orthodox Church condemns women for low birth rates, the Catholic Church has announcements on the radio in Puerto Rico against abortion and encouraging large families, and Hindu fundamentalists call on women to give up their jobs in favour of unemployed men.

This vision necessarily also demands control of women's autonomy and power to make choices. Speaking about the United States, one women's rights activist notes that "a woman's moral authority to act has been limited". In the context of Presbyterian policy regarding women who experience problem pregnancies after the first trimester:

The tone of many overtures to the [Presbyterian] General Assembly is paternalistic and infantilizes women as not able to properly weigh the options for themselves. (Women's rights activist, United States)

The fundamentalist need to control women's autonomy can, especially in the case of modernist variants, sometimes be masked by policies that seem to support women's education or maternal health programs. In other words, not all religious fundamentalists are overtly misogynist, which can make it difficult to identify some fundamentalist actors. However, fundamentalist support for such programs is invariably strictly conditional—the content of education is controlled, its purpose is purely to benefit the family, or women's healthcare choices are still restricted. Therefore these apparently women-friendly positions do not undermine the basic fundamentalist focus on limiting women's autonomy. As one activist summarizes:

When we talk about religious fundamentalists being anti-women, we need to break this down a bit: they are not anti-women as such; they are anti women's autonomy and control of their own sexuality and in favour of patriarchal heterosexuality. It helps to name the problem clearly. (Ayesha Imam, Nigeria)



Similarly, fundamentalist discourses sometimes place women on a pedestal as "treasured gifts from God" and give special attention to female roles. However, this is not used to support women's access to human rights but to reinforce the need for women to remain limited to their patriarchally-defined domestic roles. This line of argument states, for instance, that if women remain in the home they will not have to face sexual violence such as rape—utterly ignoring that sexual violence is frequently perpetrated within the home. "Motherhood" is idealized in the fundamentalist worldview. But again, this is not in ways that ensure protection for women's health, or economic security, for instance. Instead, both Hindu fundamentalists and Serbian ethno-religious fundamentalists have used "the mother" as a powerful symbol around which to mobilize support against the external enemy and delegitimize internal critiques, while Catholic, Christian and Jewish fundamentalists have used it to deny women rights (such as access to family planning) that contradict this limited notion of "motherhood". Feminist analysis has also revealed how, by reducing women to their role as biological reproducers and socializers of coming generations, fundamentalists give women the burden of being the symbolic bearers of the community's identity. One women's rights activist notes in the context of Gujarat, India, where there have been large-scale public rapes of women during communal violence: "Women are central to religious fundamentalist strategies, as they play a dual role both as reproducers of the community and as symbols of family, community and religious 'honour'. Religious fundamentalists seek to control the mobility and sexuality of women of their own community, and consider sexual attacks on women of other groups as one of the most effective strategies for dishonouring that community as a whole" (Trupti Shah, India).

Ultimately, the levels of psychological and physical violence perpetrated against women by religious fundamentalists are the best illustration of the fundamentalist determination to control women and keep them within the confines of the patriarchal family. "Women in general" are one of the top four groups subjected to physical and verbal violence from fundamentalists. This is both strategic and tactical: for the specific individual or organization, it "teaches them a lesson" while also sending the wider message that opposition to the patriarchal norm is unsafe.

## "The family" and "morality" in fundamentalist campaigning

Religious fundamentalist messaging about "the family" and "morality" are not just abstract words. When these words are translated into fundamentalist campaigning regarding laws, policies and practices, they lead to concrete negative impacts on women's rights and human rights.<sup>7</sup>

The fundamentalist message that women's "natural" place is in the home often translates into limited educational opportunities, a problem found in both the global North, such as among Baptist communities in the United States, and the South. "Several Mbororo female children do not have access to educational facilities. They believe that the role of the girl child is to assist in the kitchen, get married and give birth to as many children as the husband would want" (survey respondent, Cameroon). Fundamentalists are particularly keen to limit girls' (and boys') access to sex education, since knowledge and control of their own bodies is a starting place for broader autonomy. In contexts as diverse as Georgia, India and Nigeria, fundamentalists have campaigned against sex education. Nicaragua, where fundamentalists have successfully brought about a nearly two-decade long ban on sex education, has one of the highest fertility rates in Latin America.

The fundamentalist obsession with limiting women's expression of sexuality to the confines of the heterosexual family takes diverse forms across different regions and religions. These include: abstinence pledges, "purity rings" (symbolizing a promise not to engage in pre-marital sex), virginity testing, early marriage, rejection of sex education in schools, female genital mutilation, laws criminalizing *zina* (extra-marital sex) and *khalwa* (proximity), laws restricting abortion and divorce, honour crimes, and the murder of inter-caste couples.

In contexts as diverse as Chile, Egypt, Fiji, Ireland, Israel, South Africa and Zimbabwe, covering Catholic, Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalisms, the strategic focus on the patriarchal family and gendered family roles is reflected in religious fundamentalist campaigning against family laws that provide for more equal spousal relationships. In Bangladesh, the fundamentalist promotion of unequal power relationships in the guise of "good" religious practice threatens to undermine progress towards equal and violence-free personal relationships.

All those who live outside the religiously-sanctioned heterosexual family are subject to attack. In Kenya, at the instigation of religious fundamentalists, local councils have harassed and arrested commercial sex workers. Their clients do not experience the same treatment, and it is almost impossible for sex workers to organize themselves or take up advocacy action to address their situation for fear of violence. According to women's rights activists surveyed by AWID, religious fundamentalists across regions and religions consistently and most frequently campaign against two issues: abortion and LGBTQI rights. Over one-third of the examples that activists provided of fundamentalist campaigning related to these two issues. The high levels of fundamentalist violence against LGBTQI people illustrate just how central the idea of heterosexuality is to religious fundamentalisms: three-quarters of women's rights activists say that sexual minorities are targeted. For example, Gay Pride marches in Hungary, Jerusalem, Mauritius and Serbia have been viciously attacked by fundamentalists. In 2006 in Fiji, fundamentalists held marches "against gay marriage after hearing of progressive changes overseas despite no real call yet in Fiji for gay marriage, as most LGBTQI are just trying to retain basic human rights!" (survey respondent, Fiji). That same year witnessed a mass mobilization by church groups in Nigeria supporting the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, even though there is hardly a visible national LGBTQI movement. This type of campaigning is tactically designed to mobilize popular support for fundamentalist groups through the manipulation of general homophobia. Diverse fundamentalisms have even blamed natural disasters on "immoral" behaviour. Evangelical preacher Pat Robertson from the United States blamed the Haiti earthquake on a "pact with the devil" that Haitians had made in order to be free from French colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> Similar attempts were made by Muslim fundamentalists to create a causal link between the 2005 Pakistan earthquake and a publicized same-sex marriage.<sup>9</sup>

7 See: AWID, *Religious Fundamentalisms on the Rise: A case for action*, <http://awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/What-s-new-from-this-initiative/Religious-Fundamentalisms-on-the-Rise-A-case-for-action>  
8 [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083\\_162-12017-504083.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-12017-504083.html)  
9 <http://www.pakquake.com/first-gay-marriage-in-pakistan.html>

## Controlling women’s public participation

Ensuring that women’s roles are restricted to the family and reproductive spheres also requires controlling their public participation and visibility, although this is manifested differently from one context to another.

Often such control is achieved through religiously-justified moral codes. In fundamentalist discourse, women’s public presence is blamed for a range of social evils in both the public and private spheres. “There is this equation of women’s economic independence with (women’s) promiscuity. If women would just stay at home, there would be no rape, sexual harassment, unwanted pregnancies, irresponsible fathers, domestic violence, etc.” (survey respondent, United States).

The dress codes encouraged and imposed by especially Muslim and Evangelical Christian fundamentalists across different regions serve the multiple functions of controlling women’s sexuality and public participation as well as emphasizing their moral inferiority. Although women can be ordained in the Congolese Kimbanguist Church, women and girls must cover their hair in all places of worship. “The Islamic army in Gaza threatened women journalists in Gaza and especially those working as reporters in television stations that they would be beaten or killed if they continued in their work and they did not start wearing the veil” (survey respondent, Palestine).

Indeed religious fundamentalists tend to sexualize all human interaction, which has led for example to fundamentalist campaigns for separate swimming lessons for boys and girls in Islamic schools in the Netherlands; for an end to women’s public participation in sporting events, both as competitors and spectators, in Iran; and Hasidic communities campaigning for frosted glass to be put up in the Montreal YMCA windows so that Hasidic congregations could not see women exercising. In Darfur and India, the fundamentalist influence has meant women and girls no longer bathe openly in rivers.

Pressure against women’s public leadership and political participation is a pattern reported by women’s rights activists in contexts affected by Catholic, Evangelical and Buddhist fundamentalisms in Southeast Asia and Latin America, and Dutch Christian fundamentalists have also campaigned against women’s right to vote or participate in politics.

Controlling women’s public participation includes controlling women’s economic resources and participation. Religious fundamentalists in all contexts have resisted reform to family laws that remove the husband’s status as head of household or his legal “guardianship” of his wife, which in practice translates into the need for the husband’s permission if the wife wishes to buy property, access credit, open a bank account, travel for work, etc.

But in many countries women’s public presence is a reality —to which religious fundamentalists have two common responses. In developed market economies like Germany and Australia, Christian and Catholic fundamentalists have lobbied against daycare provision for children. In Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, when the transition to market economies meant a shift away from socialist policies of full employment, Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox Christian fundamentalists revived stereotypes regarding women’s “natural” domestic role and many women were successfully pushed out of the formal economy. While some were restricted to the home, this exclusion from the formal economy in the name of “domesticity” simply meant others ended up in the more exploitative informal sector. Elsewhere, religious fundamentalists may appear to encourage women’s political and economic participation—but in a highly selective manner. So-called “moderate Muslim” groups may support women’s professional achievement but only if it is not at the cost of the patriarchal family; in practice the choices arising out of women’s achievement remain limited. According to a Sudanese survey respondent, “the political participation of women is restricted to affiliation to the fundamentalist parties”. Meanwhile in Latin America, Catholic fundamentalists may oppose public feminist mobilizing as “immoral” and routinely undermine women candidates by making accusations about their sexual behaviour, and at other times encourage women supporters to counter-demonstrate under the slogan “many women believe in the family”.

## Complexities and context: Religious fundamentalist campaigning on violence against women and family laws

On three issues directly related to women (violence against women, domestic violence, and women's rights in family laws) trends in religious fundamentalist campaigning are both complex and context-dependent. For example, the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) "proposed a domestic violence bill but it was very patriarchal in its approach, including an unprecedented defence for the husband, where he could assault the wife in protection of his property! As a strategy, they were claiming they were opposed to domestic violence but not [for] women's empowerment as women's rights advocates would understand it" (Anasuya Sengupta, India). In Latin America, there has been some fundamentalist campaigning in favour of legislation to stop violence against women but this has been in the context of the "protection of the family". Evangelical churches in the region discourage alcohol consumption, which appears to be contributing to a decrease in domestic violence. However, the Evangelicals' temperance message remains within an overall focus on male responsibility for the family rather than equal family relationships. In many contexts, religious fundamentalists are less likely to campaign against domestic violence than against violence against women; in other words, the preservation of the patriarchal family takes precedence over women's security.

Fundamentalist campaigning on the issue can also be mere lip-service. One women's rights activist in India believes all religious fundamentalisms in the country officially condemn the widespread practice of female foeticide "in order to be politically correct, while doing nothing to address the causes". One factor behind the complexities is that other political forces have often failed to act regarding domestic violence, and thus in some contexts religious fundamentalists can appear to at least be taking the issue seriously.

**The former ruling secular Fatah movement did not thoroughly investigate honour killings, but Hamas lately did jail family members of victims in Gaza. It's too early to say if this is an effort to seriously tackle honour killing or just to prove that they are in control of the whole Gaza Strip. (Survey respondent, the Palestinian Authority area)**

In women's rights activists' experience in sub-Saharan Africa, fundamentalist campaigning on domestic violence shows an interesting pattern: as compared to other regions, the region records the highest levels of fundamentalist campaigning against domestic violence *as well as* in favour of domestic violence. This not only indicates it is a live issue for the region but also that religious fundamentalist campaigning may vary greatly from country to country, or according to different aspects of domestic violence. Religious fundamentalist campaigning on women's rights in family laws is similarly complex. In South Asia, the reported levels of fundamentalist campaigning for and against, as well as silences on the issue, are the same; the absence of a clear regional trend indicates that national experiences are very diverse.

Indeed, within the same country and under the same fundamentalist regime, campaigning on women's rights in family law can fluctuate over time. Within two weeks of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Family Protection Law was repealed (partly as a symbolic act) and replaced by far less favourable legislation. This was amended in the 1990s to provide women greater financial rights in marriage and demonstrate the regime's responsiveness to women, but:

**Now that the government have lost legitimacy and support, they are trying to appeal to those more traditional conservative men by actually bringing this law in [limiting the amount a husband can pledge to his wife in the marriage contract]. (Homa Hoodfar, Iran/Canada)**

Although campaigning against women's rights in family laws is more marked in the Middle East and North Africa and among Muslim fundamentalists elsewhere, this does not mean that expanded and more equitable rights for women are supported by other fundamentalisms or in other regions. In Chile, the right to divorce was not granted until 2004 due to opposition from the Catholic Church. In Israel, the Orthodox Rabbinical courts continue to guard their exclusive jurisdiction over divorce among all Jews.



# Fundamentalist Messaging: Cultural and Moral Superiority, Purity and “True” Religion

Religious fundamentalist messages privilege the fundamentalist worldview as the only Truth, and promote the fundamentalist individual as a culturally and morally superior being. This absolutist vision requires an emphasis on “purity” and an intolerance of internal diversity and dissent. While asserting their superiority, religious fundamentalists also play upon the fear of the inferior yet threatening Other and often use racist stereotyping in their strategic messaging. Religiously-justified moral superiority can be

even more powerful as a fundamentalist message when it is combined with nationalist discourses.

In the experience of women’s rights activists in almost every region (see Table 1 on p. 24), the top five religious fundamentalist strategies include both asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities and emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity.

## Asserting moral and cultural superiority

Naturally, all political actors seek to prove they are better people than their opponents; what distinguishes the approach of religious fundamentalists is that this moral superiority is supposedly God-given and thus in effect above challenge and questioning.

According to 76% of the women’s rights activists surveyed by AWID, the assertion of moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious community is an important fundamentalist strategy. This is more commonly viewed as very important in Western Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and South Asia, as opposed to Latin America, the Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, in Latin America, which has been religiously more homogenous than other regions, the assertion of religiously-inspired superiority is simply articulated as “morality” vs. “immorality”, or “good Catholic” vs. “bad Catholic”—at heart just as much of a presumption that there is only one “correct way of being”. Women’s status sometimes becomes a pawn in this game of superiority: both Jewish and Hindu fundamentalist messaging often emphasizes the low status of women in Muslim communities, thus confirming Jewish/Hindu “cultural superiority”; meanwhile Muslim fundamentalists cite the prevalence of pornography and high divorce rates in the non-Muslim West as evidence of Muslim superiority.

This presumption of superiority is often closely associated with racism, including towards members of the same religion. One activist notes, “The Arabs just classify us as second-class citizens. We have these big lips, we are black...” As she observes, the idea of superiority can be used toward violent ends: “To justify the war against Darfur, [the National Islamic Front government says] it is because ‘They are not true Believers, we have to put them on the right track’” (Eiman Abulgasim Seifeldin, Sudan).

In recent years, this fundamentalist notion of “moral superiority” has been expressed variously as being pro-poor, the champion of the “little guy” or the champion of local culture in the face of the globalist onslaught, anti-corruption, anti-authoritarian, anti-single-party rule, and keen to assert freedom of speech. Women’s rights activists provide numerous examples that expose the realities of the fundamentalist claim to stand for cultural-moral superiority. One activist notes how fundamentalists may preach against “the West” and globalized technologies but happily indulge in all its fruits: “It’s not going the way they preach. If they are anti-West, they have satellite [telephones], they use the Internet, they use airplanes” (Mairo Bello, Nigeria). In Ireland, a 2009 inquiry found that Church leaders knew sexual and physical abuse was “endemic” at Catholic children’s institutions and instead of acting to protect those in its care, shielded the adults responsible.<sup>10</sup> In Bangladesh, religious fundamentalist parties have used nepotism to place party members in positions they are unqualified for. For additional examples from women’s rights activists questioning the fundamentalist claim to superiority, see *Exposed: Ten myths about religious fundamentalisms*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8059826.stm>

<sup>11</sup> See: AWID, *Exposed: Ten myths about religious fundamentalisms*, <http://www.awid.org/About-AWID/AWID-News/Ten-myths-about-religious-fundamentalisms>

## The fundamentalist emphasis on “purity”

The fundamentalist assertion of cultural and moral superiority is accompanied by an absolutist emphasis on “purity” and the existence of one “true” religion. Like other movements that insist there is only one correct interpretation of their culture, fundamentalists use the idea of cultural “purity” as part of the myth of a “glorious past”, their critique of the “degraded” present and their promise of the utopian future that the resurgence of the religion will bring.<sup>12</sup> “Purity” and the assertion of cultural and moral superiority are effective mobilizing tools because they tap into contemporary fears and hopes generated by the rapid onslaught of globalization: the sense of a loss of identity and community; the loss of national or community autonomy or influence; and the desire to return to a simpler era and “rediscover one’s roots”.

In the United States, for instance, the need to ensure “purity” is partly behind the separatism of some Christian fundamentalist communities, “which require families to home-school children rather than sending them to public or private schools, which require women to be ‘keepers at home’, and which emphasize avoidance of the ‘world’ in the form of mainstream media, films, music, books, entertainment and non-believers” (Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, United States).

The fundamentalist notion of “purity”, however, is necessarily selective and frequently involves the manipulation of culture and the reinvention of “tradition”. In Malaysia, for example, an Arabized version of local culture is now idealized as “proper” Malay culture. Muslim fundamentalist movements more broadly have introduced an international uniform that has displaced the traditional dress of local cultures. One women’s rights activist observes the impact on Darfuri Muslims in Sudan: “These people impose this black *hijab* of Iran... They [have] tried to modify even our food. We eat sorghum and they start to introduce fava beans. They don’t allow children to speak African languages. Now FGM (female genital mutilation) is starting to be practised in the big cities of Darfur” (Eiman Abulgasim Seifeldin, Darfur, Sudan). In Israel, the Shas party is influenced by Ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian *yeshivas* but targets Sephardi Jews who have no ethnic connection with Lithuania. “It declares ‘you can now reclaim your heritage, you can now be proud of who you are, you can go back to your roots’. The weird thing is that their roots are not in Lithuania, so exactly what roots are they talking about?” (Debbie Weissman, Israel).

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Levinger and Paula Lytle, 2001: 178 cited in Green, J.A. (2003) “Cultural and Ethnic Fundamentalism: The Mixed Potential for Identity, Liberation, and Oppression,” Public Lecture at the Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy, 18 Nov. 2003, [http://www.uregina.ca/sipp/documents/pdf/SSfall03\\_green\\_final.pdf](http://www.uregina.ca/sipp/documents/pdf/SSfall03_green_final.pdf)



## Intolerance of diversity or dissent

Fundamentalist messages of superiority also entail intolerance of diversity within the religious community, especially dissidents who question fundamentalist norms. Women’s rights activists provide numerous examples from diverse contexts where religious fundamentalists have taken strategic steps to counter plurality and ensure there is a “united”—meaning absolute and monolithic—understanding of the religion, which includes disqualifying or oppressing alternative interpretations and practices.

For example, in 2000 the Serbian Orthodox Church started refusing communion to doctors, nurses, and midwives who perform abortions, while in Mexico, the Catholic Church threatened to excommunicate congressional representatives who voted for the legalization of abortion. In Morocco, *fatwas* were issued against campaigners advocating for family law reform. Rights activists and those who challenge the fundamentalist vision from within the community are routinely alleged to have caused “moral outrage” or injured religious sentiment through “blasphemy”. These powerful sentiments can be mobilized to lead to extreme violence. Notable examples include Hindu fundamentalist attacks on Indian artist M.F. Husain and filmmaker Deepa Mehta; Sikh fundamentalist attacks on *Behzti*, a play in Britain about sexual abuse in Sikh temples; the murders of several journalists and popular artists by Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria; the destruction of Argentinian artist Alfonso Barbieri’s exhibition which included drawings of Christ and the Virgin Mary, and the subsequent arson attack on his house; and the Christian Right’s attempt to close down *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. Women’s rights activists also provide examples where fundamentalist incitement behind such violence is not so publicly visible but is just as harmful. For instance, “the Pentecostals are largely silent in the open [as regards LGBTQI people and women who express sexual or reproductive autonomy], but carry out their hateful activities within their churches by giving sermons that fuel hate, discrimination and stigma” (Dorothy Aken’Ova, Nigeria). In Uganda, this approach among Evangelical groups has spilled out more visibly into the public sphere in the form of the viciously discriminatory 2009 proposed Anti-homosexuality Bill promoted by Evangelical politicians.<sup>13</sup>

Often, the development of an internally monolithic vision involves a focus on controlling education. In Peru, the Catholic fundamentalist Opus Dei launched a campaign to discredit the leadership of the Pontifical Catholic University, known for its more rights-based positions on reproductive health, minority rights, corruption and democracy. Parents’ associations in Latin America, which can have a major say in the syllabus, are also commonly controlled by anti-abortion groups linked with the Catholic Church. In Sweden, fundamentalists have set up “free schools” where religion is able to be a major part of the curriculum. In Nigeria, Muslim fundamentalists have focused on promoting the teaching of natural sciences and Arabic in Islamic schools in a calculated effort to downgrade the social sciences, fields that lead to critiques of power and society. Overall, religious fundamentalisms discourage independent thought: “Religious fundamentalisms are violent because they do not accept doubt as a possibility for learning, communicating, understanding” (Maya Varinia Alvarado Chávez, Guatemala).

As fundamentalist absolutism is imposed on entire societies, ordinary people who are not consciously seeking to challenge this vision can be accused of inciting “moral outrage” and “injuring” religious sentiment. In Nigeria and Lesotho, women who violated dress codes by wearing trousers have been brutally attacked, while in Pakistan, illiterate people alleged to have desecrated the Quran have been lynched. Indeed, 75% of women’s rights activists are of the view that people who do not match religious fundamentalists’ expected norms of behaviour are targeted for attack.

<sup>13</sup> <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=49617>

## Mobilizing the fear of “the Other”

Religious fundamentalists also use the flipside to the assertion of superiority: the fear of “the Other”. It is a powerful tool for both mobilizing support and controlling opposition.

Fear is always helpful to the ones who govern. The enemy is the Other, who endangers one’s own identity, whether the threat is real or created. The fear of the Other helps to unify national power and makes citizens less demanding of those who govern them. (Marta Alanis, Argentina)

In India, “the Other” (defined by religion) is portrayed as inherently different and threatening. Hindu fundamentalists play to the majority community’s fear of a loss of its superiority by warning that they are about to be “overrun” by the inferior minority Muslim population; the Hindu fundamentalist *woh panch aur hum do* (they are five and we are two) campaign stereotypes all Muslims as polygamous and claims this results in a higher fertility rate. Similarly, Serbian ethno-religious fundamentalists talk about the “white plague” of falling fertility rates: “white” in contrast to “higher fertility rates amongst Roma, Albanian, and Bosniak populations [which] is meant to produce fear of an eventual subjugation or extinction of the Serb people in Serbia” (Staša Zajović, Serbia). Meanwhile, all parties to the “war on terror” have used racist “othering” and the discourse of the “clash of civilizations”, which includes an often explicit claim of religious-moral superiority, to justify violence.

Religious fundamentalists also use the allegation that a person or group is part of the hated “Other” to delegitimize political opposition: “Religious fundamentalists sabotage the work of women’s rights organizations by saying that they are funded by the West and that they are western and anti-Islamic” (survey respondent, Syria). African Pentecostals and Charismatics often appeal to “African-ness” to reject notions of gender equality. For example, religious groups condemned the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa “for its ‘westernized’ concepts and mentioned that it eroded African culture and traditions” (women’s rights activist, Uganda). In Latin America, fundamentalists initially responded to feminism by dismissing it as an “external invasion”.



## Religion and nationalism — a powerful combination

Nationalism is essentially a claim to superiority, and when religion is emphasized as an element of national identity, the result is a deeply powerful discourse in the service of fundamentalist movements.

According to AWID’s survey, the focus on religion as a feature of national identity is particularly important to religious fundamentalisms in the Middle East, North Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, in some Central Asian states, “there is a tendency towards restoring national identities and national values, and that cannot be separated from the [process of] re-Islamization” in the region (woman’s rights activist, Central Asia). In Argentina, the “true Argentine family” is portrayed as necessarily Catholic. Elsewhere too, this claimed link between national and religious identities is visible. In the North American context, during the administrations of George W. Bush (2001-2009), the United States was aggressively characterized as a Christian country despite the state’s official secularity. The interplay between religious fundamentalist and nationalist sentiment was visible throughout the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001). In Fiji, “the Great Council of Chiefs is filled with (mostly male) members who hold very strong right-wing Christian beliefs, entwined with traditional Fijian political networks and politicised ethno-nationalist belief systems. They use the Church to justify their cultural beliefs, and vice versa” (survey respondent, Fiji).

In many contexts, the portrayal of national or ethnic and religious identity as inseparable has made it even more difficult for activists to challenge local religious fundamentalisms. Using the rhetoric of a divinely ordained “Greater Serbia,” the Serbian Orthodox Church continues to portray itself as the saviour and keeper of Serbian identity. At the core of this is the claimed unbreakable unity of nation, state and Church—a construction that excludes those who are not Orthodox from asserting Serbian identity.<sup>14</sup>

The claimed link between national and religious identities has not only been used by militaristic and fundamentalist forces to justify the continuation of conflict between countries, such as that between India and Pakistan, but has also been used to justify discrimination against religious minorities within a country. In Pakistan, for example, since the Islamization movement of the late 1970s, religious minorities such as Christians, Parsis and Hindus have been increasingly under attack: “Vast numbers of an already small minority have migrated. Those who remain don’t dare to speak out, especially when their identity as Pakistanis is questioned all the time. They have to constantly prove that they are Pakistanis and loyal to the country” (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan).

14 *Challenging the Growing Power of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Public Life: The Case of Women in Black-Serbia*, AWID case study, Staša Zajović and Katie Mahuron, Women in Black, Serbia [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

# Fundamentalist Messaging: Manipulating Hopes, Fears and Contemporary Discourses

In terms of how fundamentalist messaging uses the idea of “morality”, it appears that there is a distinction between the approaches of Christian-Catholic fundamentalisms and Muslim fundamentalisms. Whereas the former use the symbolism of “life” for mobilizing around what is “good”, the latter emphasize death, suffering and martyrdom in their mobilization against “evil”. These are undoubtedly generalizations, but further analysis, as well as comparison with other religious fundamentalisms, may help women’s rights activists deepen their understanding of how fundamentalist messaging taps effectively into the most basic (and therefore most powerful in terms of mobilization) of human hopes and fears—life and death.

Religious fundamentalists are also sensitive to shifts in global discourses and contemporary concerns. Increasingly, but also highly selectively, fundamentalist messages refer to science, human rights, and democracy in recognition of the global social and political importance that such concepts have today. As one women’s rights activist from Nigeria summarizes, “They have borrowed so much from our language and are using it counter our claims” (Dorothy Aken’Ova, Nigeria).

## Playing upon hopes and dreams

Religious fundamentalists play upon a range of themes that reflect people’s aspirations in the context of the harsh realities of daily life. These include hope, justice, certainty, and the desire for freedom. These aspirational messages can be highly effective at drawing people into their movements.

Religion is particularly suited to mobilizing around such concepts because its metaphysical nature does not necessarily promise that these aspirations will be met in this life; or at least, if the aspirations do not materialize, fundamentalists can lay the blame elsewhere: on “God’s anger” or on a believer’s inadequate faith.

Such messaging is especially successful where it responds to the pulse of local contexts. According to Hope Chigudu, Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe have gained ground by offering their believers the positive promise of wealth, as opposed to the relatively solemn promise of mainstream Christian churches, “blessed are the poor”.

Some modernizing fundamentalisms also play upon people’s desire for freedom from cultural traditions. “The Evangelicals publicly speak about their differences from the Catholic Church to differentiate themselves, present themselves to society as more modern and to emphasize the Catholic Church’s backward position” (María José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil). This approach is also familiar to activists in migrant Muslim contexts, where fundamentalists have gained considerable ground among youth (especially young women) by presenting themselves as “modern” or “moderate” in contrast to traditionalists who support customary practices such as honour crimes.

However, in the experience of some women’s rights activists, the fundamentalist message of hope in a hopeless world is just rhetoric. As one women’s rights activist from Sudan puts it, “in the name of Allah they can build hundreds of mosques but they cannot do anything for the poor people”. For other activists, religious fundamentalists may work to alleviate poverty but do not take concrete steps to dismantle structural poverty and inequality. One survey respondent from Argentina points out how, despite their considerable social capacity and resources, religious fundamentalists “only combat immediate hunger and cold, without attacking the roots of poverty”.

## Co-opting scientific knowledge

In recognition of the importance that scientific knowledge has for people today, it is often manipulated to support the fundamentalist vision.

The co-opting of scientific knowledge is particularly visible in Latin America and the Caribbean, Italy and other countries under strong Catholic influence. In such contexts, bioethics committees have claimed that scientific evidence argues against stem cell research and fertility treatments such as IVF. Christian fundamentalists in Africa have selectively referred to science to “prove” that condoms “do not work” against HIV, a claim bolstered by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 during a visit to Cameroon and Angola, and in his various papal encyclicals. The co-opting of scientific language has also been useful to Muslim fundamentalists. In Marrakech, for instance, the imam of a mosque sought to counter work by women’s rights activists with poor local communities by distributing cassettes that lectured: “We can’t pretend to the idea of equality... Women are lacking in reason and in religion... Science has demonstrated that a man’s brain weighs 100g more than that of a woman” (Democratic League for Women’s Rights-LDDF, Morocco). In Canada, Catholic fundamentalists who oppose healthy relationships training for school-going teens “routinely draw on dubious academic studies about the plight of youth and the violence perpetrated by women”.<sup>15</sup>

## Co-opting aspirations for human rights and democracy

The desire for human rights and democracy, and related ideas such as “justice” and “development”, seem to have such resonance in today’s world that religious fundamentalists find it important to co-opt these contemporary concerns in their messaging.

The words “justice”, “welfare” and “development” often feature in the names of Islamist political parties, just as Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) is one of Poland’s most pro-Vatican parties. A message from Pope Benedict XVI to the Brazilian Bishops’ Conference in 2008 illustrates how the Catholic Church skilfully co-opts buzzwords such as civil society, solidarity, justice, the popular will, as well as the fear of death, in support of its fundamentalist position on reproductive rights. “In inaugurating this year’s Fraternity Campaign”, the Pope said, “I again express the hope that the various institutions of civil society will show their solidarity with the popular will which, in its majority, rejects everything that runs counter to the ethical requirements of justice and of respect for human life.”<sup>16</sup>

Three-quarters of women’s rights activists working at international, regional and national levels regard the co-opting of human rights language as an important fundamentalist strategy. Through this language, fundamentalist movements are able to establish legitimacy, gain the support of governments and aid agencies, and forge partnerships with development and human rights organizations, and even some women’s rights groups.



<sup>15</sup> *Rural Feminist Activism and Religious Fundamentalism in Nova Scotia, Canada*, AWID case study, Leona English, Lucille Harper and Betsy MacDonald, Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)  
<sup>16</sup> <http://tisk.cirkev.cz/en/vatican/brazilian-fraternity-campaign-this-year-about-defence-of-life/>

This strategy is evident in every region and among all religions, where the language of rights can be used to curtail the very rights of those it works to mobilize. For example, “Our choice, our freedom, our right” is the featured slogan of the Europe-based Pro-Hijab campaign, whose aims do not include protecting women’s right not to be forced to veil.<sup>17</sup> Using the ground prepared by women’s rights organizations, both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist groups have used the concept of empowerment to attract young women college students, who then discover that this autonomy is narrowly defined. When discussions were being held in Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission on proposed changes to abortion regulations, religious fundamentalists co-opted the language of human rights, in this instance the “right of the unborn”: “[They] found an opening by arguing that abortion impinges on the rights of ‘people to be born’ and the Commission accepted the argument” (women’s rights activist, Mexico). The selective expansion of the notion of who is a bearer of rights effectively contracted the rights of another set of rights bearers: pregnant women.

Fundamentalist campaigns have also used “cultural rights”, which includes freedom of religion, as an entry point. For example, in 2008 the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) introduced Human Rights Council Resolution 7/19 on Combating the Defamation of Religions,<sup>18</sup> which women’s rights activists fear could be used to “effectively place the tenets of religion in a hierarchy above the rights of the individual” and “be used to silence progressive voices who criticize laws and customs said to be based on religious texts and precepts”.<sup>19</sup>

Where globally accepted human rights terms cannot be easily distorted, there are efforts to replace them. In contexts where fundamentalists are seeking to remove women from the public arena, “the whole discourse of protection is replacing the discourse of rights” (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh). Instead of gender equality, religious fundamentalists talk of “equity” and the “complementarity” of the sexes; yet when rights discourse works to their advantage, allowing them to claim the right to freedom of expression of religion for instance, they revert to the term “equality”.

The democratic ideal has been similarly manipulated in order to advance religious fundamentalist movements. In India, the Hindu fundamentalist BJP leadership often highlights their part in the opposition to Indira Gandhi’s authoritarian Emergency in 1977, as a way of emphasizing the party’s democratic credentials and thus countering accusations regarding their discriminatory policies and violent mobilization.

Religious fundamentalists can also co-opt the idea of plurality. Fundamentalist campaigning for separate family laws for different religions, for example in Canada, Nigeria, Senegal and Tanzania, may claim this as a right in the name of democratic pluralism. However, the aim of such campaigning is less to encourage pluralism and more to establish absolutist uniformity *within* each set of laws. Formal recognition of plural legal orders means specifying what is being “recognized”, and in this process it is often the fundamentalist voice that dominates.

17 <http://inminds.co.uk/hijab-protest.html>

18 [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A\\_HRC\\_RES\\_7\\_19.pdf](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A_HRC_RES_7_19.pdf)

19 [http://www.wlumL.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[157\]=x-157-564223](http://www.wlumL.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[157]=x-157-564223)

# Fundamentalist Strategies for Effective Communication

The above discussion about fundamentalist messaging regarding the family, morality, and cultural superiority, and about the manipulation of people's hopes and fears, focused on the content of religious fundamentalist discourses. Just as important is the way fundamentalists package these messages and the methods they use to ensure their vision is communicated effectively.

## Simplistic messages, emotive language and sensationalism

Using a method that stems from their characteristic absolutism, many religious fundamentalists use highly dichotomized language, focusing on black and white binaries that best suit the local context. Simplistic messages eliminate the middle ground or grey area in debates, and help justify religious fundamentalist violence and oppression of those who do not agree with their approach.

Simplistic messaging has proved highly effective in mobilization. The strength of religious fundamentalisms “comes from their ability to simplify a very complex reality and make it comprehensible to ordinary mortals: the Good and the Bad; Believers (blessed with all virtues) and non-believers (demonized)” (Rabea Naciri, Morocco), or fundamentalist Catholic “pro-life” positions contrasted with the “pro-death” positions of women’s rights activists. Describing the discourse of Evangelical churches in Honduras, women’s rights activists liken their messaging to “‘spiritual fast food’: simple and accessible answers to existentialist questions” (Eunice Alfaro and Jean-Philippe Nicot, Honduras). Simplistic messaging lends itself to sensationalism, which religious fundamentalists often use for gaining attention and mobilizing. In the United Kingdom, Muslim fundamentalists deliberately “sensationalise the things they say in order to get more coverage” (Parvin Ali, United Kingdom), particularly hoping to provoke a response from the racist Right which in turn gains fundamentalists sympathy from anti-racist forces.

Women’s rights activists also provide numerous examples of the strategic use of emotive language by fundamentalists, particularly around the issue of abortion and LGBTQI rights. In the Philippines in 2008, the Archbishop of Manila campaigned against a series of proposed rights-based laws that he dismissed as the “D.E.A.T.H. bills”—they would, he said, lead to the promotion of Divorce, Euthanasia, Abortion, Total Reproductive Health, and Homosexuality (same sex marriage).<sup>20</sup> In many contexts, fundamentalists use explicit and graphic visuals in their campaigning against reproductive rights. In the Czech Republic, the populist Pro-Life Movement against access to abortion juxtaposed pleasant scenes of young (living) children with the image of a dead and bloodied foetus, trailed by the slogan, “You are alive because your parents desired your birth”. In the United States, anti-abortion election candidates in the 1990s used such graphic images of fetuses in their national political advertising that viewers sued some of the television stations involved, claiming intentional infliction of emotional distress.

**A campaign against abortion by orthodox and nationalistic youth in Belgrade involved the distribution of flyers and materials with pictures of a beheaded baby with the heading “Mothers who are not Mothers”.  
(Survey respondent, Serbia)**

<sup>20</sup> <http://m.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=674>

## Using deception and double discourse

Women's rights activists from several countries where Catholic fundamentalists are influential report the use of deception in fundamentalist strategies to control sexuality and in anti-abortion initiatives. Notices in the small advertisements sections in newspapers publicize telephone help-lines, appealing to young women considering or seeking abortion: "If you're pregnant, call us!" When a woman calls, she finds herself talking to people trained by Pro Vida (an organization linked to Opus Dei<sup>21</sup>) to provide manipulative "psychological treatment" that is designed to convince them to continue the pregnancy. A similar campaign in the Czech Republic is deceptively called Freedom of Choice (*Svoboda volby*).

Misleading information that plays upon people's fears and prejudices is often used to build popular opposition to or support for legislative reforms. A bill in Nigeria to promote the establishment of reproductive health institutions made no mention of abortion, but Christian fundamentalists wrote media articles calling it the "Abortion Bill". In Morocco, fundamentalists who oppose the new family law have incorrectly told men that in the event of divorce their wives would automatically get half of their husband's assets and property, in order to discourage use of the new law, which supports spousal equality. In India, Hindu fundamentalists rally support by spreading rumours about "forced conversions" of Hindu communities by Christian charities.

In Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, it is common for fundamentalists to use "double discourse", although the term is understood somewhat differently in different contexts. For activists in Mexico, for example, it means the fundamentalist tendency to say one thing and act otherwise (such as the theoretical emphasis on "morality" while in practice misusing public funds or indulging in child sex abuse); for those challenging Muslim fundamentalists in France, it means the tactic of saying one thing to one audience and the opposite to another, depending upon the circumstances. Both examples show how religious fundamentalist messages cannot always be taken at face value.

## Using and controlling new media, mass media and popular culture

More than 80% of women's rights activists find that religious fundamentalists use modern technologies (such as the Internet, cable TV, satellite technology) to promote their messages—a finding that contradicts the common understanding of these movements as "anti-modern" or "medieval". Indeed, the success of religious fundamentalisms on a global level is closely linked to their ability to make strategic use of technology and new media. "Modern technology—the Internet is very much used by the Ultra-Orthodox community—is an important factor today in Israel and the Diaspora that is nurturing the growth of Jewish fundamentalisms" (Debbie Weissman, Israel).

The control of mass media, which was central to Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic nationalisms during the conflict in former Yugoslavia, is also vital in Latin America. As one women's rights activist observes, "TV stations (e.g., Channel 13, the Catholic channel, and the private Megavision channel) simply don't air government announcements about HIV/AIDS or abortion. [Instead] I remember hearing campaigns against abortion on the radio" (survey respondent, Chile). In Gujarat, India, Hindu fundamentalists target lower middle class women through mass media radio music programs, and in Central Asia, where Muslim fundamentalists are officially banned, they attract followers through the mass distribution of religious cassettes. Transnational mass media also play a strategic role: Fiji's Radio Light, partly funded through international connections, plays Evangelical content from overseas for much of its airtime, while women's rights activists from North Africa are critical of the monolithic vision of Islam promoted by Al Jazeera's Arabic television station.

In their appeal to a mass base, particularly youth, a prominent tactic is the use of popular culture to disseminate fundamentalist messages. In the Philippines, the United States and Brazil, for example, rock concerts and festivals have been used effectively to build solidarity and visibility, as well as to raise funds for religious fundamentalist groups. In Mexico, famous actors like Roberto Gómez Bolaños (pseudonym Chespirito) were featured in the 2006-2007 fundamentalist campaign against the decriminalization of abortion.

21 [http://www.ceped.org/cdrom/avortement\\_ameriquelatine\\_2007/en/chapitre2/page1.html](http://www.ceped.org/cdrom/avortement_ameriquelatine_2007/en/chapitre2/page1.html)



# Building Fundamentalist Movements: Recruitment and Mobilization

For any socio-political movement to be successful, it needs a power base that provides it legitimacy and sustained influence. As one women's rights activist notes, "Someone who says they speak for millions of people has political power" (Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani, Argentina). An effective leadership cadre is also vital, and with this in mind, AWID's research has worked to chart strategic fundamentalist recruitment of followers and cadres across diverse contexts. According to women's rights activists, youth and women are particular targets for recruitment and mobilization by religious fundamentalist movements, and the creation of emotional communities and a sense of belonging are essential vehicles for this mobilization.

Additional aspects of building fundamentalist movements are dealt with later in this chapter. These include the close attention that fundamentalist groups pay to ensuring a solid institutional base by investing in organizational development and building the local and transnational ties that can bring them resources and influence. Finally, fundamentalist movement building involves a strategic use of violence aimed at discouraging any resistance or challenge, also discussed in this chapter.

## Trends in fundamentalist recruitment

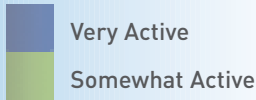
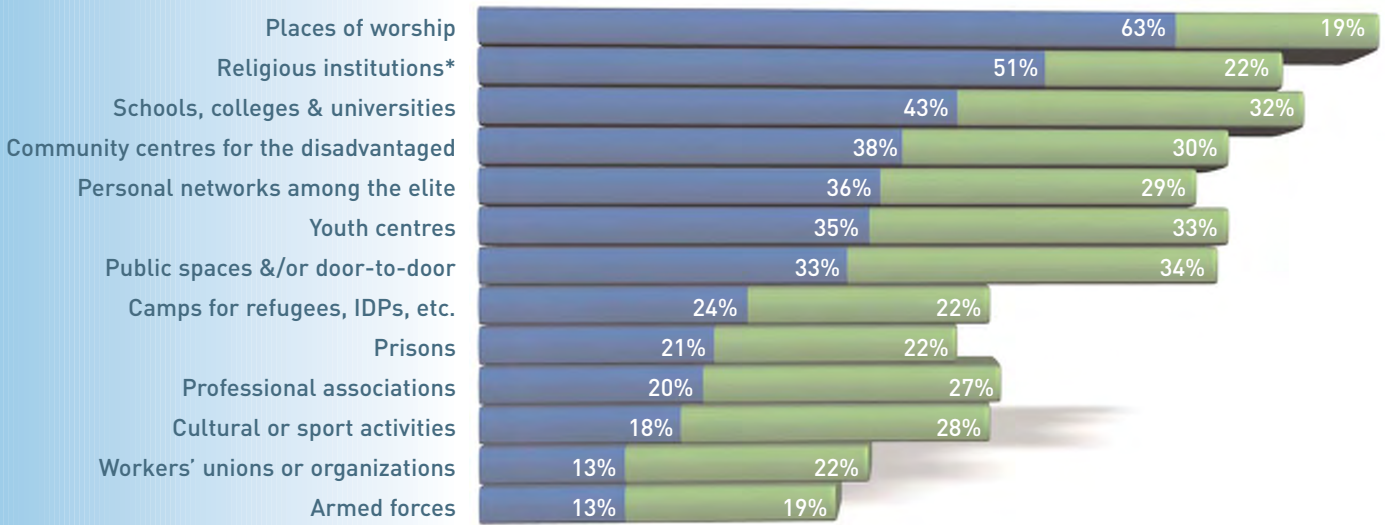
To understand how religious fundamentalists strategize to build their movements, AWID's survey asked women's rights activists to rate how actively fundamentalists recruit in various spaces. The findings (see Table 2 next page) indicate that fundamentalist recruitment targets four main sections of society, which are pursued to varying degrees. According to 78% of women's rights activists<sup>22</sup>, fundamentalists actively recruit among the religious (places of worship and religious institutions); 63% report recruitment among youth (educational institutions, youth centres, cultural and sports activities); 48% report recruitment of the powerful and the elite (personal elite networks, professional associations, armed forces); and 48% describe recruitment of the poor and the disadvantaged (through community centres, refugee camps, prisons and workers' unions).

The high levels of recruitment among the religious are to be expected since, as discussed in Chapter 1, dominant forms of religiosity and religion tend to lend themselves to fundamentalisms. The similar levels of recruitment among the powerful and the poor indicate that religious fundamentalist actors regard the building of an influential leadership and a mass base as equally important for their movements. The strong emphasis on youth covers both these needs, since young people include the potential future leadership cadre as well as an active resource for mass mobilizing.

<sup>22</sup> Percentages reflect an average of the combined figures in Table 2 for the places of recruitment relevant to each section of society.

**Table 2**

Over the past 10 years in your work, how active have the most influential religious fundamentalists been in using each of the following places to recruit followers?



Base: 1,500 survey respondents

\*Religious institutions other than places of worship (e.g., Torah or Bible study groups, *madrasas*, etc.)

Within this overall pattern, religious fundamentalists from different regions and religious traditions take varied approaches to recruitment. In some instances, this diversity is an adaptation to opportunities available in a particular context. For example, recruitment in camps for the displaced and refugees is far more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia than in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the Middle East and Africa, where a very high proportion of the population is young, recruitment tends to focus on youth. Evangelical churches in Latin America tend to recruit among impoverished indigenous peoples, and Hindutva movements in India target the poorest of the poor. In all of these contexts, fundamentalist recruitment seeks the power of numbers.

Yet in other instances there are no straightforward explanations for the variations. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean there is a far greater tendency to recruit among elite networks (e.g., Opus Dei and the Legionnaires of Christ) than in sub-Saharan Africa, but this is not a phenomenon specific to Catholic fundamentalisms, since elite recruitment is also high in South Asia, where Muslim and Hindu fundamentalisms are dominant. Recruitment within the armed forces is much more prevalent in Western Europe and North America,

Australia and New Zealand, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, than for example in Southeast Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, for reasons one can only speculate about. Unlike other regions, in the Middle East and North Africa recruitment through community centres is more popular than through religious institutions. But this apparent interest in the poor does not mean religious fundamentalists in the region ignore the elite, since recruitment among professional associations is also high. Meanwhile, recruitment through prisons is comparatively high in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean, yet low in South Asia.

Regional trends may hide diversities between countries within a region. For example in Pakistan, religious fundamentalists “don’t go for the poorest of the poor, they go for those who desire upward mobility” (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan). In contrast, next door “in India it is marginalized groups, and I think the reason might be that due to the democratic nature of the polity of India they have to get the support of the majority of people” (Trupti Shah, India). The complexities of these patterns indicate that further work needs to be done to understand how, at the national level, fundamentalists build their movements.

## The focus on recruiting and mobilizing youth and women

According to a substantial majority of women's rights activists, mobilizing and recruiting youth and making women supporters visible are important fundamentalist strategies.

AWID's research found that the emphasis on schools, colleges and universities in recruitment comes second only to places of worship (see Table 2 on p. 44). Studies of religious fundamentalist mobilization often highlight educational establishments as key sites for youth recruitment.<sup>23</sup> Fundamentalist movements focus on youth not only through targeted recruitment, but also through penetrating the education system itself, subverting the curriculum where it does not suit fundamentalist purposes, and creating parallel education systems. According to women's rights activists, it is common for fundamentalist groups to establish free schools with religion as a key curricular focus. In contexts as diverse as Nigeria, Canada, and the United Kingdom, they provide examples of fundamentalist attacks on multicultural public education systems and demands for state recognition and funding of religious schools. Funding from foreign fundamentalist groups has boosted this trend, with a significant impact on young people: "[Arab] and other countries open Islamic schools, universities, build mosques in our country. For [the] last 15 years [a] whole generation of people with [a] changed consciousness has grown" (survey respondent, Central Asia).

Penetrating the school system provides religious fundamentalists with a support base that is legitimate and emotionally powerful. In Colombia, "pro-life" groups launched a virulent campaign against abortion, using school children to write letters to the Constitutional Court. In Israel, Orthodox Jewish groups use their schools as handy protest crowds. As one women's rights activist observes, "they can cancel classes for that day and bus the kids to a demonstration" (Debbie Weissman, Israel).

In many countries, support networks and scholarships from fundamentalist organizations for talented but poor young men and women guarantee an educated leadership cadre whose loyalty can then extend for generations.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-e-Islami student leaders organized in the West to receive students from the Third World. While the liberals and the progressives were too busy having fun, those groups received students at airports, drove them for hours to their university, found them housing, lent them books. These young students were lost and just fell into their arms. Then they used the communist cell method to keep them in line.  
(Zainah Anwar, Malaysia)

Although most favoured among Muslim fundamentalisms, mass youth recruitment among the poor also appears to be popular with Evangelicals. In Latin America, where the power of Catholic fundamentalisms has historically been less about mass mobilization and more concentrated on the state and the elite, youth recruitment was focused on building an elite cadre through Catholic educational institutions. Despite the high proportion of young people in the region, the pre-eminent status of the Catholic Church once precluded the need to build on the power of the people. However, in response to the rising pressure of Evangelical Christian fundamentalisms in the region, Catholic movements have more recently begun to respond with popular youth mobilizations of their own. In April 2004 and 2005, for example, 100,000 Catholic youth from all over the country attended the annual Resuscitated Christ youth meeting at the Aztec Stadium in Mexico.<sup>24</sup> An active member of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a Catholic evangelical movement, explains, "The church realized that we had to use a different language to reach some of the faithful."<sup>25</sup> The Pope's September 2009 tour of the Czech Republic, reputedly one of the most secular countries in Europe, similarly saw widespread mobilization of youth.

Some activists assert that the focus on youth has been learnt from progressive social movements. In Latin America, "fundamentalist groups, whether from Evangelical churches or Catholic churches, are using the same tactics as so-called alternative groups to attract youth. They promote parties for youth, organize marches with famous artists and open courses specifically for youth with modern songs and ideas" (Ana Adeve, Brazil).

23 Angel M. Rabasa, *The Causes of the Radicalization of the Muslim Communities in Southeast Asia*, RAND Corporation, [http://www.homelandsecurity.org/hsireports/Radicalization\\_Final\\_Report\\_15Dec06.pdf](http://www.homelandsecurity.org/hsireports/Radicalization_Final_Report_15Dec06.pdf)

24 <http://www.aciprensa.com/noticia.php?n=7895>; <http://www.esmas.com/noticierostelevisa/mexico/356309.html>

25 <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/may/08/world/fg-brazilchurch8>

Whereas religious fundamentalists may have learnt from the success of alternative social movements in attracting youth, they also seem to have learnt from the failure of such movements in attracting women. The strategic focus on women has been a powerful tool for countering the charge that fundamentalist movements are anti-women. Making women supporters visible appears to be a particularly popular strategy in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Meanwhile, Muslim fundamentalists often prominently feature claims about young female converts to Islam. The Islamic Society of North America, for instance, claims that tens of thousands of Hispanics have converted in the past decade, and many of them are women.<sup>26</sup> In Indonesia, interactive fundamentalist websites highlight posts from young Muslim women that oppose feminist arguments. While female religious leaders are emerging in Uzbekistan and Muslim West Africa, they frequently take regressive positions on women's rights. In contexts as diverse as the United States, Spain and India, survey respondents talk about the co-optation of women supporters as a means of presenting a "soft image" and "subverting the growth of women's rights"—a way of fighting fire with fire.

## The appeal of fundamentalist movements to youth and women

Religious fundamentalist movements attract young people by meeting a variety of their needs. They appeal to the need to rebel, for example against authoritarian states and the neo-imperialism of globalization. In the absence of alternative spaces for political engagement, rebellion or opposition to imperialism or to the state, fundamentalist movements become highly attractive to young people (Hadil El-Khouly, Egypt). In Brazil, fundamentalist influence works to turn young people away from socially progressive ideas: "The Church is creating its army of youth, armed with its ideas. The old youth rebellion is now in favour of old traditions, that's what being a modern, young person in Brazil is" (Ana Adeve, Brazil).

Yet the paternalism characteristic of religious fundamentalists can also give young people a vital sense of identity and belonging. In many contexts, these movements work to enhance a sense of power and visibility for young people, if only superficially. For instance, the religious Right in India runs camps on personality and leadership development, where the focus is on creating safe spaces and community, and Jewish and Christian Evangelical groups in the United States run camps for children and youth.<sup>27</sup> The Catholic Church holds a World Youth Day and periodic World Youth Congresses with the presence of the Pope, which attract hundreds of thousands, with considerable visibility and impact.

The deliberate appeal to youth is often also gendered. One young feminist from Senegal suggests that one of the attractions for young women is that joining such movements is a way to find a "reliable husband".

Young women are trying to redefine themselves and go to these [Pentecostal and charismatic] churches to seek this sense of identity ... Young women are worried about their career, new relationships... The church is also a place to find solace.  
(Survey respondent, Uganda)

Joining a fundamentalist group can be a socially acceptable way for young women to move from the private into the public sphere. Young Muslim girls from ghettoized communities in Europe took a very visible part in anti-war demonstrations after 9/11, and used the opportunity to stray far from their chaperones. The appeal to young men on the other hand often emphasizes social power and control (generally over women), increased visibility, leadership, and the seductive promise of a move into formal spaces of political power.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.isna.net/articles/News/Latino-Muslims-Growing-in-Number-in-the-US.aspx>  
<sup>27</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus\\_Camp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Camp)

Undeniably, religious fundamentalisms do offer something to women. According to one survey respondent in Germany, “Milli Görüs gives scholarships to women who wear a headscarf and who cannot study in Turkey (because of the scarf) so they can study at German universities”. In Chiapas, Mexico, after converting to Protestantism through Pentecostal churches, many men have stopped drinking, which is an improvement for women: “Their husbands respect them more, don’t assault them, and the women are happier” (survey respondent, Mexico). Many Evangelical and Pentecostal African churches ordain women and give them prominent public roles, while “women are helped to sell their wares at church” (Hope Chigudu, Zimbabwe/Uganda). In many contexts, religious fundamentalist movements provide space for some women to express their ideas and ideologies and to exercise their leadership, space they may not be granted from the state or civil society more generally.

In 2006, Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, won a landslide victory in the Palestinian elections, with six women among the ranks of successful Hamas candidates. Women not only articulated their interests within the ranks of a fundamentalist movement, their participation was in fact decisive in the party’s victory, as 46% of the ballots in the election were cast by women, and women reportedly voted Hamas more often than men did. In an interview with the *New York Times*, the director of women’s affairs for Fatah’s youth wing revealed that her party “took women for granted”, assuming that its position as a secular party would make it the obvious choice for women.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Hamas devoted much of its energy to addressing the particular concerns of women, securing their support through the provision of social services. The party not only made the conventional needs of women the focus of its campaign, it also broke down the private/public divide in an effort to engage women’s support as grassroots political agents. It reached out to women both in rural and urban areas, through women-only rallies and female preachers in mosques, and through thousands of female volunteers, many of them university students, who took the message of Hamas door to door.<sup>29</sup> In Mexico, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) political party has trained women and forwarded them as candidates for parliaments at the local, state and national levels. Many are clearly associated with either Opus Dei or the Legionnaires of Christ, and once in office have led amendments to state-level constitutions to protect “life from the moment of inception” and therefore ban all forms of existing legal abortion provisions; in 2009 over a dozen states introduced such changes in their constitutions.

The involvement of women in fundamentalist movements presents a challenge to feminist analysis. The extensive involvement of Hindu fundamentalist women in actively facilitating violence against Muslims, especially Muslim women, during the 2002 Gujarat attacks in India “exposed the weakness of the women’s human rights movement because we were very ill-prepared to deal with the violence. The notion of women as violators had to be accounted for” (Pramada Menon, India).

Yet women’s rights activists are conscious of the limits to this “empowerment”: “Religious fundamentalist groups allowed women to use their vote but they did not allow them to run for parliament” (survey respondent, Yemen). In some instances, the appeal to women appears to be tactical:

When Turabi came to power, they declared Islam, and imposed *hijab* on students at the university... In 1999 when he had been kicked out, he was talking a very different language—from the extreme to the extreme. He said publicly, “Women should be free”, and he issued a *fatwa* that Muslim women can marry non-Muslims and women can lead the prayers! You see what kind of manipulation! The percentage of women in Sudan is more than 55% and when he says something like this he’s calculating for the voters! (Manal Abdel Halim, Sudan)

28 Ian Fisher, “Women, Secret Hamas Strength, Win Votes at Polls and New Role,” *New York Times* (3 February 2006) at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/03/international/middleeast/03women.html>

29 Sarah El Deeb, “Women Were Hamas’ Key to Victory, Pollsters Say,” *Associated Press, The Virginian-Pilot*, 4 February 2006

## Creating emotional communities

Religious fundamentalists have strategically built on the very human need for a sense of belonging, community, fun and emotional release. They work to create communities and spaces where, as one women's rights activist observes, "people feel good", and that deal "with people's subjectivity, which has been very marginal in Left discourse and liberation theology" (María José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil). Women's rights activists from Brazil, Nigeria, and the United States highlight the emotional power of Evangelical meetings. The Jewish fundamentalist youth organization Aish HaTorah organizes speed dating sessions, and Baptist choirs and Muslim student federations across Europe provide opportunities for fun and acceptable socializing between girls and boys. Religious fundamentalists provide people with a sense of belonging, particularly in moments of vulnerability: one women's rights activist from Canada recalls how a widow changed her behaviour to match the fundamentalist vision following the personal support she received from a group of Muslim fundamentalist women. As one youth activist describes, "By the time I get to these young women, religion and its fundamentalism got to them first. Their self esteem is usually zero or nothing and it is only in religion that they feel they belong or have been made to feel like they belong" (survey respondent, Kenya/Tanzania).

While religious fundamentalisms refer to scripture and sacred texts, they also specialize in using symbols and rituals to affect their adherents. One women's rights activist in India describes the large-scale mobilization of women by Hindutva movements through religious festival gatherings, which has also proven particularly attractive to young people (Trupti Shah, India). Indeed, Hindu fundamentalists create entire worlds of meaning for their followers:

Aside from the emotional identification there is a whole cultural, artistic, aesthetic universe that these groups create for people to identify with, which ranges from the images that they use, to the songs and the poetry as well as the dress and everything else.  
(Chetan Bhatt, United Kingdom)

Fundamentalists not only make strategic use of festivals as key spaces for recruitment and mobilization, but also co-opt religious occasions to further their political agendas. In Latin America, the religious Feast of the Annunciation (25<sup>th</sup> March) has been co-opted as the Day of the Unborn Child. This strategy, which took different forms in the various countries across the region starting with Argentina in 1999, paved the way for constitutionally secular Nicaragua to institute the day as a national holiday in 2000, and then in 2001 to integrate "protection for the unborn" into the Penal Code.

Once members are attracted to the movement, fundamentalist groups can be skilled at making members feel useful, thereby increasing the sense of belonging and community. Performances and television programs or media people that challenge the fundamentalist vision or denounce their actions or crimes can be subjected to organized phone-ins complaining about content. This increases pressure on national institutions responsible for public standards and can lead to the banning of those who challenge fundamentalisms from the public or private media. This way even "ordinary" members are given a sense of involvement which further strengthens their emotional commitment to the fundamentalist community.

While religious fundamentalists may harness the spiritual and emotional power of religion to draw people in, they also use it strategically against any challenge or critique of their movements. "When monks and nuns cooperate with or are silent about state injustice against minority groups such as in Sri Lanka, the people are confused or even copy that cooperation because monks and nuns are their spiritual leaders" (Ouyporn Khuankaew, Thailand). Elsewhere, fundamentalists have deliberately blurred the line between divine injunction and human interpretation in order to stifle challenge to their authority: "The fundamentalists have created this discourse that any challenge [to them] is an attack against God, Sharia and Islam" (Zainah Anwar, Malaysia). Religious fundamentalists exploit even secular people's respect for religiosity and community tradition:

They have power partly because they are perceived by some people as: "Well, we don't like them, but you know they look like my grandfather looked; they are probably the authentic Jews, and we have to give them some credence because they are the keepers of the flame, they are keeping alive the tradition".  
(Debbie Weissman, Israel)

## Providing services and charity

Many fundamentalist movements respond to the vacuum left by the absence or weakness of state services, often taking advantage of the economic and social inequalities arising out of neoliberal policies of deregulation and privatization. In fact, providing services and charity has a long history, and in the Christian and Catholic contexts was closely linked with colonial missionary activity. It is unwise to ignore the sincere religious motivations behind the charity work of many religious groups, yet service provision has undoubtedly worked to both strengthen recruitment and legitimize religious fundamentalists as social actors.

Muslim fundamentalists in Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan, for example, provide services and economic opportunities—especially for young men—that the state cannot. In this way, they gain influence within communities and find a captive audience for their discourse and politics. Following increasing privatization in Brazil, for example, “a lot of health care delivery has been provided through *Casas Santas* (church-run hospitals), which limit access to sexual and reproductive health services” (Fernanda Grigolin Moraes, Brazil).

In many instances, fundamentalist groups step in to provide support where no other group or institution is willing or able, especially taking advantage of natural or man-made disaster. The reputation of the Hindu fundamentalist Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) was greatly enhanced by its relief efforts during periods of crisis: it “would go in after some grave emergency, pick up the dead bodies and bury them and do all these very ‘polluting’ [in the Hindu view] tasks” (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom). Similarly, following the Israeli attack on Gaza and Lebanon in 2006, in Lebanon, Hezbollah launched a reconstruction initiative *al-Waad al-Sadek*, (sincere promise) pledging shelter for families waiting to rebuild their damaged homes, monthly payouts to all families of the targeted zones, and to reconstruct roads and communication networks. Evangelical groups from the United States organize summer missions to “exotic locales” in the global South, encouraging youth and sometimes entire families to spend their holidays helping to build houses or provide other services—while preaching the word of God.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For example, see [http://summermissions.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=section&id=8&Itemid=226](http://summermissions.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=8&Itemid=226)

## Building Fundamentalist Movements: Resource Mobilization, Transnationalism and a Focus on Organizational Development

Many of the strategies used by religious fundamentalists—such as extensive use and control of the media to spread their messages, mass mobilization and service provision—require considerable financial investment. Fundamentalists have been careful to ensure proper resourcing of their movements, and indeed their resources are often far greater than those of women's rights and human rights movements.

Two-thirds of women's rights activists regard individual donations and membership fees as important sources of funding for the most influential religious fundamentalists in their context. These contributions, which can be voluntary or forced, are seen as a religious duty and are often a specified percentage of a person's income. The practice is found across regions and religions: *diezmos* (one-tenth among Evangelicals in Latin America), tithing (one-tenth among African Christian Churches), *khums* (one-fifth among Shia Muslims), ritual donations to temples among Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, and collections at every Catholic mass. This gives the religious institutions that receive these individual donations a relatively stable source of income that requires neither a funding application nor accountability for its use.

However, according to women's rights activists, international religious organizations and institutions are an even more important source of funding for religious fundamentalisms than donations from individual followers. Foreign governments, particularly of Iran, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the United States, as well as the Vatican, are also seen as vital to the funding of fundamentalist groups, charities and advocacy NGOs in other countries. One-third of the activists surveyed by AWID state that fundamentalists in their context have been strengthened by international development aid/post-disaster relief aid. One respondent from the United States remarks on the types of organizations involved: "The big religious fundamentalist [charities] here in the US... have significant ties to Christian community based organizations and churches (Family Impact, Scripture Union) as well as regional and sub-regional Christian networks such as the Pan African AIDS Network (PACANET)."<sup>31</sup>

Religious fundamentalists use transnationalism not only as a funding strategy, but also to expand their reach and influence. While the content of missionary activity is not always fundamentalist, missions (both from the global North to the South as well as South to South) have been an important means of building religious fundamentalist movements worldwide. In the case of Muslim fundamentalisms, the Pakistan-based proselytizing Tablighi Jamaat is one of the sources of international fundamentalist links most-commonly cited by women's rights activists. In contexts as diverse as India, Mongolia and Latin America, Evangelical Christian groups send missionaries specifically to target tribal and indigenous communities, particularly those with animist beliefs, while Brazil's Evangelical Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is a major "exporter" of religious leaders to the rest of the region. With modern technology, missionary activity no longer requires physical relocation. One women's rights activist from the southern Africa region notes that televangelists from the Southern United States Bible Belt have "aggressively planted themselves into South Africa".

The scope of transnational linkages extends well beyond missionary activity. It includes the presence in Indonesia of Pakistani cadres from the armed Hizb ut-Tahrir; Mormons and Adventists from the United States in the Philippines; Muslim organizations and European Christian and Catholic organizations in the Democratic Republic of Congo; the affiliation of the Evangelical Focus on the Family in Canada with its counterpart in the United States; and the Indian Hindu fundamentalist Rashtriya Savayam Sewak Sangh's ties with the Hindu Swayam Sewak Sangh in Holland. Human Life International (HLI) is a coalition of "pro-life" groups in many countries that is strongly backed by conservative groups in the United States and supported by some parts of the Catholic leadership, through organizations such as the Pontifical Council for the Family. Two-thirds of women's rights activists regard the influence of international religious institutions, organizations and groups on local fundamentalist movements as significant, but in some regions, including sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, North Africa and Southeast Asia, this trend appears more prominent than in others.

<sup>31</sup> For more details please see AWID's forthcoming short report on the funding of religious fundamentalist movements.



Governments dominated by religious fundamentalists are particularly well placed to spread fundamentalist influence transnationally, with the Saudi and United States governments among the most frequently mentioned international linkages. Many women's rights activists cite George W. Bush's presidency (2001-2009) in the United States as a period when a Christian Right-dominated government was able to promote fundamentalist perspectives in its domestic and foreign policies and thus fuelled religious fundamentalisms across the world. For example, President Bush's "Global Gag Rule" policy (lifted since the inauguration of President Obama in 2009) required NGOs receiving American government funding not to perform or promote abortion and led the United States to withdraw crucial funding to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

While care must be taken not to exaggerate the organizational capacity of religious fundamentalists, it is clear that across regions and religions, these movements have invested in organizational development. In Indonesia, for instance, there is an effective cell system for recruitment in high schools, mirrored by similar groups at the university level called Lembaga Dakwah Kampus (LDK, Campus Dawah Institute), which is designed to retain the young recruits (Firliana Purwanti, Indonesia). With the important exception of women's leadership, in some contexts fundamentalist movements present a paradox: "They are more internally democratic than any other so-called democratic party. [Rising within the ranks is] not dependent on whether you're related to the leaders at the top" (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh).

The religious Right in the US has built a network of organizations—an infrastructure well-funded in part by wealthy corporate philanthropists—to advocate their point of view and undermine progressive strength.  
(Jennifer Butler, United States)

# Building Fundamentalist Movements: The Strategic Use of Violence and Steps to Undermine Opponents

In the experience of women's rights activists, almost all religious fundamentalists strategically use violence. No matter what form it takes, this violence is above all designed to create an atmosphere of fear and isolation that discourages resistance or challenge and hinders the advance of pluralism and tolerance. In addition to physical and psychological violence, religious fundamentalists use a variety of undemocratic and anti-pluralist strategies to undermine those who oppose their politics.

An analysis of which groups are particularly targeted by fundamentalist violence helps illustrate both the strategic aims of this violence and the broader fundamentalist vision. Nearly half (46%) of women's rights activists regard human rights activists as frequently targeted in fundamentalist attacks, and more than one-third regard intellectuals and journalists, secularists and atheists as frequently targeted. Nearly half of women's rights activists have either personally experienced verbal or physical violence from fundamentalists on account of their work for women's rights, or have a colleague who has experienced this, while 10% have witnessed physical attack or destruction of the workplace or equipment. All of these groups—human rights activists, intellectuals and women's rights activists—are those that present the greatest challenge to the absolutism and intolerance of religious fundamentalist movements. In the case of women human rights defenders, fundamentalist violence can send a broader message to all potential opposition. For example, in Afghanistan, fundamentalist groups have murdered women human rights defenders in order to send a pointed message: that entering the public arena is unsafe for women; and that if women, society's most "protected and honoured" members, can be targets, then no one in political opposition is safe. In many contexts, both female and male political prisoners are subjected to sexual violence as a similar means of intimidating and silencing all potential opposition.

Religious fundamentalists thus direct violence against people who may not be part of an organized or collective resistance, or who may not even be consciously challenging their politics, but whose very existence and behaviour challenge the fundamentalist worldview. For instance, three-quarters of women's rights activists believe that

LGBTQI people, women in general and people who do not match expected norms of behaviour are sometimes or frequently attacked by religious fundamentalists; and 59% report that LGBTQI people are frequently attacked.

When AWID asked women's rights activists to name a fundamentalist group that affects their work, only 4% of the examples they cited relate to armed groups (such as the Christian Phalange in Lebanon, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the Moro Liberation Front in the Philippines, Hezbollah and Hamas in the Middle East). In other words, women's rights activists see fundamentalism and fundamentalist violence as much broader than armed extremism. Examples they cited include the violence of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories; the violence of maternal deaths caused by laws that prohibit abortion; and the violence of deaths from AIDS caused by the prohibition on the use of condoms.

At one end of the scale lies fundamentalist violence of the order of high-visibility attacks against prominent individuals, for instance, Dr. George Tiller, an abortion doctor in the United States, and Sitara Achakzai, an Afghan woman politician, both killed in 2009. Targeting the women of an entire community is also an expression of fundamentalist violence, such as the mass-scale rape and sexual assault of women of all ethno-religious groups in the Yugoslav Wars, and the sexual violence of Hindu fundamentalists against Muslim women in Gujarat, India.

At the other end of the scale, a fundamentalist group may not directly engage in violence, but may support state militarism and military expenditure which contribute to the realization of its vision. As one women's rights activist notes, "Jewish organizations like the one I work with always campaign to support Israel's troops, Israel's state. The Jewish community [has] heavily supported the Israeli military" (survey respondent, Canada). Women's rights activists from Western Europe and North America are much more likely than activists in other regions to report high levels of fundamentalist campaigning against any attempt to reduce military expenditure, which indicates a particularly close connection between religious fundamentalism and state militarism in that context.

## Fear and psychological violence

Some forms of violence, though less tangible, are equally severe in intensity and impact, such as the long-term, daily psychological pressure against rights activists and ordinary people alike.

Nearly half (45%) of women's rights activists have suffered the psychological violence of being labelled "bad"—a "bad" woman, a "bad" Christian, a "bad" daughter—due to their work on human rights. Some forms of psychological violence targeting individuals are just as effective as physical violence at "making an example" of the activist. In contexts as diverse as Malaysia, Nicaragua and Uganda, women's human rights defenders face legal action, excommunication, or expulsion from the community. One woman who ran a Christian magazine and then left a Christian fundamentalist community in the United States describes the relentless social and economic pressure she experienced and its devastating outcomes. After years of suffering domestic violence, "in desperation and fear, I finally separated from my husband and filed for divorce. In response, national religious leaders 'disciplined' me. I was ordered to return to my husband, fire my attorney, drop my restraining orders, stop publishing. I was told I should never speak publicly or write for publication again. I was told I was to turn over my bank accounts to my pastor and that I was not to answer the telephone, go anywhere at all unaccompanied, or log in to the Internet. If I did not agree to these 'proofs of repentance,' I was told I would be publicly, nationally excommunicated. I did not comply, and I was excommunicated on a national scale. Prominent national leaders of this movement contacted my advertisers, columnists and subscribers, with the assistance of my ex-husband, and told them I would not be publishing any longer and that I was in a state of 'unrepentant sin'. As a result, subscribers cancelled their subscriptions, advertisers cancelled ads, and columnists quit. My publication was destroyed" (Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, United States).

The same fundamentalist movements that offer hope and comfort through creating communities of belonging, engaging in charity work and promoting "fun" among their followers often simultaneously make calculated use of violence, fear and intimidation. The fluctuation between these emotions is reminiscent of the manipulative power of perpetrators of domestic violence, who often claim they love the people they hit but whose ultimate goal is to create dependence.

In contexts where religious fundamentalists present themselves as an alternative to state-sponsored terror, at some level fundamentalists benefit from the continuation of an atmosphere of tension in society. Such is the case in Guatemala, for example, where "the Evangelical churches warn of a return to the horrors of the 1980s political violence," implying that without their influence, society would be worse off. Observing the situation, one women's rights activist argues that "fundamentalist religiosity builds social imageries based on authoritarianism, terror, obedience, surveillance and punishment. Guatemalan society, in all its diversity, remains stuck in those imageries" (Maya Varinia Alvarado Chávez, Guatemala).

**Fundamentalism does not rest on the basis of an aware, responsible and liberated society, but on one that is forbidding, [with] a uniform and docile mass [where there is] encouragement of self-punishment, guilt, repentance, [and] denial of a positive vision of human beings. (Eunice Alfaro and Jean-Philippe Nicot, Honduras)**

## Some regional variations in fundamentalist violence

A number of trends emerge in religious fundamentalist violence according to the regional and religious context, and some of these variations can be more easily explained than others. In Latin America, for instance, it is relatively rare for fundamentalist groups to target ethnic or racial minorities, as compared to the countries of South Asia, Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. This may be because ethnic or racial minorities in the region have for so long been subjugated, with the collusion of the Catholic Church, that they ostensibly pose no threat to fundamentalism. In this region, fundamentalist violence is instead primarily directed at “the enemy within”—those who transgress established social norms.

The logic behind other regional variations is not as evident, and this demands further study. For example, in the Middle East and North Africa, intellectuals, journalists, secularists and atheists are significantly more frequently targeted than elsewhere, whereas in Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, LGBTQI people are far more frequently targeted for fundamentalist attack than any other social or political group. In South Asia, women in general stand out as primary targets. Are these patterns indicative of which group is most active in resisting fundamentalist politics in each region? Whereas only 17% of women’s rights activists focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean see violence as a very important fundamentalist strategy, in South Asia the figure is a significant 45%. Are these figures a comment about the nature of local fundamentalisms, or do they say something about the place of violence in South Asian society more broadly, or the varied understanding of “violence” among women’s rights activists? How would our answers influence feminist strategizing to counter religious fundamentalisms?

## Strategically undermining opponents

Apart from violence, there are multiple ways religious fundamentalists strategically undermine their opponents, including de-funding and attacking the infrastructure of rights advocacy groups and socially progressive religious organizations, and delegitimizing opponents through labelling and circulating misinformation about them.

One particular focus is the strategic undermining of collective organizing for women’s and human rights. In Mexico, for instance, the fundamentalist-influenced Health Ministry obstructed funding for NGOs working with LGBTQI people. In India and Brazil, initiatives working on HIV and AIDS prevention among sex workers were hit by United States government funding conditionalities inspired by the Christian Right. In Bangladesh and Canada, government links with religious fundamentalists resulted in targeted de-registration and de-funding of women’s rights NGOs who were holding the fundamentalists to account, and in Latin America attempts have been made to de-register *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* (CDD, Catholics for Choice). In Uganda this year, Christian fundamentalists, with the tacit support of the authoritarian government, have presented to parliament an “Anti-Homosexuality Bill”. Apart from its proposed draconian punishments for LGBTQI people, one of the main objectives behind the bill is, according to local rights activists, to stifle political opposition and civil society criticism about human rights in the run up to national elections.<sup>32</sup>

Religious fundamentalists also attack collective organizing by religious groups that do not share their absolutist vision. For example, “the infrastructure of the progressive church was really decimated [by fundamentalists] in the United States in the 1980s and the 1990s and it is much less a counterforce” to the Christian and Catholic Right (Mab Segrest, United States). In Malaysia in 2009, 14 Muslim NGOs launched an attack on the feminist group Sisters in Islam (SIS), lodging a police report alleging that it had “insulted Islam” by criticizing the sentence of whipping of a Malaysian woman. Earlier in the year, the main fundamentalist political party, PAS, had called for SIS to be investigated by Malaysia’s National Fatwa Committee and if found to be against Islam, for the group to be banned and its members sent for rehabilitation.



<sup>32</sup> <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/59556>

Labelling as a means of delegitimizing opponents is a common fundamentalist practice. Thirty-eight percent of women's rights activists say that, because of their work for women's human rights, they or a colleague have been labelled an "atheist" or "unbeliever". Sexuality baiting—publicly alleging homosexuality no matter what a person's actual sexuality—of human rights activists has been documented in the publication *Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women's Organizing*.<sup>33</sup> AWID's research found that a quarter of women's rights activists have themselves experienced such baiting or know of a colleague who has. For example in Cameroon, religious fundamentalists have succeeded in delegitimizing religious liberals by association: "The increasing difficulty of distinguishing between religiously liberal and avowedly secularist views on such matters as homosexuality, abortion and women's rights" has meant that religious liberals can be dismissed as "anti-religious" or "fringe extremists" (survey respondent, Cameroon).

Particular forms of labelling are visible in Muslim contexts: "Hezbollah do not allow the presence of women's rights organizations. They label them as collaborators with the West" (survey respondent, Lebanon); women's rights activists in Egypt report this as well. Alleging alliances with "the enemy" is also common in the states of the former Yugoslavia. Women in Black activist Staša Zajović documented allegations from fundamentalist-nationalists that "feminists from here [Serbia] are very well connected with the feminists from Zagreb [Croatia], who are trying to bring about the extinction of the Serbian people".<sup>34</sup>

Other religious fundamentalist tactics designed to delegitimize opponents include misinformation about their activities: "When we started our work in the slum areas, religious leaders claimed we would sell the girls from the slum. They spread false messages about our team, so that women would not come to our meetings. It took more than three years to deal [with this]; we spent so much energy on the *mullahs*" (survey respondent, Pakistan). In Canada, the modus operandi for Catholic fundamentalists who oppose health and relationships training for teens is "to create a climate of fear of feminism and mistrust of the work of the Women's Centre among school board members, school staff, and the general public. To this end [among other strategies] they use misinformation and make damaging statements to malign Women's Centre staff personally. They misrepresent positions taken by the Centre. They dismiss the Centre as a special interest group with a covert agenda to destroy the family...The personal attacks about Women's Centre staff contained information not in the public realm, inaccurate though it was".<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/publications/written.htm>

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.zeneucnom.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=99&Itemid=21&lang=en](http://www.zeneucnom.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=99&Itemid=21&lang=en)

<sup>35</sup> *Rural Feminist Activism and Religious Fundamentalism in Nova Scotia, Canada*, AWID case study, Leona English, Lucille Harper and Betsy MacDonald, Antigonish Women's Resource Centre  
[http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

## Fundamentalist Penetration of Political and Public Arenas

Most religious fundamentalist movements, like many social movements, actively seek to spread—or even impose—their vision of society at all levels, from the individual psychological level to the family, the local community, the national level and the international sphere. There is a clear attempt to influence laws, policies and practices in areas far beyond spiritual matters, and to define these in ways that affect all people, religious or not. The aim is to make their regressive interpretations of religion the principal source of public policy and social practice. Towards this end, fundamentalist messages which portray religion as a “complete way of life” help to justify public policies that govern every aspect of private life.

One highly effective means of influencing society has been for fundamentalists to enter public spaces and institutions. They pursue this goal through multiple strategies including: undermining public principles of secularity, capturing key institutions or the state itself, entering mainstream politics and engaging in tactical alliances, reducing the public space for debate and influencing international human rights standards as well as working hard to delegitimize activist opponents. One women’s rights activist indicates the range of strategies used in her context: “Today religious fundamentalisms define public policies and laws and place their leaders in important public offices. They have manipulated election results, limited independent human rights bodies’ ability to act, and justified repressive acts against people fighting for social justice through their control of public institutions” (Daphne Cuevas, Mexico).

Although the fundamentalist penetration of public spaces is a global trend, there are some significant regional variations. In some contexts, fundamentalists have directly entered mainstream politics, but through varying routes (secular or religious political parties), as discussed in detail below. In Latin America, fundamentalists have benefited from *association* with existing state power (which is predominantly right-wing and at least superficially secular), whereas in much of the Middle East and North Africa, with the exception of Iran, their legitimacy is primarily secured through *opposition* to state power (which may be right-wing and superficially secular). As compared to women’s rights activists elsewhere, those in sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Eastern Europe and former Soviet Central Asia tend to regard the direct entry of religious fundamentalists into politics as a less important strategy. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, NGOs with fundamentalist links have emerged as significant actors in the public arena. They have succeeded in making Christian religious practice the norm, to the extent that it has become a regular component of apparently “secular” spaces; Christian prayers now preface NGO meetings and workshops in many countries including Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and Sierra Leone. Depending on the national context, penetration of public spaces has enabled fundamentalist campaigning either to obstruct progressive social development or to reverse advances wherever they have occurred. Despite these variations, religious fundamentalist strategies remain remarkably similar overall, and AWID’s research found examples of each of the strategies for penetrating the political and public arenas in most regions and religions.

## Penetrating public spaces by undermining secularity

Across all regions, religious fundamentalists actively seek to undermine secularity as a way of sidelining the contribution of alternative worldviews to the formation of public policy and shutting down the public space for pluralist debate. As one Malaysian activist argues, “poor secularization leads to what Karen Armstrong calls ‘bad religion’. How can progressive Islam develop without there being a public space? We need to protect that larger space” (Zainah Anwar, Malaysia). Fundamentalist movements in different contexts use a variety of approaches to undermining secularity, depending on the character of the existing political space.

Wherever there is a formal separation of Church and state, this divide is subject to increasing attack. This has occurred through Eastern Europe: in 2006, for example, the Serbian Parliament passed the Law on Churches and Religious Communities, which not only gave the Serbian Orthodox Church extraordinary legal rights but also legal legitimacy, recognizing the history of its state-constituting role.<sup>36</sup> In Mexico, “the Catholic Church, through an organization called Catholic Lawyers, campaigned in favour of the rights of priests to be involved in politics, to vote and to be elected, to receive tax money from the state and to disseminate Catholic religion in public schools—preschool, primary and secondary” (survey respondent, Mexico). In Turkey and India, Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists have sought, so far unsuccessfully, to undermine secular constitutions and national laws—and the rights they guarantee—replacing them with religion as a policy reference point. In Thailand, fundamentalists have campaigned for Buddhism to be declared a state religion, which, for one survey respondent, “seemed a particular contradiction in terms”. And for more than 60 years, secular and religious Zionists in Israel have battled over whether the state is to be secular or not, blocking the development of a written constitution.

In many Muslim countries, previously secular constitutions or secular political environments have been “Islamized” since the late 1970s. Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan all began post-colonial life as secular states but have since adopted Islam as the official state religion; and in 2007 Madagascar dropped the word *laïc* (secular) from its constitution. In Indonesia, under the recently decentralized political system and in contrast to the early post-Independence rejection of a state religion, Muslim fundamentalist institutions have increasingly “become the state” through local elections and a politics of appeasement (Kamala Chandrakirana, Indonesia).

Many Catholic-majority countries have, through concordats or agreements between the state and the Vatican, formalized a particular relationship between the Church and the state that in some ways transcends the secular/religious divide.<sup>37</sup> In countries such as Italy and Croatia, as well as much of Latin America, despite a theoretical separation of Church and state, there is officially sanctioned religious influence and protection of the Church’s privileged position, such as Catholic religious education in public schools, the right of Church representation on public policy bodies relating to education or media, and tax relief for religious institutions. Such normalizing of the Church’s privileged position has encouraged thinly disguised attempts to influence public policy. In such contexts, strategies that blur the lines between the secular and the religious are very popular, such as forming NGOs and think-tanks to influence policy, co-opting scientific discourses, and forming alliances with “secular” Rightist political parties or actively recruiting within such political parties. However, this blurred line between the religious and the secular is not unique to Catholic fundamentalisms. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, for instance, religious fundamentalists have historically never had sufficient power to enter government independently, and have often developed alliances with Rightist secular parties, while the Hindu fundamentalist BJP in India is difficult to label as strictly secular or purely religious, especially since it has fielded Muslim candidates in elections.

36 *Challenging the Growing Power of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Public Life: The Case of Women in Black-Serbia*, AWID case study, Staša Zajović & Katie Mahuron, Women in Black, Serbia [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

37 Information about Latin American Concordats can be found at [http://www.concordatwatch.eu/showtopic.php?org\\_id=870&kb\\_header\\_id=17031](http://www.concordatwatch.eu/showtopic.php?org_id=870&kb_header_id=17031).

While some were concluded in the 19th century, one of the latest was the 13 November 2008 Agreement between the Federal Republic of Brazil and the Holy See on the legal status of the Catholic Church in Brazil, which illustrates that this is an on-going process.

## Religious fundamentalists capture the state and public policy

In the experience of women's rights activists, religious fundamentalists seek to capture the state because of its crucial control over resources, law enforcement, and legal and social policy. As one women's rights activist from Iran explains, "When you have the force of law, and police, and jail to enforce it, that makes the major difference ... Where you have the state, you have legal violence against women as opposed to customary violence" (Homa Hoodfar, Canada/Iran). Indeed, women's rights activists from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia mention examples of armed fundamentalist groups seeking to capture state power through insurrection.

However, women's rights activists also mention a much wider variety of methods used by religious fundamentalists to capture the state. This includes "infiltrat[ing] governments [to] take possession of resources and authority over the allocation of resources" (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria). Fundamentalist strategies shift in response to local developments, and capturing the state by coming to power (whether through revolution or the ballot box) is not always the route to social control. In some instances, public spaces beyond mainstream politics and state institutions beyond the legislature become vital to the fundamentalist project. Those often targeted include: state education and health infrastructures; national family, youth or women's machineries; the judiciary and the law; the military; the bureaucracy; and civil society. The difficulties of capturing state power through insurrection or elections in the 1990s led *al-Manar al-Jadid* (New Lighthouse), the ideological journal of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, to discuss abandoning the quest for state power in favour of achieving dominance through social influence. There are indications that this indirect approach has had some success in the country. In recent years, the state has made increasing concessions to fundamentalists, such that Christian Coptic groups have "become a state within a state", while the Muslim Brotherhood, even if it has not been given political space by the state, nevertheless "has been allowed social and economic spaces within society by the state" (Azza Soliman, Egypt).

One of the most important public spaces is the education system, which fundamentalist movements target, through both curriculum and policy, as a means of normalizing their vision for entire generations. In the mid-1990s in Nicaragua, although the country's secular constitution meant the Opus Dei-linked Minister of Education "couldn't impose religious instruction by law, in fact he did so by changing all the school books across the country over three months" (Ana Maria Pizarro, Nicaragua). In East Timor, the post-conflict reconstruction of society "was destabilized by the Church", which argued that "the ruling party was trying to rob people of their faith" in response to a statement by the liberation organization FRETILIN that "schools should be secular and people should choose their own faith" (Shalmali Guttal, India/Southeast Asia). One strategy for influencing education policy, which has been particularly successful at building grassroots demand for the fundamentalist vision, has been to use the secular platform of parents' associations such as the Asociaciones Nacionales de Padres de Familia in Latin America, or to consciously penetrate representative institutions such as school governing boards through parent-governors. Women's rights activists also provide examples of use of this strategy by Christian fundamentalists in Canada and Muslim fundamentalists in Britain.

It is a common strategy in Latin America and South Asia for religious fundamentalists to secure a sympathetic minister of justice or minister in charge of civil society organizations or taxation in order to facilitate their funding and limit accountability. When a Jamaat-e-Islami member became the Minister for Social Welfare in Bangladesh, there was little hope of regulating *madrasas* and the funding of pro-fundamentalist NGOs. In other contexts, the judiciary is targeted. In Morocco, for example, Muslim fundamentalists have deliberately flooded the lower judiciary in an effort to obstruct the implementation of a more equitable family law that was ratified in 2004. In the United States, where Christian fundamentalists oppose laws on women's reproductive rights and same sex relationships, appointments to the Supreme Court have been a major focus of lobbying. This was very apparent in public campaigns against the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor in 2009.<sup>38</sup>



<sup>38</sup> [http://www.overturro.com/sotomayor/mini\\_tour.htm](http://www.overturro.com/sotomayor/mini_tour.htm)



Fundamentalists also place gatekeepers (often bright students targeted for recruitment several years earlier) in strategic state policy-making positions. The aim is not just to promote a religious perspective but also to ensure that alternative, non-absolutist, secularist or atheist perspectives from within the same religious background remain invisible or delegitimized. Gatekeeping by Muslim fundamentalists in the United Kingdom's Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices has been documented.<sup>39</sup> In such instances, a person of migrant Muslim origin has entered low-ranking but strategic bureaucratic positions, usually relating to policy on minorities or towards Muslim countries, and once in position has influenced policy in ways that favour fundamentalist perspectives or groups.

## Religious fundamentalist entry into mainstream politics

One of the most direct means of influencing the public arena is for religious fundamentalist movements to enter mainstream politics. This strategy takes slightly different forms depending on the region, religion or national context, although some practices appear nearly universal.

The capture of the state often begins through sub-national politics, such as the focus of the fundamentalist Algerian Front Islamique du Salut (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front) on winning control over local authorities through elections. Indeed, in some instances, the line between mainstream politics and insurrection can be unclear. Women's rights activists from the region believe the FIS' control of certain municipal authorities facilitated the building of the infrastructure (including underground supply and escape tunnels) necessary to the fundamentalist insurgency against the state. Fundamentalist movements have often found it easier to enter national politics through the provincial route. "Fundamentalist groups also use democracy. Since they failed at the national level, they shifted to local parliaments at the provincial levels to pass 'Sharia-inspired' local regulations" (Firliana Purwanti, Indonesia).

Women's rights activists affected by Jewish and Hindu fundamentalisms as well as many from sub-Saharan Africa and the United States note that congregations, especially among Pentecostal churches, are told who to vote for in elections: "The only viable candidates are fundamentalists" (survey respondent, United States). The practice is also common in Latin America: "The closure events for electoral campaigns take place in Evangelical temples or Catholic churches" (Maya Varinia Alvarado Chávez, Guatemala).

In the Pacific Ocean region, Christian fundamentalists have become increasingly visible in mainstream politics. "Family First is a male-dominated fundamentalist Christian group that is organizing itself into a political force, standing candidates for election across all tiers of government" (survey respondent, Australia). In Fiji over the past decade, "the Catholic Church, and increasingly the newer Evangelical Churches linked to United States TV evangelists, have been more directly involved in politics. The Methodist Church in particular was involved in the ethno-nationalist led coups of 1986 and 2000" (survey respondent, Fiji).



<sup>39</sup> <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/publications/publication.cgi?id=13>

In the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, and particularly among Muslim fundamentalisms, entry into mainstream politics generally moves through political parties that are explicitly identified as religious, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia, the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, or FIS in Algeria. Hindu fundamentalists have also established political parties that contest national elections, such as India's Shiv Sena. Their entry has often been successful, and has enabled them to form local, provincial/regional or national governments (although they are frequently voted out of power once their lack of concrete policies becomes evident).

Fundamentalist political parties that are apparently "moderate" can provide the ground on which militant extremists stand. In Pakistan, "many of the groups have splintered off from what used to be main [religious] parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI). The first militant group was the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a JUI splinter group. The JUI is the one linked to the Taliban" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan). The actual distance between mainstream fundamentalist parties and armed splinter groups has been the subject of feminist investigation in different contexts. "The SSP gave them [the JUI] 'plausible deniability'. This was the armed group, doing things outside the law. The JUI could always say 'it wasn't us'" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan). In Algeria, feminists have attempted to track shared membership between the FIS and armed groups such as the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA /Armed Islamic Group).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, and particularly in Southeast Asia and Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, religious fundamentalists have entered mainstream politics mainly by influencing "secular" parties and politicians to pursue a fundamentalist policy agenda.

The political class is essential to fundamentalist sectors. It is a marriage that is long lasting and solid, a relationship that they both gain from, because the political class in Nicaragua needs the blessing of the religious hierarchy and the Church gains the power to make decisions. (Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua)

One survey respondent who worked in Canada's House of Commons believes that "money filtered into the Conservative Party came from fundamentalist groups (particularly in Alberta)", while another in Australia says that "the [Christian Evangelical] Exclusive Brethren leaders funded political parties in Tasmania in the lead up to elections". South Asia has also seen many alliances between religious political forces and outwardly secular parties. "During the anti-autocracy movement in the 1980s, the Jamaat-e-Islami and other Muslim fundamentalist groups reinvented themselves as 'democratic forces' in alliance with mainstream democratic parties of the centre-left and centre-right ... This was the beginning of the end of any hope of having them identified for what they were" (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh).

Wherever fundamentalists have directly entered mainstream politics, they have often proved to be sophisticated actors that can respond to shifting national and global situations.

The [Hindu fundamentalist] BJP did [in India] what the fascists have never been able to do in Europe: they developed sophisticated parliamentarians, who, for example when they lost confidence motions, instead of trying to buy legislators, gave up power. They gave up power because they had a long game in mind. (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom)

In Latin America, the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches has created a strategic shift in the way fundamentalists engage in mainstream politics. During the 1990s in Brazil, Evangelical churches began to form political parties and participate in traditional politics and form blocs in parliament; in 1995 the Evangelical bloc included over 100 Representatives. The new fundamentalists no longer operate "from the shadows" as the Catholic Church had traditionally done, but openly, as ministers, representatives, etc." (Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani, Argentina). In Honduras, too, "Christian fundamentalist Protestant denominations, such as Iglesia de Dios, Eben-Ezer, La Cosecha have come together to form the Asociación de Iglesias Evangélicas Centroamericanas de Honduras (Honduran Association of Central American Evangelical Churches), that gives them more weight" (Eunice Alfaro and Jean-Philippe Nicot, Honduras).

## Tactical alliances and unlikely bedfellows

Women's rights activists provide occasional examples of religious fundamentalist involvement in pro-democracy campaigns. These include the *Kefaya* (Enough!, or Egyptian Movement for Change) coalition between fundamentalists, democrats and women against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's intention to transfer power to his son; the successful Green Ribbon campaign to uphold the national constitution in Zambia, in which the Church in collaboration with NGOs campaigned against the president's attempt to seek a third term in office; and the role played by Anglican, Evangelical and Catholic churches in Lesotho in support of the opposition call for the fair allocation of parliamentary seats. However, this participation in pro-democracy work must be assessed in the broader context of fundamentalist absolutism. Once in power or in control of public policy, fundamentalists have proved intolerant of plurality and dissent.

Like other political forces, religious fundamentalists enter tactical alliances to increase their political access and legitimacy. This includes inter-faith alliances. In Brazil, for example, Catholic and Evangelical blocs may be rivals for people's souls, but they also collaborate at the parliamentary level in obstructing positive laws on sexual and reproductive rights and sexuality, just as Muslim and Christian fundamentalist organizations occasionally lobby together against homosexuality in Nigeria and Kenya. Women's rights activists in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean are more likely than activists in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa to see inter-faith alliances as an important fundamentalist strategy.

Some tactical alliances are forged with unlikely bedfellows: between Evangelical Christians and Zionists in North America—both seeking to realize the same Biblical prophecy, although with different ends in mind; and between Catholic fundamentalists in Nicaragua and Daniel Ortega (regarded in the 1980s as a socialist revolutionary and currently President of Nicaragua) in support of criminalizing abortion. Muslim fundamentalists may appear to challenge existing power structures, but, as one women's rights activist observes, they are also “working very cosily with some of them: the CIA, various security services” (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom). Meanwhile the “Unholy Alliance” between European leftists such as the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, and Muslim fundamentalists, gave fringe Muslim groups unchallenged access to public platforms in Europe based on a shared anti-US position.

## Influencing policy through civil society at national and international levels

“Civil society” is not inevitably pro-human rights: religious fundamentalists have strategically entered this arena by setting up NGOs, charities and front organizations that give them access to global funding, great respectability and an additional means of influencing national and international policy. Nearly three-quarters of women's rights activists see the setting up of NGOs and think-tanks as an important fundamentalist strategy.

As one women's rights activist points out, feminists need to strengthen their research into the key actors of religious fundamentalisms and know “which organizations and networks of front organizations such as charities, women's organizations, youth organizations, trade unions and think tanks are controlled by which fundamentalist political body. It isn't always obvious and needs careful research” (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom).

Civil society organizations with fundamentalist tendencies or links are not just passive vehicles for spreading the fundamentalist vision; in the experience of women's rights activists, NGOs and charities are key fundamentalist actors themselves. When activists were asked to identify the two most influential fundamentalists in their contexts, more than one in five specifically named an NGO or charity, including Catholic and Christian “pro-life” organizations, Hindu “cultural” organizations and Muslim humanitarian relief charities. This far outweighs the 4% who see armed groups as influential, and suggests that religious fundamentalists have a strategic preference for the creeping influence of social organizations rather than military confrontation.



This strategy is replicated both at the regional and international levels. In addition to international charity organizations, religious fundamentalists have also built international policy advocacy NGOs specifically designed to ensure a presence in the international policy sphere. Examples include the World Congress of Families (its fifth congress was held in 2009 in Amsterdam), which, although dominated by Christian and Catholic fundamentalist groups, also attracts Muslim, Hindu and Jewish fundamentalists. The primary aim of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (known as C-Fam) is to ensure UN policy towards women's rights and sexual and reproductive rights is in line with Catholic fundamentalisms. Regional parliaments and forums have also been targeted. For example, "the fundamentalists succeeded in freezing policies of the European Union regarding sexual and reproductive health rights due to a very active campaign by anti-choice NGOs and conservative members of the EU Parliament" (Wanda Nowicka, Poland).

Religious fundamentalists have targeted international public spaces for particular attention, notably the United Nations system because it sets policy standards that can have implications both globally and nationally. The privileged status of the Holy See at the UN as a Non-member State Permanent Observer gives it immense power in this space, while the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has a permanent observer mission at the UN and has been instrumental in several recent regressive developments in international human rights standards. While Christian and Muslim fundamentalists may enact the "clash of civilizations" in one global sphere, in the name of protecting the right to culture and freedom of religion they also engage in global alliances against women's rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTQI rights in international human rights forums. For example, the proposed 2008 United Nations General Assembly Declaration on sexual orientation and gender identity faced crippling opposition from a combination of Middle Eastern, African and Central Asian countries reflecting Catholic, Christian, and Muslim fundamentalist influence. At the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+15), following pressure from Iran, the term "sexual and reproductive health and rights" was removed from the conference's final document, while several Catholic-majority countries such as Chile, Poland and Ireland also spoke out against terms such as "reproductive rights".

In general, women rights activists working at national, regional and international levels have a shared view of how religious fundamentalists strategize to spread their influence. However in terms of specific topics for campaigning, women's rights activists working at the international level are considerably more likely than those working at the local level to regard religious fundamentalists as campaigning against women's rights in family laws (40% as compared to 28% respectively). This may reflect negotiations at the level of international treaties such as CEDAW, which continues to carry reservations from many countries argued on the basis of culture or religious principles.

Fundamentalist approaches to human rights and the international legal system are extremely selective: only rights to culture and religion are promoted, privileged above other rights such as the right to gender non-discrimination. The idea that human rights are universal and indivisible (especially that women's rights are human rights) is rejected, often on the basis of arguments taken from cultural relativist analysis, which emphasises the distinctions between, rather than the commonalities of, different cultures.

## Influencing policy through the legal system

This selective use of legal standards and legal systems extends to the national sphere, and here too enables religious fundamentalists to promote their messages and influence public policy, even when they do not completely control the state. It is a paradoxical use of democratic space for furthering absolutist visions.

In the United States, some of the major battles over the role of religion in public policy are played out through the Supreme and State Courts in cases relating to abortion and same sex relationships. Since its introduction in 1961, the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance in Pakistan has been under near-constant legal attack in the courts, with fundamentalists attempting to undermine the few rights it offers women in the family. In Brazil in 2007, anti-abortion members of Congress demanded the mass prosecution of a family planning clinic's staff and women patients for abortion; over two dozen were taken to court. Fundamentalists have also used the legal system to undermine those who work to protect human rights. In 2007, at the behest of an organization sponsored by the Catholic right wing, the Secretary of the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference filed a case against nine leading Nicaraguan feminists in connection with the case of a nine-year-old girl who had been raped and subsequently underwent an abortion; the charges were finally dropped by the Attorney's Office only in March 2010 following a national and international campaign in support of the feminists.

At the same time that fundamentalists make use of the judicial system to support their ideologies, they also prevent those who oppose their views from claiming the same rights. "Women are constantly pressured into tolerating domestic abuse. They are told not to go to court because this is not Islamic. This is the case for all women's rights" (survey respondent, Jordan). Similarly, in some Catholic and Christian contexts, women who seek divorce through the courts are told that divorce is a sin. In other words, fundamentalists make selective use of the rights guaranteed under the legal system.

Although most religious fundamentalist groups utilize the formally democratic public space wherever it works to their advantage, the tactics they use in their campaigning raise serious questions about their commitment to democratic processes. A detailed example from Serbia is illustrative: "The Law on Churches and Religious Communities was introduced in April 2006, without public debate, although the Orthodox Church has been discussing six draft versions with certain NGOs and international bodies. In spite of all the comments, remarks and recommendations to improve the draft, through the Ministry for Religion the Church submitted to Parliament a new and more rigorous version which had never been discussed. A coalition of NGOs made pressure against the law, arguing that many legal provisions violated the Constitution, the principle of secularism, human rights, etc. But the Law was passed and all the amendments were rejected. It was a dirty game by the Church which ignored all public and international comment" (survey respondent, Serbia).

# Religious Fundamentalist Strategies: Making the Most of the Movement and the Moment

The examples that women's rights activists provide of religious fundamentalist campaigning demonstrate how their movements make effective use of a combination of multi-faceted strategies, including having a simple and absolutist message, using emotive symbols and religious spaces, mass mobilizing especially among youth, using mass media, and influencing public policy, especially the legal system. One women's rights activist from Colombia describes the campaign against the liberalization of abortion, which involved "exhortations from the pulpit at Sunday mass; a campaign to collect signatures and letters from boys and girls in Catholic schools; large public demonstrations, including a grand procession led by the image of the Divine Child (a religious national icon that is popular among believers); demonstrations outside the Supreme Court; financing the transportation of large groups of youth to public demonstrations against the proposed changes; paid advertising on the radio and TV, in the press and on public billboards; lobbying the Constitutional Court and Congress of the Republic" (survey respondent, Colombia). This example illustrates the essential nature of religious fundamentalisms: they work as movements and use their ample resources relentlessly to pursue their goal of controlling the public arena and promoting their vision.

The nature of religious fundamentalisms as movements is visible not only at the national scale, as illustrated above, but also at local levels and in the context of, as well as at, the international level. Within development work in Nigeria for example, "the religious fundamentalists are [present] in every open public lecture, seminar and conference that has themes of women, gender, reproductive sexual health and rights, adolescent sexuality, sexual orientation, and voice their stand loudly and aggressively" (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria). In Pakistan the movement is visible even in very personal spaces: "It is insidious. Al-Huda [a nationwide institute for religious instruction] go to every funeral and pass out literature with *duas* [prayers] which has their contact details on the back" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan). Meanwhile, at the international level, "the reservations at Cairo [International Conference on Population and Development, regarding sexual and reproductive health rights] were repeated at [the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in] Beijing, the children's summit and the Disabilities Convention; every-

one who represents Nicaragua repeats the reservations" (Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua). This relentlessness has profound implications for feminist strategizing. Indeed, where feminist strategizing for rights has been successful, as in the case of family reform in Morocco and Turkey or abortion reform in Colombia, those involved have pointed out that they worked *as a movement*, developing a long-term vision and not letting temporary setbacks divert them.

When religious fundamentalist strategies and campaigning and the factors behind their rise are analyzed as a whole, a pattern emerges: religious fundamentalisms are flexible political movements that take advantage of current and local opportunities for building their numbers as well as their influence over society and public policy. The issues on which they campaign, the messages they use, and the audiences they target, very often correspond to some of the major concerns facing people in their daily lives.

While fundamentalist discourses are generally shared across regions and religions, there are clear variations in tactics and campaigning at the national level. This can complicate analysis of fundamentalist strategizing because it may appear that movements in one particular context do not follow the broader global fundamentalist pattern. In other words, care has to be taken not to stereotype fundamentalisms, but rather to recognize how they respond to the details of the local socio-political context, local laws and practices. In their campaigning, religious fundamentalist movements frequently address issues that are already "hot" in the local context: corruption in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia; freedom of speech in the Middle East and North Africa; the status and rights of LGBTQI people in the Americas, Western Europe and the Pacific; the HIV and AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa; poverty reduction in South Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean; abortion in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (where relatively easy access was a policy associated with the communist past). Shifts in fundamentalist strategizing bring their own analytical challenges. For instance in Latin America, "it is necessary to think about other ways of confronting an adversary that no longer operates as the 'power behind the throne' but defines itself as a social movement and questions meanings and spaces as such" (Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani, Argentina).



AWID's research reveals that in order to more fully analyze how a particular fundamentalist movement works on the ground, it is important to take into account the interaction between the regional or national context and the religion involved; making generalizations about how fundamentalisms work in one religion or in one region does not give the whole picture. For instance, women's rights activists say that Muslim fundamentalist movements tend to campaign more in favour of social justice issues than Christian fundamentalists. But this apparently clear picture is challenged by their assessment of fundamentalist campaigning in contexts where Muslim and Christian fundamentalisms exist side-by-side or where both Catholic and Christian fundamentalisms are active; in these contexts, women's rights activists see fundamentalist campaigning as even more supportive of "social justice" issues than Muslim fundamentalist campaigning. This indicates that a very specific type of Christian fundamentalism is at work here. In sub-Saharan Africa as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean—precisely the regions most likely to combine Muslim and Christian or Catholic and Christian fundamentalisms—Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical forms of Christianity are growing rapidly. The possibility is that these forms of Christian fundamentalisms share a strategic campaigning focus that is remarkably similar to those of Muslim fundamentalisms. Certainly in Latin America, Evangelical fundamentalist groups have moved into the vacuum left by the Catholic Church's lack of focus on the poorest sections of the population (especially after the defeat of populist liberation theology in the Vatican) and have presented themselves as a contrast to the Catholic Church and its association with oppressive state power.

Subtle differences in national contexts produce very different outcomes for religious fundamentalist campaigning on one and the same issue. For instance, as discussed above, their campaigning on family laws and domestic violence is highly complex and context-specific, which presents a challenge for feminist critiques. Other examples include the impact of the fundamentalist approach to alcohol. Whereas women in Chiapas have benefited from reduced domestic violence due to fundamentalist Evangelical control of alcohol, the anti-alcohol morality campaigns promoted by Christian fundamentalists in Australia have meant Aboriginal people are being given welfare vouchers instead of unemployment payments, which a survey respondent criticizes because it "diminishes individual dignity, self determination and control over daily life. It doubly punishes women for the violence and alcoholism of their men. It is an inherently racist solution to a very complex problem".

Finally, religious fundamentalists not only respond to the local context but also over time display a considerable degree of tactical flexibility within the same country. For example, after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement ended the decades-long war between north and south Sudan, the Sudanese government decided "[to] give the people not genuine freedom but freedom like you see on the TV, to go to restaurants, etc.", fearing that if they kept young people suppressed, "there might be a revolution" (Manal Abdel Halim, Sudan). In some instances in Latin America, civic participation is discouraged by Catholic fundamentalisms as just being "dirty politics", but is actively encouraged in the "defence of the unborn".

However, the flexibility of fundamentalist movements should not mask several important facts. The first is that fundamentalist commitment to concepts such as social justice, human rights, plurality and alleviating poverty is not designed to achieve an actual end to structural discrimination in society and is not matched by any widely positive impact. Secondly, this failure to address structural issues means that although religious fundamentalists may fulfil important abstract needs such as providing hope, certainty and a sense of community, as well as selected concrete needs such as welfare services in the absence of the state, on balance the benefits they bring are selective and tilted in favour of the powerful rather than the disempowered.<sup>40</sup> Third, despite their contextual responsiveness, religious fundamentalisms across regions and religions are remarkably similar in the messages they promote, the ways they build their movements, their strategies for controlling society, and the issues they choose to champion or ignore in their campaigning.

A cross-regional, cross-religion approach to analyzing religious fundamentalist strategies and feminist counter-strategizing provides the opportunity to make these commonalities more visible. At the same time, this macro-level synthesis must be paired with micro-level analysis, such as in AWID's collection of case studies of feminist strategies of resistance, *Feminists on the Frontline: Case Studies of Resisting and Challenging Fundamentalisms*.<sup>41</sup> This combination will provide the richness of detail that can help feminist strategizing in this field to be grounded in a deeper analysis of the diversities and similarities in religious fundamentalist movements across the world.

40 See: AWID, *Exposed: Ten myths about religious fundamentalisms*, <http://www.awid.org/About-AWID/AWID-News/Ten-myths-about-religious-fundamentalisms>  
41 [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)



## Chapter 3

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# Feminist strategies of resistance and challenge



# Feminist Strategizing to Resist and Challenge Religious Fundamentalisms: an Overview

This chapter examines feminist strategies aimed at resisting, challenging and countering religious fundamentalisms. Just as there are many similarities in the way religious fundamentalist movements strategize, some aspects of feminist strategizing in this field may be transferable from one context to another. At the same time, just as contextual differences produce diversities in fundamentalist strategizing, feminist movements respond to their specific context and produce a wide range of strategies of resistance and challenge. This chapter hopes to enable women's rights activists to share analysis and experiences regarding strategies, both where these are transferable across contexts and where such sharing may inform and inspire new directions in rights-based strategizing regarding religious fundamentalisms.

## **This chapter looks at the views of women's rights activists on:**

- How to strengthen feminist analysis of religious fundamentalist strategies and thereby improve counter-strategizing;
- Strengthening how women's rights activists communicate the impact of religious fundamentalisms, including creative use of media;
- What pro-active strategies women's rights activists can adopt to challenge religious fundamentalisms, including:
  - > promoting pluralism, secularity and citizenship;
  - > reclaiming a feminist vision of religion and the family;
  - > strengthening the building of feminist movements and their alliances with other rights-based social forces such as development and human rights organizations; and
  - > recapturing public spaces;
- Factors external to women's rights movements that complicate resistance to religious fundamentalisms; and provides
- Examples of how women at the individual level resist religious fundamentalisms.

This report cannot attempt to be a comprehensive collection of the rich history of women's rights strategizing in this field. Many important feminist strategies have already been well-documented; others remain to be recorded and shared. The strategies examined in this chapter are drawn from AWID's research with women's rights activists over the past four years. They are highlighted here because they are representative of an approach common to many regions, or because they may be particularly inspiring for other women's rights activists. The list of strategies included is certainly not exhaustive, as women's rights activists use many other strategies both when they work within women's rights movements and when they work outside them, for example as gender specialists in development organizations. In addition, new possibilities for strategies are constantly emerging, and as one women's rights activist suggests, "Things might become the seeds for strategies but do not exist as fully-fledged strategies at the moment. [We should examine] potential strategies or informal spaces outside formal women's movements" (Georgie Wemyss, United Kingdom).

Women's rights activists are by no means the only force that presents a challenge to religious fundamentalisms. Apart from interventions by other non-state actors such as human rights and development organizations or LGBTI movements, governments may consciously or unconsciously confront fundamentalisms by promoting national unity. For example, the Nigerian federal government has attempted to counter national ethnic-religious polarization through "unity schools", where quotas ensure that students come from every State. However, care must always be taken to examine the motives of those resisting fundamentalisms as they may simply reflect one power bloc or fundamentalism "resisting" another, rather than a challenge to the absolutism, patriarchy and hostility to human rights that are characteristic of religious fundamentalisms.



Nevertheless, AWID found that women's rights activists are amongst those most actively resisting and challenging religious fundamentalisms. As Zainah Anwar from Malaysia explains, "Women's groups are in the forefront because it is women's lives that are at stake". Among women, those who are most negatively affected by religious fundamentalisms are not surprisingly the most likely to be spurred into action. In the context of France, for example, those on the frontlines are "young women from the second or third generation in immigrant families who suffer under the rise of fundamentalist groups in the poor suburbs of France" (Marieme Helie-Lucas, Algeria/France), while in South Africa, some of the most active are "women who have suffered a negative effect, for example left destitute after divorce [through discriminatory religious laws]" (Waheeda Amien, South Africa). In Latin America, where there is entrenched fundamentalist opposition to LGBTQI rights, lesbians have been particularly visible in the struggle against religious fundamentalisms. And in

Mexico, where the fundamentalist focus on abortion carries political weight, "feminists have organized in many ways to demand that Mexico remain a secular state and to advocate for sexual and reproductive rights, which are essential in the fight against religious fundamentalisms" (Daptne Cuevas, Mexico).

Sharing concrete examples of resistance and challenge helps clarify, firstly, that religious fundamentalisms are neither inevitable nor invincible; and secondly, that there are locally-rooted struggles for women's rights, human rights, pluralism and democracy everywhere in the world, and thus resistance to religious fundamentalisms is neither a "western" phenomenon nor "alien" to any culture. This chapter has implications for all those who seek to address the impact of fundamentalist forces on human rights and development, with a focus on feminist strategizing to ensure that women's rights are an integral consideration in any response.

## Unmasking Religious Fundamentalist Strategies through Strengthened Feminist Analysis

There are several measures that women's rights activists can take to strengthen their analysis of religious fundamentalist strategies, and thereby improve the effectiveness of their own counter-strategizing. As Chapter 2 shows, religious fundamentalist strategies can be complex and present challenges for feminists who seek to unmask their agendas. This is particularly so when religious fundamentalist actors do something that appears to support a rights-based vision of society. For example, the 2000 Jubilee Debt Campaign calls for the cancellation of foreign debt for the world's poorest countries as a means of addressing poverty effectively. It brings together a wide range of secular and religious groups, including some which have been identified by women's rights activists in AWID's research as "fundamentalist".<sup>42</sup> How should feminists analyze and respond to such developments?

This section suggests three perspectives needed to advance feminist analysis of fundamentalist movements and thereby facilitate the unmasking of their agendas:

- Analyze a fundamentalist strategy with an eye to its long-term, structural impact;
- Analyze a fundamentalist strategy in the context of other strategies by that actor; in other words, take a holistic approach to their strategizing;
- Analyze one fundamentalist actor's strategy in the context of strategies by other fundamentalist actors; in other words, keep the bigger picture of fundamentalist strategizing in view.

With these broad analytical perspectives in mind, the precise shape that counter-strategies take will be dependent upon the context, and how it shapes local religious fundamentalist strategies as well as the local political and social environment in which rights activists operate.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk/?lid=134>

## An eye on the long-term, structural impact of a fundamentalist strategy

The evidence shows that religious fundamentalisms do not have a positive impact on human rights, and women's rights in particular. In AWID's survey, women's rights activists cite over 600 examples of the negative impact of religious fundamentalisms: these are physical and psychological—manifested in the control over women's bodies, sexuality, autonomy, freedom of movement and participation in public life. Fundamentalist influence also manifests as diminished tolerance and plurality in society, as well as negative impacts on human rights such as freedom of expression and the rights of minorities.

However, religious fundamentalist messages hold a powerful attraction for many people, including women. They answer to core human emotions such as a need for hope, a sense of family and community, belonging and stability, and often co-opt scientific knowledge and important contemporary concepts such as human rights and democracy. Fundamentalist movements also seek to meet practical needs, often providing communities with essential access to food, shelter, health and education services in the absence of state initiatives. These strategies can make it particularly difficult for women's rights activists to clearly identify and expose what is a fundamentalist agenda and what must be resisted.

One way of cutting through these subtleties is to assess the real and long-term impact of religious fundamentalist movements on women's human rights and human rights more broadly, and to ask how far they bring any concrete change to structural discrimination and oppression. Examining impact begins with critical questions. Does religious fundamentalist campaigning against poverty actually challenge inequitable economic structures? Does religious fundamentalist campaigning for minority rights support the human rights of minority women and their right to equal participation, or just replace one form of domination with another?

As women's rights advocates or feminists, there is a primary obligation to analyze institutions, behaviours and individuals by doing a gender analysis. When one looks at charity or welfare work [by religious groups] which is very important and valuable, do these projects respect women's moral rights and foster women's moral agency? Yes or no? If they don't, one may still say they do other good things, but the function of a feminist is to hold them accountable to the achievement of women's rights and women's moral agency.  
(Frances Kissling, United States)

The need for in-depth analysis of impact is illustrated by the apparently diverse approaches of religious fundamentalists to the question of women's education. While some fundamentalists discourage girls' education altogether, others appear to support it. In the latter case, the actual content of the education offered or promoted by fundamentalists and its impact on women's human rights must be examined. For example, young women may attend universities run by Southern Baptists in the United States, and girls in Indonesia may attend Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Yet both types of institutions have been criticised by local women's rights activists for reinforcing patriarchal gender roles and fostering passivity in female students, and thus "encouraging acceptance of domestic violence and other forms of abuse" (survey respondent, United States). In this sense, any fundamentalist promotion of education cannot be understood without a clear assessment of its impact.

But assessing impact and conveying this in advocacy terms seems to present some challenges. For instance, AWID found that a tiny percentage of women's rights activists do perceive a positive impact. However, it is also important to point out that on closer inspection, their reasons for such an assessment are often paradoxical. Some noted as a "positive" impact the irony that shared opposition to religious fundamentalisms is creating solidarity among local women's groups. Others attribute the "positive" impact of religious fundamentalisms to the fact that they are driving people to abandon religion altogether.



A broader or long-range view can also uncover the limits of any positive impact. In some contexts, fundamentalist use of rights language “is often a source of strength and empowerment for believing women” (survey respondent, Bangladesh). In Bangladesh and Nigeria, for example, women have used arguments about their “Islamic rights” to property (the Quran guarantees daughters a share in inheritance) to counter cultural practices that deny them property rights. But, as the survey respondent warns, claiming “Islamic rights...at the same time closes the space for reform, as in the case for equal inheritance rights for women”; the “Islamic rights” promoted by fundamentalists do not conceive of women as fully equal and autonomous beings and rely on the literalist interpretation that a daughter’s share is half that of a son.

Deepening feminist analysis of the impact of religious fundamentalisms is also needed to understand certain paradoxes in the way fundamentalisms affect women’s lives, and especially their psychological well-being. For example, a recent Serbian study found that despite the Orthodox Church’s hold over society and hostility towards reproductive rights, women continue to make decisions that fly against the Church’s positions. Slightly more than half of the women surveyed think that abortion is not murder. When asked whether a believer is allowed to abort, most of the women answered “yes”, which demonstrates that, regardless of the Church’s position that abortion is murder (and bearing in mind that 60% of the women stated they were believers), women make decisions in real life based on their needs.<sup>43</sup> The impact of fundamentalisms may nevertheless be heavy on such women because they face the weight of social pressure against their decisions or the psychological burden of reconciling the positions of the Church hierarchy with their own needs.

<sup>43</sup> Staša Zajović, “A Gap between Reality, Women’s Experience, and Clericalism in Serbia” Unpublished.

## A holistic analysis of a fundamentalist actor's strategizing

By taking the multiple aspects of religious fundamentalist strategizing and campaigning into account, feminist analysis can more clearly unmask the overall political direction of these movements. This is especially important in contexts where religious fundamentalisms appear to be playing a positive role regarding certain issues.

For example in some contexts, religious fundamentalists campaign in support of democracy. But the nature of this commitment cannot be understood without also questioning, for example, how far religious fundamentalists promote political pluralism and a society that is respectful of diversity. This line of inquiry must consider their efforts to have opposing political parties and NGOs delegitimized through false allegations, de-funded, or banned; the extent of physical and psychological violence towards opponents; and their attitude towards the citizenship of religious and ethnic minorities. For instance, the Catholic Church in Brazil may present itself as a “moral” force that is above “dirty politics”, but during recent federal elections it “started a very strong campaign publicizing falsehoods and lies” against a popular and respected woman candidate “because she is a recognized feminist and she worked for the legalization of abortion” (María José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil). Although polls had predicted she would win, she was not elected. In India, Hindu fundamentalists opposed the suspension of democracy during the 1970s Emergency, but once in power, mis-used the institutions of the state, including the police and the judiciary, to oppress religious minorities. Whereas over half of women rights activists in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia regard fundamentalists as campaigning in favour of democracy, far fewer (36% and 23% respectively) see them as campaigning for political pluralism. This can be read as a fundamentalist commitment to democracy that is limited to enabling the inclusion of their own actors in political power or formal political spaces. Religious fundamentalist campaigning on freedom of speech can be analyzed in the same way: is the demand for such freedom meant to secure a space to spread their own ideology, or does it entail a commitment to freedom of speech for all? Similarly, if fundamentalist actors support certain aspects of human development such as poverty eradication, but at the same time do not support women's full enjoyment of their human rights, can such actors be said to be supportive of human development?

A holistic approach must also consider the issues on which religious fundamentalists remain silent. For example, the campaigns of some fundamentalists on social justice issues such as poverty are undermined by the fact that in the experience of women's rights activists, the same groups are usually silent about the need to reduce military spending—which surely would make a concrete contribution to reducing global poverty. How often have religious fundamentalists used the visibility and power they have gained in international forums to campaign for arms control and global trade equality, as compared to their frequent campaigns to roll back gains made in sexual and reproductive health rights? Nearly half of women's rights activists surveyed feel that religious fundamentalists do not campaign on domestic violence, violence against women in general, or workers' rights. Given the widespread prevalence of gender-based violence and the exploitation of workers, this silence reveals that religious fundamentalists make strategic choices as to whose concerns they prioritize for campaigning; empowerment of the structurally disadvantaged seems to be of little interest.

A sophisticated analysis of fundamentalist strategizing must also take an intersectional approach, examining how regional and religious contexts combine to shape diversities in strategies. For example, women's rights activists in Latin America are generally less likely than women's rights advocates in the Middle East to feel that religious fundamentalist movements are interested in the poor. But this picture changes when examining Latin American Evangelical and Pentecostal fundamentalisms, which work actively among marginalized indigenous communities. Similarly, women's rights activists in Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand do not regard alliances between religious fundamentalists and Leftists as an important fundamentalist strategy. However, activists working to challenge Muslim fundamentalisms in these contexts do regard this as a vital fundamentalist strategy. These specificities create a complex picture of the phenomenon of religious fundamentalisms, but also serve to direct and nuance the response of rights-based movements.

## Keep the bigger picture of fundamentalist strategizing in view

Resistance to religious fundamentalisms on the ground requires a contextual analysis that takes into account country-level diversities that shape the details of local fundamentalist strategizing. However, focusing on the particular characteristics of one fundamentalism can unintentionally lead women's rights activists to present the particular fundamentalism they face as somehow unique or "worse" than other fundamentalisms. As AWID's research into the impact of religious fundamentalisms has shown, women's rights activists in all regions and affected by fundamentalisms in all religions view them as deeply damaging to women's human rights. Therefore, in order to develop a broad, united and effective global challenge, feminist analysis of religious fundamentalist strategizing needs to retain a vision of the overarching similarities in fundamentalist strategies and movements that go beyond context-specific details.

For example, as regards certain bodily rights—abortion, condom use, reproductive rights, sexual orientation and gender identity—AWID's survey found that women's rights activists in Latin America and the Caribbean report a specific focus on these issues in religious fundamentalist campaigning. A similar focus was reported for Western and Eastern Europe, North America and the Pacific region, and is matched by campaigning by Catholic and Christian (especially Orthodox) fundamentalisms. In contrast, these are areas of relative silence in fundamentalist campaigning in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. But this does not signal that fundamentalist movements in these regions are supportive of sexual and reproductive rights.

There are several examples which help illustrate this, notably the "Holy Alliance" between various fundamentalisms at the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development and afterwards. The consistent fundamentalist attack on sexual and reproductive rights is also apparent at the country level. In India, for example, the Hindu fundamentalist Bajrang Dal has campaigned against sex-education, while other Hindutva groups have condemned abortion as an act of "murder". Unlike Christian and Catholic fundamentalisms, Muslim fundamentalisms are often credited with campaigning against capitalism and neoliberalism. Yet according to women's rights activists affected by Muslim fundamentalisms, these movements campaign against abortion more frequently than they do against capitalism and neoliberalism. In recent years, "the Muslim society of Kenya has joined forces with the Evangelical movement (led by a female Evangelist) to oppose two laws put to Parliament that would have made abortion safe and legal in the country" (survey respondent, international). In some parts of Africa, both Christian and Muslim fundamentalists claim FGM is a practice mandated by religion. Similarly, the high levels of fundamentalist campaigning against LGBTQI rights reported by women's rights activists in Latin America and the Caribbean must not obscure the fact that, for example, the gay community in Egypt is brutally persecuted by Muslim fundamentalists.

Finally, the bigger picture of fundamentalist strategizing can sometimes be obscured because exceptions are more interesting than the rule. For example, there is great mainstream media interest—and heart-searching by feminists—regarding the existence of women members of fundamentalist movements across all religions. While important to consider, the less sensational reality is that men appear to make up the majority of these movements.



## Strengthening Feminist Communication of the Impact of Religious Fundamentalisms

Strengthened feminist analysis of religious fundamentalist impact and strategizing needs to be accompanied by changes in the way this analysis is shared among women's rights activists and beyond. This includes a strategic assessment of what a specific audience needs in terms of information form and content. The failure to communicate impact effectively has meant the significance of the fundamentalist threat to rights is sometimes downplayed. "For a long time people have just dismissed some of these groups as fringe extremist groups and not really seen them until they've become powerful enough to have an impact" (Mona Mehta, India).

While one solution is to ensure greater documentation that will provide more concrete illustrations of impact, such examples can at times be elusive because of the systemic and sometimes subtle nature of fundamentalist influence.

Many activists recognize the need to share women's experiences more widely. Indeed, 45% of those surveyed regard greater capacity to communicate the impacts of religious fundamentalisms as the top need in their work on fundamentalisms. A further 35% see this as a major need. A key part of this effort will be to make feminist analysis more accessible, especially to women who are not actively supportive of feminism.

It is not just a matter of increasing capacity to communicate. Women's rights activists also suggest significant changes in the way feminists *frame* the reporting of impact. Such changes would include relating the fundamentalist impact to specific human rights: "We may understand what we mean by attacks on women's rights but it is not understood in many places. We have to analyze them as human rights violations, as threats to freedom of expression, freedom of movement, etc." (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom).

The way feminists frame their relationship with fundamentalisms is also important because it can either convey a sense of defeatism or a powerfully mobilizing message of hope. "Are we going to position ourselves as empowered women who know what we want or as victims of religion and fundamentalisms? We have to recognize that we are winning and they are reacting to that" (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay).

Indeed some point out the strategic need to convey the limits to religious fundamentalist popularity and influence, uncovered through research and documentation. In Iran, Nigeria and Sudan, where religious fundamentalists have come to national or local power, women's rights activists note the popular disillusionment with these movements, because "once in power they cannot deliver" (Ziba Mir-Hosseini, United Kingdom/Iran). Making this experience more visible will help demystify the fundamentalist claim to popular legitimacy. Similarly, fundamentalist power and influence can be resisted. In 2005, the Brazilian government refused US\$40 million in PEPFAR funding from the United States on account of the "Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oath"<sup>44</sup> requirement. Survey respondents report that some Latin American organizations took a more subversive approach: they accepted PEPFAR funding and its conditionality, but in practice continued their work with sex workers regardless. Contemporary global social changes mean a challenge to fundamentalisms is inevitable, or as one activist puts it, "An outcome where fundamentalists succeed in putting the toothpaste back in the tube is not likely" (Frances Kissling, United States). Conveying these limits not only provides hope for rights activists, but also ensures that foreign governments and non-state actors such as donors and development organizations retain an accurate perspective on the popularity and influence of religious fundamentalists. This will in turn ensure more effective engagement with and support for alternative rights-based socio-political forces.

44 See <http://www.avert.org/pepfar.htm>. All organizations receiving PEPFAR funding (U.S. President Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) were obliged to have a policy that explicitly opposes prostitution and sex trafficking. This policy, known as the Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oath (APLO), has been shown to have a negative impact on prevention efforts because it undermines the most effective approaches to working with sex workers. [http://www.pepfarwatch.org/the\\_issues/anti\\_prostitution\\_pledge/](http://www.pepfarwatch.org/the_issues/anti_prostitution_pledge/)

## Using the media and the power of speech

Women's rights activists from diverse contexts recognize the central role that media and social communications can play in advancing feminist strategies of resistance and challenge. This requires a highly creative approach, given the enormous imbalance in the resources available to rights activists and religious fundamentalists.

"Whether it's in the Arab-Muslim countries or migrant communities in France and Europe, which television channel do women have for broadcasting their actions? This central issue of the media was raised at the Feminist Dialogue and World Social Forum in Nairobi in 2007 but since then, nothing" (Samia Allalou, France).

**We need to make media active as much as possible against fundamentalism. Unfortunately, often media are unfriendly to women and in this subject they act together with fundamentalists. (Survey respondent, Georgia)**

Nevertheless, where religious fundamentalists have used television advertisements to powerful effect, women have responded with counter-advertising supporting, for example, the right to abortion ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D6-nJqdpE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D6-nJqdpE) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5Xi0C1co1c&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5Xi0C1co1c&feature=related)).

The Nicaraguan NGO Puntos de Encuentro developed an award-winning *telenovela* (soap opera), *Sexto Sentido* (Sixth Sense <http://www.puntos.org.ni/english/resources.php>), designed to broaden public discussion of rights issues such as sexuality, immigration, sexual diversity, rape, HIV, sexual abuse in the family and abortion—all issues closely related to religious fundamentalisms. Soap operas are highly popular in the region and the series was broadcast across much of Central American mainstream media with significant impact.

The campaign *Contra los Fundamentalismos, lo Fundamental es la Gente* (The People are Fundamental against Fundamentalisms)<sup>45</sup> has been particularly successful because it is inclusive and based on communications actions that particularly emphasize media impacts to condemn the many manifestations of dogmatism and absolutism. It attempts to raise people's awareness about the power of speech as a tool to denounce wrongs and share ideas. The campaign's symbol is understood and has been adopted by people and organizations in different cultures and regions. (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay)

The campaign's slogans and symbols have been embraced by other social movements as recognized symbols of resistance against fundamentalisms.

New media have proved particularly useful, even in authoritarian states. In Iran, for example, the reformist period saw an explosion in blogging by women: "Blogging is a way of pouring it out, sharing it with other women", although "it does not substitute for mobilizing because blogging remains very middle class" (Homa Hoodfar, Canada/Iran). But with the spread of cellphones far beyond the middle classes, women activists were able to use texting and phone videos to spread national and global awareness of the 2009 post-election uprising against the Iranian government, in which women took a significant role.

New media have been particularly relevant in young women's mobilizing. During the 2006 public protests against the Indonesian "anti-pornography" bill, which sought to limit women's autonomy and mobility, "young women using the Internet played a crucial role in disseminating information on the bill and the negotiations in the Parliament. This allowed different groups to plan for public actions" (Kamala Chandrakirana, Indonesia).

<sup>45</sup> The campaign is also known by its slogan *Tu boca, fundamental contra los fundamentalismos* [Your mouth – fundamental against fundamentalisms]. For a description of the campaign in English, see [http://www.youthxchange.net/utills/printme.asp?page\\_filename=main/ac041\\_03\\_people-fundamental.asp](http://www.youthxchange.net/utills/printme.asp?page_filename=main/ac041_03_people-fundamental.asp)



The power of well-timed media interventions and international visibility were demonstrated in Sudan in 2000, when the Governor of Khartoum issued a decree banning women from working in petrol stations, hotels, restaurants, most public places. “He said, ‘We want to protect women from the harassment they’re exposed to while working in those jobs’. For the first time in Sudan during that regime, there was a very successful campaign. We [women’s activists] were at a seminar on CEDAW and there were a lot of journalists. All the NGO activists came out against this decree, and we drafted a memo which we sent to the President, cc to the ILO, cc to the United Nations, everywhere. We said, ‘This is against the rights in the present Constitution – *you* made it: “Women have the right to work” – you didn’t identify which kind of work...’

We put it in on Al Jazeera, and I began to receive phone calls from tens of Sudanese in the diaspora, and they said ‘You want help?’ and I said ‘Yes, translate this and put it on the Internet!’ All the journalists in the New York

meeting [launching the Millennium Development Goals, attended by the Sudanese President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs] left everything and started asking ‘Why is your government banning women to work?’ [In 2005] this Minister was asked in an interview what was his most critical moment during his term. Everyone expected him to say the Comprehensive Peace Agreement negotiations [ending the North-South war]. He said ‘It was during the Governor’s decree. Diplomacy could not save us!’ He couldn’t believe the tactics and the women’s solidarity.” (Manal Abdel Halim, Sudan).

Feminists have recognized the importance of using popular media and local languages to reach out to the grassroots. One rights group in Morocco travels around the country, reaching villagers in often remote areas and disseminating audio-cassettes “in all local languages (spoken Moroccan, all different Berber dialects) which present and discuss progressive sayings by the Prophet [that support] equality and foster women’s rights” (Democratic League for Women’s Rights-LDDF, Morocco).

## Pro-active Feminist Strategies for Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms

Beyond strengthening feminist analysis of religious fundamentalisms, women’s rights activists provide many forward-looking proposals and examples for how to strengthen feminist strategizing to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms. These are both in relation to discursive issues such as the family and secularism, as well as in relation to more tangible areas such as movement-building and strategizing on how to recapture public spaces.

While some proposals are specific to the question of fundamentalisms, others are basic matters of movement building. For instance, the suggestion that feminists should promote secularity and/or reclaim a feminist

vision of religion responds specifically to the context of fundamentalisms. In contrast, the call for feminists to take a multigenerational approach to activism is a critical movement building issue that is not specific to the context of resisting fundamentalisms, although it is made more urgent by the threat that religious fundamentalisms pose to women’s human rights.

In a number of instances, AWID’s research found that a proposal for future feminist action in one region or with regard to one religion was currently underway in another context. This chapter will attempt to map both women’s rights activists’ experiences, and the possibilities of new directions for dialogue and strategic action.

## Promoting and protecting pluralism; rejecting absolutism

For many women's rights activists, the most effective strategies target the heart of fundamentalist intolerance and absolutism by promoting and protecting pluralism and diversity within any given community as well as vis à vis other communities.

Some consciously work to build bridges between communities fractured by fundamentalism. In the highly polarized context of 2006 Iraq, women's rights activists took risks to support and protect those who reject the boundaries imposed by fundamentalists. Yanar Mohammed from Iraq recounts an example: "The Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq held awareness-raising meetings for their office's male security guards. One of the guards came up to me after the meeting and said he comes from one of the hot zones in Baghdad where the Shiite government authorities are killing the Sunni residents. In his area there is a big number of young poets who have weekly poetry sessions and are being harassed by militia members affiliated with the government. He asked to have their poetry sessions in our office with the OWFI because they would like to do it while sitting with women and while having a freer atmosphere. So it started from there in the summer of 2006. A couple of days before the event some of our members, young men from the Shiite Sadr City, told me that poets from their area would also like to come. So we thought let's make it an event where so-called Sunni and Shiite poets come together and let's see where poetry takes us; are there really differences between people or not? We were amazed to see that improvised popular poetry that went back and forth from one team to the other created a magical atmosphere where there were no differences: men, women, Sunni, Shiite, age, nothing was a barrier anymore between people. [The participants said] they had felt ultimate freedom in that space and from then on we decided to call it 'freedom space' and that was the event 'Freedom Space No. 1'. It had almost 25 poets coming from the Sunni and Shiite areas. In [August 2007] we held Freedom Space No.7 and we were surprised to see 200 young people join us on that day." Case studies from women's rights activists in Lebanon and India also show the strength women's rights activism gained from bridging the gap between activists from diverse religious communities.<sup>46</sup>

Other initiatives counter absolutism by researching and disseminating information about pluralism within religion, and diversity of laws and practices justified with reference to religion. During the campaign against "Sharia courts" in Canada, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women frequently used the publication from Women Living Under Muslim Laws, *Knowing our Rights: Women, family, laws and customs in the Muslim world* to show the diversity and impact of Muslim laws across world. This helped challenge fundamentalist claims that there is only one "correct" interpretation of Muslim laws, and also that limitation on women's rights is the "norm" in Muslim contexts.

<sup>46</sup> [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

## Challenging absolutism through information sharing

Part of the process of challenging fundamentalist absolutism has involved providing comprehensive critical information and a space for dialogue, especially for women. Even in difficult circumstances, women have proved very resourceful in obtaining and sharing information that can help their analysis of fundamentalisms.

“There was not much to read on feminism or on the international women’s movement in Persian at that time. We were all keen to know the roots of our inferior status. The ones that knew English started translating articles. The group would also buy books on women and share them with each other. Actually, this inspired some to set up a documentation centre that would provide women with resources. The organization was set up in 1998 and aimed to collect resources on women and/or by women. Its implicit objective was to show that Iranian society was undergoing a change regarding its gender relations. Books, articles, and any other written materials on women and/or by women provided such evidence. The data collected were then published as a two-volume book, containing the bibliographic details of 15,000 resources in 33 categories. We believed that the very idea of publishing the names of women writers, journalists, and researchers along with the information on their works would strengthen the status of women as producers of knowledge. Both books were used as reliable sources. Furthermore, we provided university students with resources, advice and technical support if they chose to write their dissertations on women. In our case, as soon as another feminist women’s organization established a library, the periodicals and some relevant collections were transferred there for public use. It could be considered a sign of solidarity among women’s groups.”  
(Anonymous, Iran)



## Promoting secularism and citizenship

In certain regions it is clear that feminist resistance to religious fundamentalisms has been mainly articulated as a struggle to affirm the need for a secular state. Indeed, when asked about the most urgent step needed to prevent the further strengthening of religious fundamentalisms, without exception women's rights activists from Latin America who were interviewed, and an overwhelming majority from Western Europe, responded that this was to protect or promote secularism in public policy and in the realm of the state.

In the case of Latin America, this reflects the long-standing regional campaign on the issue. In those countries where the state is formally secular, local women's rights activists use this to call the state to account for policies that promote absolutist visions in the public education system and attack reproductive rights in the name of religion. In some instances secularity, plurality and sexual and reproductive rights are presumed to have a natural conceptual link: in Argentina, "the National Campaign for the Right to Abortion (*Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto*) demands a secular state<sup>47</sup> and freedom of thought" (Marta Alanís, Argentina), while in Uruguay, "one of the main strategies [of both abortion and civil union movements] is to establish a discourse about democracy, that legislators 'represent' the citizens that voted for them and the secular nature of the state" (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay).

In Britain too, although not formally a secular state, feminists are also engaged in protecting secular public education policies because "secular spaces provide the best space for the organic development of identity" and enable young girls especially to experiment with "the myriad cultural-religious identities that exist" without being limited to one homogenized interpretation of religion (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom). While protecting the cultural diversity that exists within a community, secular spaces also provide an opportunity for positive interaction between communities. While giving a talk at a local school to 13-14 year olds in a largely Asian area, "we talked about religion, and the most important thing that all the children said was that they loved coming to school because they saw children from other backgrounds. That was the only space where they mixed with others" (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom).

In contexts such as Peru and Canada, protecting and promoting the secular nature of public policy is sometimes expressed as a campaign for one law or one public ethic for all. "[We need to] show that the lack of a public ethic

for all harms the advancement of our rights" (Silvia Roxana Vásquez Sotelo, Peru). The Canadian Council of Muslim Women held focus groups with Muslim women to raise awareness about the potential injustices that might occur in the name of Muslim laws in the event that private religious arbitration continued to be allowed under the Ontario Arbitration Act. By the end of the sessions, "women—who had believed that the rights given to them 1,400 years ago were adequate if not better than the current laws—were convinced of the benefits of Canadian family law" (Alia Hogben, Canada).

Debates about the role of religion in public life are related to debates about citizenship. When, in the name of religion, some women are denied the same rights (for example in family law) as other women within a country, it introduces discrimination between women citizens. Once religion-based discrimination is accepted as "normal", it is more easily used against other citizens, such as men belonging to a religious minority. "We need to raise issues of Muslim women's rights to an issue of citizenship and how it affects all women and all citizens" (Zainah Anwar, Malaysia).

Women's rights activists have found allies who support a secular state even among religious leaders operating in fundamentalist-dominated contexts. In Iran, reformists, including senior figures within the religious establishment, are questioning whether it is the role of the state to implement Sharia. "The argument is that the moment that the state takes hold of Sharia, it is no longer sacred and then it becomes like any other law" (Ziba Mir-Hosseini). Some Muslim scholars, such as the former Mufti of Marseilles, Soheib Bencheikh, and Abdullahi an-Na'im, argue that secularism is the only means of ensuring the survival of Islam. Their arguments include the concern that to leave Islam in the hands of fundamentalists would be to condemn it to internal stagnation and eventual irrelevance, while externally this would lead to greater antagonism from people of other religions and beliefs. Other arguments are simply that Islam was traditionally "secular", in that state and religious power were separate in the classical Golden Age. "There are after all probably millions of Muslims who are completely secular but completely believing, practising Muslims. They just don't think that laws should be imposed on the basis of religion. They don't think the state should assume that role" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan). These and other similar arguments are being used by Muslim feminists working within a religious framework as well as feminists working outside the framework of religion to support a call for secular state policies.

47 The original Spanish uses the term *estado laico*. This is conceptually closer to the French term *laïcité* which some regard as distinct from the English "secularity". Just as the term "fundamentalism" has a multitude of connected but contextualized meanings, agreeing on a definition of its alternative presents challenges.

Aside from campaigning for secular state policies, women's rights activists have also pursued strategies that are distinctly secular in their approaches, even where the state is fundamentalist or where religion has a dominant role in public policy. For example, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign in Iran, while allied with religious reformists, has itself pursued an openly secular strategy that emphasizes the harsh realities of women's lives. This approach has opened up spaces for public discussion of punishments justified with reference to religion.<sup>48</sup> Exposure of the gross injustices experienced by women in their daily lives has also led to greater equality in criminal and family laws in Morocco and Pakistan, while questioning the privileged position of religion in public policy is a major strategy for Sisters in Islam, Malaysia, although this has at times led to its persecution by state officials and religious political parties.

Women's rights activists provide examples of a variety of approaches to "doing secularity" on the ground. A basic step is to "challenge whenever plurality is talked about only in terms of religion without giving any space for atheism or agnosticism; although I would also resist those who deny religion any legitimacy" (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom). Southall Black Sisters' No Recourse campaign against British immigration policies "was wonderful because there were women from all religious, national and ethnic backgrounds and all of us talked about the campaign and not about religion and identity. I have the hope that through such substantive issues we can keep that unity, and come together on a secular, democratic progressive feminist platform—but without having to do that blatantly" (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom).

## Challenges and limitations in the promotion of secularism as a response to religious fundamentalisms

In contexts where secularism has been seen as part of an alienating "modern" culture, it has by association become suspect and in some senses even a factor contributing to the rise of religious fundamentalisms. "Ironically secularization, which once looked like it could be a solution to religious fundamentalism, has instead intensified the rise of fundamentalisms which are in part a reaction to a rapidly changing world and growing economic disparity caused by globalization" (Jennifer Butler, United States). In several states in the Middle East and North Africa too, secularism historically became associated with authoritarian post-independence governments, which has complicated efforts to promote it.

While many women's rights activists regard a secular state as a necessary condition for the fulfilment of women's human rights, many among them are also clear that it is not a sufficient guarantee. In the early 1990s in Nicaragua, the anti-Sandinista government sought to introduce religious instruction in schools. But public opposition led the then President, Violeta Chamorro, to back off. "She publicly said, 'I am Catholic, but the state is secular'" (Ana Maria Pizarro, Nicaragua). But although the battle over religious instruction was won, the fundamentalist Minister of Education, Humberto Belli, simply revised all the textbooks to privilege fundamentalist Catholic perspectives. Women's rights activists from Latin America and the Caribbean provide countless examples of where the secular character of the state has not been sufficient to prevent the rise of fundamentalisms. In Mexico, religious fundamentalists have even used "advances in the institutionalization of democracy to blur or surmount the limits imposed by a secular state" (Dapthe Cuevas, Mexico). Peru and Paraguay are formally secular but have also officially established a "Day of the Unborn Child"—a Catholic Church inspired anti-abortion event. Brazil's status as a secular state provided at least the possibility for abortion to be discussed as a national public health issue rather than a question of women's rights vs religious ethics, but following government fear of a potential Evangelical backlash in the October 2010 general election, a hugely watered down version of the National Human Rights Plan was passed in May 2010, overturning a draft approved at the end of 2009 which included policies that recognized abortion and LGBTQI rights.



<sup>48</sup> [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

In some contexts, the term “secular” itself is strategically problematic: “We use the term ‘civil’ because ‘secular’—it’s like a bomb!” (Manal Abdel Halim, Sudan). “Everybody is becoming too nervous to say we are secular. The space for secular articulations of issues has dwindled to almost nothing” (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan). The difficulties surrounding the use of the term arise in part from uncertainty about its meaning and content, especially where religion (as opposed to religious fundamentalism) and secularism are presented as opposites. As one activist observes, “This secularism versus Islam and fundamentalism is a huge political issue in Turkey and is becoming even more so. There is a lot of confusion around those terms” (Pinar Ilkcaracan, Turkey). For some feminists, the definition of secularism is clear: “In Latin America we say that everybody has the right to the religion he or she wants, and we accept what they say is a sin, is a sin. But what they don’t have the right to do is turn a sin into a crime or public policy” (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay).

For others, “We are confronted with the contradictory ways we use ‘secularism’. Secularism is [in some places] seen as an absence of religion, or in other parts as pluralism” (Anasuya Sengupta, India). Added to the lack of consensus about definitions, there is the additional issue that “those of us opposing fundamentalisms don’t have a clear, positive vision of what our alternative is and how that vision includes religious identities and issues of faith and spirituality”. If, as one women’s rights activist recommends, “the secular agenda should be brought back on a proactive basis, and not as a response to growing religiosity” (survey respondent, Bangladesh), this requires further work to develop shared definitions of secularism, and greater articulation of the details of its content and operation in a wide variety of contexts.

Some participants in AWID’s Stakeholders Meeting<sup>49</sup> suggested that feminist strategies should be primarily guided by whether the state is formally secular or not. However, others responded that the dividing lines are not so clear-cut. For instance, Hindu fundamentalists while in power in India attempted to use the state’s secular character to promote their vision; their call for a uniform civil code ending the existence of multiple family laws based on religion was seen as a thinly disguised attempt to impose a Hindu fundamentalist vision of the family upon all. By contrast, in Bangladesh, where the constitution privileges Islam, religion has not been used

to determine public policy for example regarding abortion, which is legal and easily accessible through public hospitals. There are similar paradoxes from around the world. Denmark and Norway are widely regarded as secular societies and yet in both countries, the Christian Church and the state are formally linked. In contrast, in Thailand the state is formally secular, yet there is a close relationship between the Buddhist hierarchy and the state. Formal state secularism does not guarantee the exclusion of religious fundamentalist influence over public policy. In Italy (and many other Catholic countries), the power of the Catholic Church over public policy can be traced to the Concordat between the State and the Church. A 1929 treaty between Italian Fascist dictator Mussolini and the Pope, amended in 1984, produced a peculiar application of “secularity”. For example, marriages performed in church were recognized by the state, holy days were recognized, and religious education was extended to all children whose parents did not object. In return, the clergy was to abstain from political activity. In reality, the Concordat has given the Church a privileged position in society, while it continues to interfere in the framing of public policy. As a result, some Leftist political parties have consistently demanded the total abrogation of the Concordat.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, it is ironic that in secular France the government strongly supported the creation of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (French Council of the Muslim Faith). A formal “representative” body designed to enable dialogue with the government regarding public policy, it is heavily influenced by a fundamentalist organization (Union des organisations islamiques de France/Union of Islamic Organizations of France). Finally, it is important to recall that a secular state may be as violent as a fundamentalist one, if not more so, as illustrated by the example of Nazi Germany.

These examples indicate firstly, that the realities of the relationship between the state and religious fundamentalists, rather than the state’s theoretical label as “secular” or otherwise, may be more important in determining feminist strategizing; secondly, that the demand for secularity needs to be consistently accompanied by a demand for the fulfilment of human rights; and thirdly, that just as fundamentalisms vary across contexts, the choice of pursuing secularization as a feminist strategy and the diverse understandings of “secularism” and “*laïcité*” are also shaped by the context.

49 In November 2007, 35 activists working on fundamentalisms and women’s human rights met in Istanbul, Turkey to give feedback to the findings from AWID’s survey on religious fundamentalisms.

50 *Associazione Luca Coscioni and the World Congress for Freedom of Scientific Research: An Italian Experience of Resisting Religious Fundamentalisms*, AWID case study, Carmen Sorrentino, Luca Coscioni Association  
[http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

## The question of engaging with religion

Many women's rights activists interviewed in AWID's research feel a need to respond to the reality that religion is a visible feature of social and political life. While religion has been discussed in the context of a feminist critique of patriarchy, in many contexts it has not been a focus of activism in itself: "I think for a very long time, those of us who work within women's human rights have not really worked on issues of religion. I suspect that this has to do with our desire to appear secular" (Pramada Menon, India).

The suggested alternative—"engaging with religion"—includes very varied strategies. Examples shared through AWID's research include: disseminating feminist interpretations of religious texts; entering into tactical campaigning coalitions with religious organizations (which may or may not have a fundamentalist agenda); dialoguing with individual fundamentalist followers;<sup>51</sup> or confronting fundamentalist leaders head-on in public debates aired by mainstream media. Evidently, feminist engagement with religion includes both believers and atheists, and challenges fundamentalist interpretations of religion through both secular and religious frameworks.

Apart from the diversity of strategies for engaging with religion, in different contexts there are varied starting points for this engagement: for some women's rights activists, engagement is already well underway, while for others it is a relatively new concept. Thailand is an example of the latter where, despite the high level of women's participation in religious hierarchies, "there are no NGOs working on religion. None. We probably have about 30,000 ordained women, both in white and saffron robes, but no NGOs are working to support them" (Ouypourn Khuankaew, Thailand).

Women's rights activists provide numerous reasons for engaging with religion, including, firstly, that in many contexts—formally secular countries as well as countries with a state religion—religion is a political reality that informs public policy. As one activist notes, "Religion is in the public space; that is our reality. If we don't engage with religion it remains in the hand of the oppressors. We need to break the monopoly of the *Ulema* [religious leaders]"; this political reality also opens a door to feminist engagement: "When religion is used as a source of law and public policy, then everyone has a right to engage publicly with religion" (Zainah Anwar, Malaysia).

Also, women's rights activists believe that recognizing this reality creates the space to demand that religion be treated no differently than any other influence on public policy, indeed "with the same analytical lens and the same standards of justice as any institution in society" (Frances Kissling, United States).

Secondly, the social reality is that many people are religious: "The idea that the world would grow more modern and secular and that religion would become less of a political force in society simply did not pan out" (Jennifer Butler, United States). Articulating a feminist religious alternative can be a powerful response to this deeply-felt need for a spiritual perspective, especially since women's rights activists identified the comfort and certainty offered by religion against the background of a complex world as a major factor in the rise of religious fundamentalisms. But while for many women religion is an important element of daily life, women's groups' failure to engage "has been manipulated by fundamentalist groups who label them as 'anti-religion'" (Mona Mehta, India). One women's rights activist from Fiji, who bases her own feminism "on the 'C' of the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]", urges women's rights movements "to understand women who take a faith-based approach to the promotion and upholding of women's human rights, otherwise we will further marginalize women from the different faith-based groups". Moreover, as noted in Chapter 1, the absence of support for religious actors who support human rights has been a factor contributing to their marginalization and thus the rise of religious fundamentalisms in recent decades.

Thirdly, engaging with religion enables feminists to strategize from a position of knowledge: "If you were a woman working on the environment and climate change right now, you would spend a lot of time reading about climate change and you would try to learn" (Frances Kissling, United States). This includes being informed about the actual positions and impact of any given religious group or individual: "Do they foster women's rights? If they don't, that is what must be changed. In some cases we may judge these institutions to be un-reformable and we may work for their demise. In other cases, we may decide that there is an openness to reform, and engagement is important" (Frances Kissling, United States).



<sup>51</sup> Two of AWID's case studies for the Challenging Fundamentalisms Initiative specifically address this: [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

Finally, engagement with religion can undermine fundamentalisms by encouraging critical thinking among the religious. The work of *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* (CDD, Catholics for Choice) “has enabled more and more people to see the Catholic Church as fundamentalist with regard to women’s rights and sexual diversity, and has also encouraged thousands of Catholics to question the church leadership” (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay). In Nicaragua there are “some relatively small groups [who] believe in a liberating Christianity and practise it” but whose work would benefit from strengthened feminist “training and arguments in relation to key issues of life, particularly in terms of gender equality, sexual rights and reproductive rights” (Enriqueta Ramírez de la Mota, Nicaragua).

However, women’s rights activists are also aware that working from within the framework of religion may not always be appropriate. In Pakistan, the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) initially worked against the Islamization of laws from within a religious framework but later returned to a secular strategy because “the activists themselves were uncomfortable with this and with using frameworks which [they] thought eventually would box them in during arguments with the religious Right because you weren’t religious scholars, you didn’t have that standing. But I think in terms of mobilizing support amongst the general public it was a good tactic” (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan).

Determining the extent and nature of engagement with religion must not only remain context-dependent. It must also be acknowledged that in all contexts there are women’s rights activists who believe religion has something to offer women and those who do not; both positions must be respected and accounted for when building global feminist responses to religious fundamentalisms. Bridging the divide between women’s rights activists with different perspectives on the promise of religion for feminism is a necessary but difficult movement-building task. The way ahead lies partly in further work to develop a nuanced understanding of secularism and its application in diverse contexts; partly in recognizing that many women’s rights activists on the ground consciously and unconsciously challenge the dichotomization of secular and religious perspectives. There are examples of national and international organizations (for instance *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir*/Catholics for Choice) that bridge the either/or dichotomy and work from a religious framework as well as firmly advocating for secularism. It is clear, however, that failing to create space for a concerted feminist response to the question of religion itself has worked to the benefit of fundamentalist movements.

## Reclaiming a feminist vision and building knowledge of religion

As one women’s rights activist puts it, the rise of religious fundamentalisms represents “a crisis but also an opportunity” because it raises the urgent need for religious people both to consciously examine what “equality” means in their religions and to take action to defend equality (survey respondent, Hong Kong, Special Administrative Region, China).

Recognizing that all religions are internally diverse and contested allows feminist analysis the space to distinguish between religion and religious fundamentalisms, to expose the absolutism that is characteristic of fundamentalisms, and to make visible those feminists who are working within various religions trying to build alternative communities of thought and practice.

One of the ways to take away some of their power is by empowering other people in the community also to be knowledgeable and to develop alternatives... Judaism is broad enough for us to be able to find a way to be authentically committed Jews and also human beings who care about the other.  
(Debbie Weissman, Israel)

There are scores of examples from across the world of religious initiatives that support women’s rights and the full range of human rights. Not all specifically aim to resist religious fundamentalisms, although by virtue of challenging the monopoly of interpretation most do this by default. Just some of the examples were discussed during AWID’s research and only selected examples are mentioned here.





Some are consciously feminist. Within Judaism, the process of developing female Talmud scholars began in the 1970s and by the late 1990s led to the formation of the feminist Orthodox Jewish group, Kolech. “The key is going to be when we have women who were taught by women who were taught by women. It is okay to be taught by men also but once you have three generations of knowledgeable women then I think you are set” (Debbie Weissman, Israel). In Thailand, women’s rights activists “use feminist frameworks to redefine Buddhism. We do a lot of deconstruction on what has been misinterpreted. Not just for women but for any marginalized group like poor people. We always find that women who come to the training are either religious and anti-feminist, or are feminist and anti-religious and have given up spiritual practice all together. We try to show them in our course that Buddhism and feminism complement each other and actually lead towards the same path, which is liberation from oppression or suffering. We need to cultivate peace from within, take care of the mind and body and enjoy every day of life. This is the way we love ourselves and we bring those qualities into our work against fundamentalism” (Ouyporn Khuankaew, Thailand).

Other religious movements do not focus on women but still produce interpretations that support women’s human rights. In Indonesia, “some of the most successful strategies are by progressive religious groups such as Rahima and Islamic and Social Studies Institute (LKiS). They are re-interpreting religious texts from progressive and/or equality perspectives. This confirms the effectiveness of using the same ‘language’ to challenge conservative interpretations of religious texts” (Firlina Purwanti, Indonesia). In Nicaragua, the Ecumenical organization Centro EcuMénico Antonio Valdivieso conducts leadership training for grassroots leaders using “an avant garde theology that brings a liberating vision and renews the social commitment by Christians. ‘Moderates’ who participate in our trainings have pointed out that one of their learnings was to be able to see Jesus’ movement as a social movement coming to challenge the law and the Church and to create changes in order to reach equality and social justice. This social change can be related to other actions that other people have already developed around the world. But what is usually taught (by the Church) is to see that social movement of Jesus as something sacred that can never be related to the actions of other movements, like the women’s struggle” (Enriqueta Ramírez de la Mota, Nicaragua).

In the United States there has been a slow re-emergence of groups that provide an alternative to the Christian Right, such as the Center for American Progress, Faith in Public Life, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, Sojourners.

**We need to support religious progressives and challenge fundamentalism not by claiming religion has no place in public life, but by lifting up alternative voices and models for civic engagement; this resonates more and is actually more democratic than trying to exclude religious voices.**  
(Jennifer Butler, United States)

Sierra Leonean women’s rights activist and academic Dora King argues that if there is to be a pro-feminist movement in Christianity, it is most likely to come from Pentecostals, given that theirs is one of the few denominations that have allowed women to be ordained and that acknowledges the possibility of all women to have direct connection to God and receive gifts of the Spirit. However, she and others interviewed note that the lack of a hermeneutic tradition in Pentecostal and charismatic churches means that their congregants and leaders are unlikely to engage in broad-based critical reflection or debate on religious teachings.<sup>52</sup>

This global process of reclaiming visions of religion that have space for human rights, and specifically for women’s human rights, is closely connected with strategies of promoting pluralism, discussed earlier in this chapter.

52 *Christian Fundamentalisms and Women’s Rights in the African Context: Mapping the Terrain*, AWID case study, Jessica Horn, [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

## Dialoguing and debating with religious conservatives and fundamentalists

In some instances, the feminist engagement with religion has extended to dialoguing and engaging in public debates with religious conservatives and fundamentalists. Women's rights activists provide various reasons for their decision to engage at this level, including force of circumstance as well as a belief that dialogue can lead to a change in attitudes. One survey respondent from Somalia suggests that "because the debate is around religious interpretations", anti-FGM campaigns need to address religious leaders. Another from Nigeria suggests establishing links with fundamentalists "to dialogue on the consequences of their actions".

As discussed in AWID's publication *Shared Insights: Women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms*,<sup>53</sup> the dividing line between conservatives and fundamentalists is never easy to draw; some feminists use their respective openness to meaningful dialogue with women's rights advocates as a way of distinguishing between them. Women's rights activists provide examples of both openness and hostility to dialogue from those they identify as religious fundamentalists. For instance, in 2007 the Kenya Human Rights Commission held a mock tribunal on abortion, a public forum in which all were welcome. An hour into the tribunal, Christian fundamentalists unveiled posters and T-shirts and seized the microphone from the participants. "They were not there to listen or to debate. They were there, in the name of the Lord and the Bible, to disrupt" (survey respondent, Kenya). In contrast, a member of a women's group working within Britain's Muslim communities has found that strategic dialogues with fundamentalist women have forced the latter into the rare position of having to articulate why they hold their views, and "once they have to say something out loud to someone else and justify their view, that's when they recognize the absurdity of what they're trying to argue" (Parvin Ali, United Kingdom). If a person is open to shifting their opinions, then perhaps the label "fundamentalist" may no longer be appropriate.

Despite the aggression they may face, some women's rights activists insist on constructive dialogue with religious fundamentalists as a conscious means of challenging absolutist approaches. For instance, in Indonesia and the United States, students have successfully engaged in open dialogue with fundamentalists hostile to the rights of women and LGBTQI people.<sup>54</sup> In both instances, students deliberately sought out others who were themselves fundamentalist or in a fundamentalist institution and engaged in a one-to-one dialogue. Soulforce Q is the youth wing of a US-based organization aiming to end discrimination against LGBT people through non-violent means. "Nonviolence teaches that even the oppressors suffer in a system of injustice... We are thus willing to meet those with whom we disagree and to endure painful statements about our identities as we seek to change them."<sup>55</sup>

This strategy also raises the question of distinguishing between various fundamentalist actors: several of the examples revealed by AWID's research relate dialoguing to the followers of fundamentalisms rather than an elite leadership, whereas feminists engaging in public debate with fundamentalist organizations tends to involve their leadership.

However, effective dialoguing requires certain conditions. It requires a space where all participants feel not only comfortable but also safe enough to speak openly, as well as a conscious assessment of the political implications of dialoguing for local rights activism. Dialoguing also requires great determination. One women's rights activist from Egypt took on the question of religion at a local conference. "The first day was so difficult for me. They were attacking me and focusing more on my outer appearance (that I am not veiled) rather than on the content of what I was saying. But I didn't just turn my back on them and we kept discussing back and forth, and every time they said a point I had a rebuttal. At the end of the conference, they told me that it was 'an honour to have a Muslim like you'... they were convinced. It is important to encourage people to refuse to surrender to those who tell them what Islam is. Religious leaders need us to engage in dialogue with them just as we do" (Azza Soliman, Egypt).

53 <http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-News/Shared-Insights-Women-s-rights-activists-define-religious-fundamentalisms>

54 *Religious Fundamentalisms and Student Life: A View from Indonesia*, AWID case study, Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo and Yuyun Rindiastuti; *Sexuality, Gender and the Religious Right: Youth Advocacy on LGBT Rights in the United States*, AWID case study, Haven Herrin, Soulforce Q. [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

55 *Sexuality, Gender and the Religious Right: Youth Advocacy on LGBT Rights in the United States*, AWID case study, Haven Herrin, Soulforce Q. [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

## Reclaiming concepts co-opted by religious fundamentalisms

Women's rights activists from diverse contexts point out areas where feminism has lost the discursive initiative to religious fundamentalisms. An important area is precisely one that has been among religious fundamentalism's greatest strengths: the combined package of spirituality, hope, meaning, ethics, life, "morality" and "the family".

As one women's rights activists puts it, "Religious extremisms have seemed to fill a moral and political gap that the Left and women's movements haven't found a way to fill since the end of the Cold War" (survey respondent, United States). "I actually talk about a spiritual well-being that people sometimes find through religion and sometimes not and that has been missing a lot in the women's movement" (Ouyporn Khuankaew, Thailand).

We are missing something, we are trying to resist very powerful and centuries-old machines that use the whole might of literature, art and technology to draw pictures of paradise and the values that they offer to their audiences. What pictures are we drawing instead? Do we have a picture that we can offer? (Women's rights activist, Central Asia)

The solutions that women's rights activists suggest include providing a sense of hope, and avoiding alienating ordinary women: "Offer hope, that is what the fundamentalists are offering" (Hope Chigudu, Zimbabwe/Uganda); "[it is] vital to establish trust so that the target group is not alienated [but] becomes its own strongest advocate" (survey respondent, Pakistan).

When religious fundamentalist perspectives are unable to meet people's real needs, this offers women's rights activists an important opening for reaching out. "In our efforts to empower [indigenous survivors of sexual assault] we have noticed that Catholic and Evangelical churches do not provide the spiritual and social support these women need to fight the stigmatization they suffer. In most cases, religious discourses blamed them for what happened. These women are believers and they mistrust religious discourses stigmatizing them and, when they doubt, fundamentalism has less opportunities to undermine their hearts and minds" (Maya Varinia Alvarado Chávez, Guatemala)

Increasingly, feminist strategizing against the fundamentalist worldview is focusing on offering positive alternative visions and is finding that these are effective as mobilizing tools. Examples include *An Upside-down World is Possible* from the *Contra los Fundamentalismos, lo Fundamental es la Gente* campaign in Latin America.<sup>56</sup>

Many acknowledge that "the family" is an area where feminist discourse is currently weak, which has allowed fundamentalists to dismiss women's rights activists as "anti-family". In this context, the proposal to reclaim the discourse surrounding "the family" appears vital—for instance, to "take back space by challenging the family values put forward by the World Congress of Families" (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom). However, some caution against allowing fundamentalists in effect to determine the parameters of national debate: "To respond to religious fundamentalists on their own terms ('we are a family too' or 'god made me homosexual') is to lose the battle. It is better to place ourselves as a radical, different option, even though this looks, in principle, like an obstacle" (Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani, Argentina).

An alternative may be both to reclaim the family *and* offer a vision that is inclusive, egalitarian and varied in its structures. The Musawah global initiative for equality and justice in the family<sup>57</sup> seeks to create space for just such a vision. On the related matter of re-examining gender roles within the family, one women's rights activist points out that the challenge for feminist analysis is to "read between the lines of the deceptive logic of fundamentalism" (YFA survey respondent, Colombia). Her comment points to the need to develop an accessible argument which acknowledges the biological specificity of the male and the female but successfully challenges the fundamentalist argument that this "logically" leads to gendered, hierarchical relationships.

Feminists are challenging the current religious fundamentalist monopoly of other concepts too. Catholics for Choice have consciously reclaimed the value-loaded language of "life" and "good Catholics" in their campaigning to promote safer sex with slogans such as "Good Catholics Use Condoms" and a website address of [www.condoms4life.org](http://www.condoms4life.org). Activists in Catholic and Christian contexts are questioning the criteria for the fundamentalist claim to the title of "defender of the culture of life" and for labelling feminists as "killers" and fetuses as "the unborn". This strategy has focused on debating the concrete meaning of the "right to life" and reclaiming work around reproductive rights as work that presents an alternative vision of the "culture of life".

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPONs8DWzJg>

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6J6k6k4pSY>

## Taking back the initiative in setting the public agenda

In some instances, feminists and rights-based social movements have become so defensive about public agendas that they have unconsciously allowed fundamentalists to set the parameters of public debate. This limits the alternative visions that feminists can present. At the same time, women's rights activists share examples of how feminists can step out of defensive positions, confidently shift the terms of public debate and unmask fundamentalist weaknesses.

Women's rights activists illustrate what can happen when rights-based movements lose the initiative in setting public agendas. In Brazil in the mid-1990s, proposals for a law to recognize civil unions between people of the same sex were abandoned because of enormous pressure from the substantial Evangelical bloc in the legislature. But in time there was progress on the ground: various municipalities and states in Brazil passed laws recognizing basic rights for same sex couples, while judicial decisions recognized rights like inheritance and adoption of children for gay and lesbian couples. And following corruption scandals the Evangelical bloc lost many seats in elections. Yet some women's rights activists feel these positive openings have not been utilized and instead "the fundamentalist world vision in which punishment and suffering hold a central position [has been handed] a symbolic victory" (Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani, Argentina). This happened a couple of years ago when "the Brazilian gay movement announced that the civil union bill was no longer on their list of priorities and that instead they would focus on the penalization of homophobia because it seemed that such a law was more likely to be approved. Religious fundamentalists have had a broader triumph by convincing the gay movement that punitive measures are more acceptable than positive measures".

Women's rights activists emphasize the need to consciously abandon defensive positions and reclaim public agendas.

Many times we censor ourselves in the effort to win a possible measure... forgetting that we must work as a relevant minority, that we should try to have a clear discourse that contrasts and confronts power, and it doesn't matter how many people follow us. The "possible" is in between what we desire and what they deny us.  
(Susana Chiarotti, Argentina)

There are several possible approaches to taking the analytical offensive and thereby creating space for women to take back the initiative in setting public agendas. One is "to challenge issues of representation, authenticity and validity" (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom); in other words to publicly question the presumption in many contexts that religious fundamentalists, positioning themselves as "religious leaders" or "community leaders", can speak for everyone; to question whether their vision of religion is the only one possible; and to question how far their positions are rights-compliant.

Another approach involves not allowing religious fundamentalists to dictate the parameters of the debate but instead highlighting how fundamentalist discourses fail to match lived realities, a strategy that in Morocco contributed to the successful reform of the family law despite strong fundamentalist opposition:

The Islamists tend to see society as they would like it to be and not as it is, so women's rights organizations adopted the strategy of making visible the social problems arising from the discriminatory provisions of the Code and demanding solutions to these problems. Moving out of the ideological territory that was the Islamists' strength and bringing them face to face with realities on the ground was a very effective strategy for the women's rights movement.  
(Rabéa Naciri, Morocco)

In Canada, during the tense campaign against religious arbitration in family matters, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women consciously refused to allow religious fundamentalists to divert the debate away from real-life issues into a personalized discussion about women's religious knowledge. "When the media asked us for our response to the negative comments about us, made by the opposing side, our response was not to become defensive but to focus on the issues" (Alia Hogben, Canada).



In Uruguay in June 2007, women's rights activists used the reality that abortion is practised across society to overturn fundamentalist opposition to the decriminalization of abortion. "Through the *Yo firmo* [I sign] campaign, thousands of people publicly admitted that they have committed the 'crime of abortion'. Four ministers, eight deputy ministers and twenty legislators were among the signatories (in addition to singers, writers, etc.). The signatures were delivered to the Vice-President, who told the media that he is also in favour of decriminalizing abortion. As a result, the Senate Committee on Health stopped blocking the discussion and the legalization bill was passed to the full Senate" (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay).

Regaining the initiative also requires developing "more methods of holding fundamentalist organizations legally and morally accountable for the crimes and human rights violations that they commit" (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom). One such tactic has been to track and expose the abuse of public funding and private donations by religious fundamentalisms, as well as to delegitimize the fundamentalist claim to a monopoly on "morality" through exposure of sexual abuse of children in religious institutions.

A first step towards demanding accountability is the unmasking of fundamentalist individuals and groups to the broader public: "Naming names so that we identify the groups with fundamentalist tendencies and links in a way that people know what we are talking about" (working group, AWID Stakeholders Meeting). Although aware that the term "fundamentalist" brings its own challenges, women's rights activists suggest that publicly labelling a group or person as "fundamentalist" has several advantages (see *Shared Insights: Women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms*). It can create the strategic space in which to develop a collective understanding of a trend found across regions and religions. Moreover, women's rights activists in rural Nova Scotia, Canada, found that "unmasking fundamentalist ideologues, identifying their agenda, and naming them as a separate, oppressive and regressive ideology within a dominant religion and, therefore, distinct from the religion itself, allows those practising that religion to separate themselves from the imposition of a set of values to which they do not adhere".<sup>58</sup>

Across the world, women's rights activists have used international human rights standards, especially where governments have ratified the major treaties, as a means of combating the privileging of religion in public policy and of increasing women's counter pressure on governments: "Together with other sister organizations, mine has campaigned to raise awareness of legal texts, such as CEDAW, that support women and have been ratified by Mali" (Yaba Tamboura, Mali). However, relatively few women's rights activists in AWID's research mention the positive role national and international human rights law can play in the overall work of accountability. Whether this reflects activists' experience of a bias in national and international legal mechanisms or an under-utilized opportunity, this is clearly an area for further exploration in processes of resisting and challenging fundamentalisms.

<sup>58</sup> *Rural Feminist Activism and Religious Fundamentalism in Nova Scotia, Canada*, AWID case study, Leona English, Lucille Harper and Betsy MacDonald, Antigonish Women's Resource Centre [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

## Strengthening Feminist Movement Building

In the context of challenging religious fundamentalisms, women's rights activists see an urgent need to further strengthen feminist movement building in order to increase our collective power to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms. This entails both building solidarity across regions and religions and ensuring that all women's rights activists make the link between their struggles and action on the issue of fundamentalisms,

while also recognizing diversities among women and avoiding any replication of the patterns of power that characterize patriarchal politics. It includes a particular concern for building a mass base for feminism and in support of women's rights, and a global call for multi-generational movement building that ensures all age groups are empowered and mobilized in the resistance to religious fundamentalisms.

### Building feminist solidarity

Eight out of ten women's rights activists feel that their work to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms would be made more effective if they received greater solidarity and support from local, national and international women's organizations. As one activist notes, "other women's organizations are our best allies" (Parvin Ali, United Kingdom). In AWID's survey, this solidarity and support were given greater importance than increased funding and other resources, and one of the most frequent suggestions was for greater networking and exchange visits. Similarly, more than 80% of women's rights activists regard more information about women's strategies of resistance to religious fundamentalisms in other countries as either their top need or a major need.

In this process of exchange and in the strengthening of solidarity, a crucial element is to recognize the commonalities that women share across regional, religious and other boundaries.

Women's groups need to come together to safeguard the gains made and speak with one voice—these gains have helped all women—and to build on those. We need to promote our commonalities, which are more than our differences.  
(Pragna Patel, United Kingdom)

In diverse contexts, women's organizations have been building dialogue between women across religions, emphasizing shared experiences under religious fundamentalisms and a shared responsibility to address the issue. In Western Europe and North America, Muslim fundamentalists have been able to silence internal criticism by claiming that it plays into the hands of racists. But feminist work across community boundaries has increased the buy-in from hesitant Muslim women, as gender discrimination is not identified as solely found in any particular religious community.

[Let's] not say "Christians work against Christian religious fundamentalisms, etc.", but say that "There is this problem that everyone is facing whether you are Muslim or Christian, so let's work together regardless of what our religion is". (Azza Soliman, Egypt)



Let there be an international network against religious fundamentalism [that] does not speak against one particular religion but against all kinds of religious oppression and exploitation.  
(Survey respondent, India)

There are, however, obstacles to solidarity in the context of challenging fundamentalisms. For instance, as women's movements are not all feminist, their contributions to counter-fundamentalist efforts may vary. In Lithuania, "the word 'feminism' has a negative connotation. Thus many women's groups define [themselves] according to the service they provide and do not tackle wider goals, such as reproductive rights or gay rights".<sup>59</sup> In Sudan, for example, "[women] in the women's movement were born within the patriarchal system and still respond positively to it" (Manal Abdel Halim, Sudan). In 2002, this was manifested in the support of some women activists for the legalization of FGM in Sudan. At the same time, women's movements that may not identify as overtly feminist must not be overlooked in the process of building global solidarity.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative impact of religious fundamentalisms on women's lives, one in six women's rights activists believe that women's organizations and movements are either "not very" or "not at all" actively challenging these movements. A first step in building feminist solidarity is thus to achieve a greater commitment from women's organizations at large and women's rights organizations and movements in particular, toward counter-fundamentalist action.

59 *Confronting Catholic Fundamentalisms in the Former Soviet Union: The Case of Lithuania*, AWID case study, Virginija Aleksejune, Margarita Jankauskaite and Vilana Pilinkaite-Sotirovic, Centre for Equality Advancement [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

## Diversity and going beyond “sisterhood is global”

Some women’s rights movements particularly feel the lack of solidarity in their struggle against religious fundamentalisms. For example in Cambodia, through the fight against HIV and AIDS, sex workers are directly confronting state policies that are informed by Christian fundamentalisms, but say they need far greater support from women’s rights movements. Activists in multicultural contexts may feel a particular lack of support from the women of one community, such as one survey respondent, working in Mindanao in the Philippines, who wants “more support from Muslim women groups locally and nationally”. Even where women’s rights activists agree on the need to challenge religious fundamentalisms, as discussed earlier in this chapter, they may have sharp differences over whether or not to work from within the framework of religion.

This indicates that a recognition and respect for the diversity of women’s concerns, experiences and positions is a prerequisite for building stronger feminist solidarity in the context of tackling religious fundamentalisms. This diversity may be not just in terms of the major social categories such as class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, religion and belief; it also includes important diversities such as location in the global North or South, experience of racism or oppression as a minority, access to resources and technology, and political positions.

Women’s rights activists provide several examples of the need to recognize diversity. In the United States, some are concerned that “the US feminist movement has not engaged very well across class. Perhaps in reaction to the Christian Right, the central issue for feminism in the US has been abortion rather than economic justice for families, enabling the Christian Right to conflate women’s rights with one controversial issue rather than a broad set of concerns” (Jennifer Butler, United States). In the quite different context of Cameroon, one survey respondent similarly identified an urgent need to have “active and constant networking between women across the rural-urban divide” as a means of strengthening work to counter fundamentalisms.

We need to be exposed to different experiences, to be broadminded and accept the other. Women activists don’t know how women themselves are perceiving the issues. The women in the villages are not naïve: they have coping mechanisms... This is why they are surviving. Sometimes the women activists perceive those women as ignorant, coming from another planet; they do not consider their very rich experience.  
(Manal Abdel Halim, Sudan)

It is also important not to replicate the patterns of power that characterize patriarchal politics. One women’s rights activist from Sudan notes how activists have instrumentalized the victims of fundamentalist policies by supporting their cases before the Constitutional Court but failing to follow up with the women afterwards. Many call for self-reflection:

A serious and in-depth analysis [is needed] to see to what extent and how we are ourselves acting like the religious fundamentalists, and to be able to offer real alternatives and not barely differentiated copies of hegemonic thought. (Alejandra Sardá-Chandiramani, Argentina)

[We need] greater honesty in examining our own fundamentalisms in the process of creating strategies to combat global ones.  
(Anasuya Sengupta, India)



## Working across boundaries to strengthen feminist solidarity

By the very nature of their work, many regional or global women's rights campaigns on specific issues find themselves immediately confronted by religious fundamentalisms, and have to strategize to counter their negative influence. Examples include the campaign for a convention on sexual and reproductive rights by women's rights movements in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as The September 28 Campaign for the Decriminalization of Abortion in the region; the campaign to promote ratification and removal of all reservations to CEDAW in the Middle East and North Africa; Astra – Central and Eastern Europe Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights; the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR); Musawah (Equality), the global initiative for equality and justice in the Muslim family.

The formation of transnational networks, groups and campaigns with a specific focus on women's rights and religious fundamentalisms can lend strength to feminist resistance at the national level and grant it more global visibility. Examples include networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Catholics for Choice/ Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, as well as the campaign *Contra los Fundamentalismos, lo Fundamental es la Gente*. In recent years, Nicaraguan feminists, attacked by the government through defamation trials, have received considerable regional and international solidarity which has offered them some protection. When Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party sought to amend the Constitution in ways that would undermine many of the gains made by Turkish women, Women for Women's Human Rights-New Ways was able to mobilize allies from the international Coalition on Sexual and Bodily Rights: "As we were coordinating the campaign for the Reform of the Turkish Penal Code from a Gender Perspective as WWHR between 2001-2004, it was incredibly important for us to know that we could rely on the solidarity of the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies in case the JDP brought any Islamic arguments against our demands. In such a case, I knew that we had the power to say that 'You claim to talk in the name of Islam, but see, so many organizations from Muslim countries —from the Middle East to South/Southeast Asia—are against you'. All this cross-country work is very empowering and [brings] common analysis, etc." (Pinar Ilkcaracan, Turkey).

Localized initiatives have also developed strong feminist analysis by consciously linking women from diverse religious backgrounds to highlight the similarities among religious fundamentalisms, as well as the dynamics between fundamentalisms and women's rights. For example, Secularism Is a Women's Issue (SIAWI) is based in France, and creates links between women in Europe and North Africa. Founded in the United Kingdom, "Women Against Fundamentalism helped bring together all our partial experience and so helped us focus on the role of the state, how the state's racist agenda is contributing to fundamentalism" (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom). In Nigeria, BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights conducted bridge-building exercises in which groups of Muslim and Christian women first engaged in a critique of their own community's laws and practices, and then came together to share analysis, which strengthened a feminist response to divisive national trends.

In order to highlight the commonalities between religions regarding women's social roles, feminists have often reached out to women with analysis of other religious communities. In 2002, La Ligue Démocratique pour les Droits de la Femme (LDDF, Democratic League for the Rights of Woman) in Morocco held a colloquium with speakers from Femmes contre les intégrismes (Women Against Fundamentalisms), as well as experts on the religious Right in the United States, and Jewish fundamentalisms. "In 2003, Womenlead staged a forum on key issues of sexuality, women's rights and religion. In the forum, a Catholic theologian, a female pastor of the Philippine Independent Church and a Muslim women's rights advocate made presentations on alternative accounts and interpretations challenging traditional religious teaching within each tradition" (Claire Angeline P. Luczon, Philippines).

## Broadening the base of women's rights movements

In some contexts, women's rights activists call for a broadening of the base of women's rights movements as a means of increasing the legitimacy and visibility of the feminist cause, as well as a way of providing greater safety in numbers. This concern with the need for a "mass base" for women's rights activism in the context of challenging fundamentalisms appears to be particularly relevant for activists in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa as well as Eastern Europe. "Perhaps no single barrier is as significant in hindering the effectiveness of the work of most women's rights NGOs as the lack of a strong grassroots."<sup>60</sup> Whereas in former socialist countries the absence of a mass base is largely due to the historic suppression of social activism, elsewhere this call for broadening women's rights movements' base may well be a response to the success that fundamentalists have had in these regions in portraying themselves as movements that speak for the people.

Some criticize the direction of feminist advocacy, which has often focused on the state and the legal or policy sphere, with less energy devoted to the grassroots.

**We're quite good at having the sound bites and being on the talk shows and the high-profile stuff. But the slow, quiet seeping occupation of spaces isn't happening by us but by the fundamentalists.**  
(Sara Hossain, Bangladesh)

This has not only ceded the community base to fundamentalists, but has also meant that feminist and diverse women's rights movements have failed to build on the potential that exists in terms of women's numerous daily acts of individual resistance. Citing the example of a woman who was not a conscious feminist but who defied fundamentalist state policies regarding dress codes, Iranian activist Homa Hoodfar comments, "I feel somehow our failure to connect those types of acts of resistance to ours. I am not sure how we can do it in our different political and cultural contexts but I see considerable potential there." Moreover, without the protection brought by a broader base, "women who are trying to speak out are very vulnerable, and the fundamentalists actively use violence to suppress, to make examples of people" (Mona Mehta, India).

Of course, the drive to broaden the base will raise the question of whether this requires the dilution of feminism's radical challenge to existing social structures if this means bringing in a wider range of political positions in order to attract broad support. However, there are numerous examples of feminist activism that have successfully reached out to the grassroots. La Ligue Démocratique pour les Droits de la Femme (LDDF, Democratic League for Women's Rights) in Morocco has been conducting "caravans" for almost a decade. Each year, busloads of LDDF volunteers with doctors, psychologists, environmentalists, and lawyers embark on a two-week tour of a specific region of Morocco, bringing basic services as well as donations of clothing and other essentials to socially isolated communities. The caravan even brings along children's entertainers to enable local women to take part. Although the caravans address a broad range of people's needs in the localities they visit, their priority agenda is to reach out to local women and provide them with information, legal and health support, and to challenge the hold that religious fundamentalism and regressive cultural practices have on their lives. The caravan has been documented in an award-winning film.<sup>61</sup> "We reach all types of people through our caravans, in the peripheries of Moroccan cities, small towns, the countryside and the mountainous regions; but also in European countries where there are large communities of Moroccan diaspora (France, Spain, Holland, Belgium)" (Democratic League for Women's Rights-LDDF, Morocco).

60 *Confronting Catholic Fundamentalisms in the Former Soviet Union: The Case of Lithuania*, AWID case study,

Virginija Aleksejune, Margarita Jankauskaite and Vilana Pilinkaite-Sotirovic, Centre for Equality Advancement

[http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

61 *Allez Yallah* by Jean-Pierre Thorn, Cargo Films, 2006, <http://allezyallah.com>

## Movement building across generations

Amongst women's rights movements, there is a growing understanding that rights violations have a specific impact on younger women. There is also greater recognition of the critical role that young feminists play in defending women's rights, and of the particular perspectives and organizing strategies that they contribute through their activism. Chapter 2 of this report discussed the centrality of young people to the operation and perpetuation of religious fundamentalisms. Youth, both women and men, play key roles in fundamentalist campaigns, and are a primary target for recruitment, influence and social control. Women's rights activists note that the success of fundamentalist forces in "capturing" youth has a limiting effect on the potential and sustainability of feminist mobilization for resistance. As one women's rights activist observes, "Young women have already been 'groomed' by these [fundamentalist] churches. As a women's movement we are not doing enough to reach out to them, to nurture them and build their understanding and leadership" (Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe, Uganda).

This indicates that in terms of feminist strategizing, a perspective that begins from the standpoints, analyses and experiences of different generations is thus crucial to the efforts of women's rights movements to challenge religious fundamentalisms.

While all women feel the threat of religious fundamentalisms, there is some generational diversity in perceptions of the rise and impact of these movements on women's rights. AWID's survey found a correlation between age and increased perception of the rise of fundamentalist movements: the greater the age of the respondent, the greater her perception of the threat. As compared to the average 51% of all survey respondents, 40% of women under 30 years agreed that religious fundamentalisms have "increased a lot globally" in the past 10 years; this age group is also more likely to respond "not sure" as to whether fundamentalisms have risen or not.

Some older women's rights activists believe this may be because many young women lack the comparative experience of life without religious fundamentalisms, and have not witnessed how societies have transformed under their control. In this view, young people coming of age in an environment already steeped in fundamentalist norms and politics, and with little exposure to more open interpretations of culture and religion, would tend to have a more normalized view of these movements.

While limited space for discussion as well as the taboo on critical analysis does indeed affect the extent to which young people in general are able to identify religious fundamentalisms, it is also clear that young women are not so accustomed to religious fundamentalist movements that these have, in their eyes, become a natural part of the political landscape. In much the same way as the feminist leaders of today came of age in patriarchal frameworks and yet were still able to recognize and challenge those structures, there are young women analyzing and responding to the impact of fundamentalisms on women's rights. However, many are working in isolation from established women's rights movements and organizations. AWID received over 250 applications for the 2007 Young Women's Institute on this specific theme, many from young women who are not formally linked to existing women's rights initiatives to combat religious fundamentalisms. At the Institute, participants concluded, "Young women often feel alone and isolated... They need to be actively engaged with the feminist movement in order to encourage avenues for inter-generational dialogue, and deal with issues that may or may not be distinct from those of women generally."

Those who participated in the Institute also highlighted the importance of engaging with young men on the issue, and insisted on the need to move beyond rhetorical inclusion to build organizations where young men actively participate in challenging religious fundamentalisms.



**Some of the initiatives led by young women or specifically focusing on young women include:**

- Aware Girls (Pakistan): <http://awaregirls.webs.com/> a membership organization open to 12-16 year olds which, among other activities promotes dialogue on the effects of Islamization;
- Jovens Feministas de Sao Paulo (Young Feminists of Sao Paulo, Brazil): a feminist collective that seeks to reflect the specificities and demands of young people;
- Sahiba Sisters (Tanzania): a research, training and advocacy group working in Muslim communities and which consciously focuses on youth;
- Sisters of Sumayya (Canada; name of network changed to protect identity): a group of young women who consciously seek to create a “third space” that is explicitly queer positive, anti-racist, pro-choice and non-judgemental;
- Shura Yabafazi (South Africa; meaning Consultation of Women): focusing on Muslim family laws; formed by a group of young women activists;
- Young women in the conflict-affected district of Panchmahal in Gujarat, India, have formed groups of women with diverse identities and are working together on common concerns such as violence against women and evolving interdependent livelihood support plans;
- “Youth groups have... recently been taking the initiative to coordinate interesting public actions. For example, they brought together several music groups in a public square to support the legalization of abortion” (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay).

A key task before women’s rights activists is not only to address the impact of fundamentalist forces on the rights of young women, but also to build awareness of how young feminist activism on the issue is shaped by intergenerational politics within broader women’s rights movements. Such analysis may inspire deeper questions about how feminists work to regenerate their own movements, and highlight the critical importance of a multigenerational focus for feminist organizing.

My friend always tells me we have to create clones of ourselves but younger versions so they can keep the movement going. But I tell her, no, we need to pass on our experience and our knowledge and let them take leadership of the movement in their own way and develop our concepts and come up with new visions.  
(Azza Soliman, Egypt)

Movement-building across generations is broader than healthy collaboration. It is a lens through which we can analyze the functioning of women’s rights movements and identify how movement building happens across generations. In feminist circles, and with specific regard to the issue of religious fundamentalisms, power is often viewed as an external, masculinized threat—an orientation that tends to obscure internal hierarchies. Younger activists often sense an imbalance of strength, power and resources, where limited space gives rise to struggles for dominance between younger and older women, and among younger women themselves. Where there appears to be little opportunity to share power, intergenerational tensions are likely to emerge: Who sets the agenda? Who has access to international spaces? How is knowledge exchanged and among whom? Which voices carry more weight? As one participant in the Young Women’s Institute remarks, “There is a need to move away from the adult-centrism that pervades feminist organizations so that young women feel they can actively make their voices heard.” As a women’s rights activist working as a professor points out, “Imposing my beliefs on young women will also put me in the same category as the fundamentalists. So I just open the door and give them choices” (YFA survey respondent, Philippines).

Often pigeonholed as the “fun” and “energetic” voices of the movement, some young feminists feel they are branded by a type of activism that carries less weight. Others feel that their actions against religious fundamentalisms must contend with a number of limiting factors that older, more established feminists may not encounter to the same degree, such as fear, internalized beliefs of inferiority, a lack of awareness of rights, and the need to organize secretly due to a lack of freedom of speech. In this context, one activist notes the need for “capacity-building among younger women. Create spaces where they can come together, where we can show them the reality and the need for them to break away from that bandwagon” (Dorothy Aken’Ova, Nigeria). These reflections highlight the need for support, capacity building and leadership opportunities for young women, as well as the imperative for multigenerational networks and solidarity.



Young women are willing to take action but they have to be fully equipped and have strong backup from groups who are already on their feet on these issues, nationally and internationally.  
(Nita Ephraim, Nigeria)

Feminist strategies must also respond to the appeal that fundamentalist movements hold for young people. Part of this process may involve infusing our movements and actions with more energy, spirit and a sense of community—in essence, making “what we do fun too—have more dancing, more celebration” (Ayesha Imam, Nigeria). However, there are dangers in essentializing generational differences in the absence of a broader conversation about power sharing and solidarity: “Younger activists should play a key role in devising strategies to work with and appeal to their peers, but their contribution should not be characterized as simply bringing in the fun, energetic and creative activism. Effective dialogue between generations recognizes that individuals of different ages have varied experiences, perspectives, analysis and ideas, and that building on this diversity strengthens our strategies” (Sanushka Mudaliar, Australia/China).

In the face of fundamentalist violence, the call for solidarity across generations acquires greater urgency. According to age disaggregated data from AWID’s survey, women’s rights activists between 30 and 44 years of age tend to report higher levels of religious fundamentalist violence than those who are under 30 or over 45 years old. This is perhaps a reflection of activists at the peak of their political engagement, who are more likely to face violent fundamentalist backlash in response to their work. One young woman remarks on the implications of these findings with regard to the strength and sustainability of feminist resistance:

We need to think about safety issues, because this means that women’s movements are centralized in women who are 30-40 years old, and who are alone in front of religious fundamentalisms. When we see that religious fundamentalisms have been around for decades and centuries, we need to think about a long-term strategy.  
(Perla Sofia Vázquez Díaz, Mexico)

Women’s rights activists whose work is focused on young women feel a particularly acute need for more of each type of resource and support in their work against religious fundamentalisms: more money and other resources; more support from human rights and development organizations, as well as from local and international women’s rights organizations; more capacity to communicate impacts; and more global efforts to find solutions to the issue. This may mean that a thematic focus on youth gives rise to a specific understanding of the impact of fundamentalist forces and a sense of urgency to address the issue, or that initiatives focusing on youth and religious fundamentalisms are particularly under-resourced. They also report a higher than average experience of all forms of fundamentalist violence, indicating that fundamentalists are determined to limit social activist support for and access to youth.

Building movements across generations requires deconstructing, from a feminist perspective, the myths and prejudices that accompany the social construction of age, as well as addressing the power differentials relating to age (including the greater value accorded to “youth” or to “experience” in different circumstances). In the context of strategizing regarding religious fundamentalisms, these biases affect feminist analysis of fundamentalisms, the role of the various activist generations, how women’s rights activists of different generations engage with each other, how experiences and perspectives are communicated, and how women of various generations conceive of the development, potential and sustainability of feminist counter-strategies.

## Young feminist strategies: A party for sinners

“As the saying goes: If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. My organization, Jovens Feministas de SP (Young Feminists of Sao Paolo) and the Associação Frida Kahlo (Frida Kahlo Association) concluded that it was interesting to create something within Christianity as a way to respond to fundamentalists. So we situated ourselves inside Christianity. If we were inside Christianity we would call ourselves sinners. If all human beings are sinners according to Christianity, then as women we are much more so, don’t you think? So we created the provocative slogan ‘We Are All Sinners’. We made t-shirts with a photo of the Pope as Hitler and we decided to hold a party the same day the Pope was going to name the first Brazilian saint. The advertisement for the party ran:

Sao Paulo is going to stop on May 11...

Not for the beatification of  
Brother Galvão

Not for the Pope’s visit!

But for the party celebrating the  
Divine Right to Sin!!

Come to the party: WE ARE ALL SINNERS!

Only the POPE isn’t invited!

“The party was a success. It was reported in newspapers and blogs and we were supported by many feminist groups, activists for sexual diversity and activists from the Black movement.

“After the first party, we had two more; one the same week as the Pride Parade and the other during the holiday for the Brazilian saint. Now our idea is to continue with the parties and also create a store with different clothes with images and ironic phrases to combat fundamentalists in a creative way. The party was interesting because not only activists participated, but also youth who were interested in a new way of expressing their outrage about fundamentalist society and its Christian ideals.

“So for us the most important thing is to create happy and ironic alternatives that can make young people think. Ways that are not just a response, but are located within Christian culture. When we called ourselves sinners we were accepting in a way that we are also part of Catholic culture, that we are inside this culture and that we’re not ‘other people’, we aren’t different. With ‘We Are All Sinners’ we are also trying to address the idea of Christian concepts. We are beginning to critique from the viewpoint of Christians, since the first sinner was a woman.” (Ana Adeve, Brazil)



## Strengthening Alliances beyond Women's Rights Movements

Some women's rights activists highlight the centrality of alliances with other "progressive", "alternative", "rights-based", or "liberal" social movements as a means of ensuring that feminist activism is not politically or socially isolated. The movements they mention in particular include human rights and development organizations, trades unions, and sex workers' unions, some of which already have a strong base in certain contexts. Some also highlight the need to work with men both in terms of alliances as well as a focus of advocacy.

AWID's research revealed several examples where women's rights movements have reached out to other social movements. But it also found that women's rights activists think human rights and development organizations should address the issue of religious fundamentalisms more actively. They are less certain as to whether more support from religious organizations would be effective.

Explaining their reasons for emphasizing the need to strengthen alliances beyond women's rights movements, activists are concerned that "differences among the more progressive people allow the space for [religious fundamentalist] groups to gain power" (Mona Mehta, India). With this in mind, one solution may be to "strategically create alliances with those who work on the spaces for democracy and liberal spaces" (Wanda Nowicka, Poland). Another suggestion is for women's rights activists to "talk to various sectors of the social movement, the progressive left or the environmental movement" and build and convey a clearer understanding of how globalization is shaping gender, productive and reproductive relationships, and "how religious fundamentalisms are cross cutting this new terrain in so many ways" (Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, Philippines). By pointing out fundamentalist silence on issues such as global militarization and structural inequalities, women's rights activists will also find a way to discuss the impact of religious fundamentalisms that has immediate resonance for groups working on these issues.

As with all alliances, maintaining the feminist position within the broader agenda remains a concern. In the context of the "war on terror" it can be particularly challenging "to convey to allies the point that some of these fundamentalist groups who are standing up to the US and other imperialist tendencies are also our opponents in other aspects" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan).

When considering which anti-fundamentalist initiatives to ally themselves with, feminists must always carefully examine the motives of those apparently challenging religious fundamentalisms, as they may simply reflect the work of one absolutist movement opposing another. For example, the Jihad Watch website may offer apparently useful resources for critiquing Muslim fundamentalisms, but as a program of the conservative David Horowitz Freedom Center in the United States, it clearly has its own very right-wing agenda.

Finally, this section also addresses the strategic challenges that arise when women's groups enter into tactical coalitions or shared campaigns with groups that they identify as religious fundamentalists. Their experiences of whether or not this has advanced their work varies considerably.

## Working with men

Women's rights activists from diverse contexts such as the Netherlands and the Philippines call for sensitizing and including men in the context of resisting religious fundamentalisms: "We need to educate men in order to allow for bigger numbers of women to come to our programs and events" (Azza Soliman, Egypt). Young feminists particularly note the need to engage young men and there are examples of youth organizations, such as the International Youth Coalition<sup>62</sup> which works to promote sexual and reproductive rights and which brings young women and men together in an agenda that is clearly anti-fundamentalist.

Women's rights activists provide examples of successful engagement with men in efforts to address the fundamentalist vision of gender relations. For example, in Honduras an international organization, Médicos del Mundo (Spain) runs a sexual and reproductive health project aimed at teenagers, women and men, which is designed to tackle patriarchal language and attitudes towards gender, including attitudes justified with reference to religion. It has been "well received by male participants: for many male participants, to be faced with sexual and reproductive health issues has been a revelation. Fundamentalism is based on people's ignorance [and the] men were not aware of their own rights nor of women's. For instance, [since the project, there have been] changes in the notion of women as *hembras* [a term loosely translated as "cows" or "bitches" i.e., a crude reference to female animals], being able to talk about these rights with other men in their communities, churches and families" (Eunice Alfaro and Jean-Philippe Nicot, Honduras).

There is little feminist research on the impact of religious fundamentalisms on men, including socially privileged men; this may be particularly important in the context of conflict linked to religious fundamentalisms and as regards the psychological impact of fundamentalisms.

One of the main fields of collaboration with men is in the area of LGBTQI rights, where there is a cross-over between women's rights activists, and men and transgenders—in a shared struggle for human rights and freedom that often confronts religious fundamentalisms. However, such alliances can have their challenges where the leadership of LGBT movements remains hierarchical and dominated by white, gay men who are middle-aged professionals.

## Alliances with rights-based social movements

Women's rights groups have often played a central role in building broad coalitions to challenge religious fundamentalisms that have included mainstream human rights groups and those working on LGBTQI issues and issues of peace, anti-militarization and national harmony. This shows a clear recognition by women's rights activists of the analytical link between women's human rights and other areas of rights and development.

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition<sup>63</sup> is an example of the cross-over between women's rights and human rights activism. An international coalition of 21 human rights and women's rights organizations, the WHRD IC works for the recognition and protection of women who are activists advocating for the realization of all human rights for all. One of the factors that has enabled such a broad coalition is the WHRD Coalition's inclusive definition of a "women's human rights defender". The campaign asserts that women fighting for human rights and particularly focusing on women's human rights face specific violations in the course of their work because of their sex and gender. In addition, the Coalition focuses on the situation of human rights activists defending women's rights and in particular calls attention to the violations experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other rights activists on grounds of their sex and gender identities. It emphasizes the need for safety and security strategies for those confronting fundamentalisms.

The involvement of feminists in broad coalitions against communalism and religious fundamentalisms seems to be particularly common in South Asia, where human rights work has historically been less gender segregated than in some other regions. For example the founders of the Anhad (Act Now for Harmony and Democracy)<sup>64</sup> anti-communalism platform in India included prominent feminists. AWAAZ South Asia Watch<sup>65</sup>, which has monitored the work of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh fundamentalist organizations in Britain and their transnational links, includes many women involved with the group Women Against Fundamentalism. As one member explains, "The politics of anti-fundamentalism has to be rooted in a politics of an egalitarian vision. Feminism de-linked from a wider politics dies. Feminism that's only concerned with fundamentalism also dies because it will not know how to position itself in relation to building movements, building strength" (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom).

62 [http://www.youthcoalition.org/site08/html/index.php?id\\_cat=2](http://www.youthcoalition.org/site08/html/index.php?id_cat=2)

63 <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/about.php>

64 <http://www.anhad.in.net/>

65 [http://www.tmg-uk.org/?page\\_id=279](http://www.tmg-uk.org/?page_id=279)



In Pakistan, the Women's Action Forum (WAF) was instrumental in creating the Joint Action Committee for People's Rights, which initially came together in opposition to the government's decision to include religion on the national identity cards and the introduction of the Sharia Bill; JAC now includes 85 NGOs. "WAF decided that to resist this imposition of Sharia you needed to broaden the alliance. We brought in Christian organizations, both Anglican and Catholic groups, and others who were more like political parties (labour parties, very small left-leaning groups) and human rights groups, various other civil society organizations that shared a general perspective" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan). The attempt to include religion on identity cards was thwarted.

Elsewhere, there has been considerable overlap between movements to support the legalization of abortion and movements advocating for sexual diversity and the legalization of civil unions. In Uruguay, "both are facing the power that the Catholic Church attempts to wield against the 'progressive' government, in spite of the fact that an indisputable majority of the population supports both bills." (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay)

The strategy of the women's movement in Brazil is important: making alliances so that the issue of women's rights is addressed and advocated for also by men, especially the medical establishment, the courts and in legislatures. Others are working strongly with the media, influencing public opinion and working with youth to stop the fundamentalists.  
(María José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil)

Alliances have enabled rights-based forces to share skills that have led to concrete successes against religious fundamentalists. In Mexico<sup>66</sup>, feminists built an alliance with women parliamentarians, HIV and AIDS groups, and a development NGO specializing in tracking the federal budget; they also worked with lawyers from specialized institutes from two of the largest public universities in the country. Together they used the Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Public Governmental Information, which entered into force in 2003, to investigate major funding received from the Federal Budget by Pro-Life (Pro-vida)'s Women's Support Centers. While the funds were originally allocated to support HIV and AIDS work, they were misappropriated to fund the Centers, which encourage women not to have abortions. The researchers had access to financial reports, copies of invoices and other written records which proved serious irregularities in the ways the funding was allocated to Pro-Life, revealed conflict of interest, embezzlement of funds and corruption in the use of the funding, and highlighted the fundamentalists' double standards in morality. The alliance had an effective strategy for broadening its reach and mobilized about 500 diverse civil society organizations. Combined with a strong media strategy, the alliance forced an official response: the Pro-Life leader was eventually prosecuted under criminal and administrative charges. As a result, Pro-Life stopped receiving Federal funding, had to pay a major fine and was ordered to return the funds; its national leader was disqualified for 15 years, and the organization suffered a major loss to its political and moral capital.

AWID's Stakeholders Meeting concluded that there are also useful allies beyond those visibly engaged in social movements. "We need to make alliances with scientific communities. They might not be feminist or part of political organizing but because of their scientific work, are actually supportive of women's movements" (Working Group, Stakeholders Meeting). One example of broader collaboration came in 2007 in Pakistan when students from a fundamentalist-dominated *madrassa* attacked music and video shops: the Joint Action Committee, which included feminists, "went to the affected groups, e.g., the traders, video shops, the musicians... everyone in the entertainment industry is affected by what the fundamentalists are doing because it's all *haram* [forbidden] now and they have been attacked. So we went to them for first time in our lives and they came on board. You had very strange partners at the demonstration on the Al-Hafsa *madrassa*, saying 'no to fundamentalism', 'no to *mullah-raj*' [rule by the clerics]" (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan).

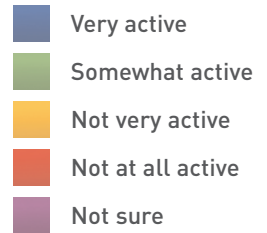
66 Helena Hofbauer Bamori, *Caso Provida: los alcances del acceso a la información versus los límites de la rendición de cuentas*, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas de la UNAM, [www.bibliojuridica.org/libros/5/2456/10.pdf](http://www.bibliojuridica.org/libros/5/2456/10.pdf)

## The role of human rights and development organizations

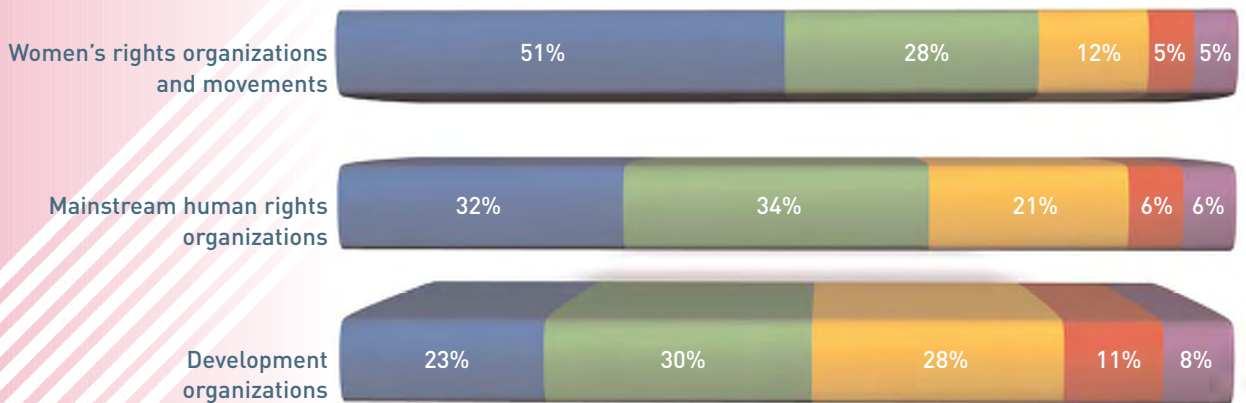
Clearly there is a need to strengthen alliances between women's rights movements and human rights and development organizations in efforts to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms, building on the global acknowledgement that women's rights are human rights. Moreover, the broad impact of fundamentalisms on all areas of human rights and development means that a wide range of social movements have a stake in reducing fundamentalist power and influence.

Eight out of 10 women's rights activists who responded to our survey believe human rights organizations should make activities to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms their top priority or a high priority. One activist working in a human rights organization wants "change within my organization itself to see religious fundamentalism as an obstruction to women's rights and human rights in general" (survey respondent, Australia). Another working in a major international development charity feels her work to challenge fundamentalisms would be strengthened if there was "buy-in from my organization, which to date has been resistant even though I've shared [information] which examines the role of 'The Church' as it relates to women's position in society and the heightened risk of VAW and HIV and AIDS" (survey respondent, United States).

At present however, the women's rights activists surveyed regard human rights organizations as less likely to be active in the struggle against fundamentalisms, and development organizations significantly less likely. Whereas 51% of women's rights activists surveyed regard women's rights organizations as being "very active", only 32% view human rights organizations as being as active, with less than a quarter seeing development organizations as "very active" (see Table 3 below). Just 12% of women's rights activists working at the international level view development organizations as very actively challenging religious fundamentalisms. Those working at the local and national levels particularly call for increased support from human rights and development organizations. "[We need] more boldness by development organizations to confront religious fundamentalism" (survey respondent, Nigeria).



**Table 3**  
 How active have the following been in trying to challenge religious fundamentalisms in your work?



There are various explanations for the differences in the perceived levels of active resistance to religious fundamentalisms. For some this includes human rights organizations' "exclusive focus on state crimes, rather than crimes committed by non-state actors" (Marieme Hélie-Lucas, Algeria/France). As another activist explains, "Many human rights organizations are working on religious fundamentalisms, but their perspective on gender issues is almost nil" (Trupti Shah, India). In Egypt, "the divide between women's rights organizations and human rights organizations is clear. They do not work together and choose to work only in their separate spheres. Women's rights have to be viewed by the community as a part and parcel of human rights and not as a 'western' ideology or invention" (Azza Soliman, Egypt).

Women's rights activists currently face the challenge of understanding how best to ensure a comprehensive global approach to religious fundamentalisms. This partly rests on strengthening the capacity of women's rights activists to communicate the impact of fundamentalisms on goals that are key to human rights and development organizations. "You have to persuade potential allies, including those in the human rights movements, that religious fundamentalisms affect many groups other than women: for example religious minorities, outside [and] within the group" (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom). Another example is to show how religious fundamentalism limits overall national political development by discouraging critical thinking: "We can't have a sustainable democracy if people aren't allowed to think" (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria). An additional approach could also involve highlighting human rights and development organizations' own policies that commit them to ending all forms of discrimination, especially those promoted by religious fundamentalisms such as discrimination against women, minorities and LGBTQI people.

At times it is not straightforward to identify whether an organization is or is not "working on fundamentalisms" because the organization may address an impact of religious fundamentalisms without working on fundamentalisms as a specific theme. For example, many development and human rights organizations campaign against violence against women, and some of their campaigning may link with aspects of fundamentalisms even if religious fundamentalisms are not an organizational focus. The challenge for feminists (both those who work

within human rights and development organizations as well as those who seek to ally with such organizations and encourage them to address the human rights impact of fundamentalisms) is then to work out whether women's human rights would be better served by urging an organization to establish a specific initiative to address religious fundamentalisms, or urging them to "mainstream" work on fundamentalisms within their other human rights/development projects.

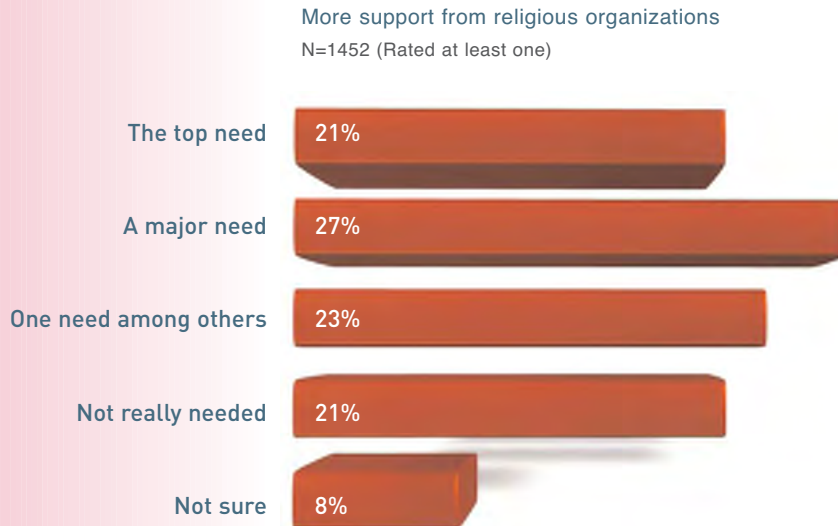
This question is particularly acute in the case of women human rights defenders, who are frequently the target of attack by fundamentalist non-state actors. Overall, human rights law and practice, which have focused on the state, have yet to develop an adequate and effective response on the question of non-state actors. This has been compounded by an inadequate gender focus on the part of mainstream human rights organizations. As a result, the human rights system has lagged behind in the defence of women's human rights defenders when their rights are violated by religious fundamentalists.

## The question of more support from religious organizations

While there is broad recognition of the need for greater support from human rights and development organizations in the work to resist religious fundamentalisms, women's rights activists are more ambivalent about the need for support from religious organizations. Equal numbers think it is the "top need" and "not really needed".

There is a notable regional diversity of views on the issue. Women's rights activists focusing on Latin American and the Caribbean are significantly less likely to see further support from religious organizations as a priority; significantly less likely even as compared to those focusing on other regions where Catholic and other Christian fundamentalisms are strong, such as North America, Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of subject area, activists working on HIV and AIDS (but not those more generally working on sexual and reproductive rights) are by far the most likely to regard support from religious organizations as the top priority. Similarly, women's rights activists working in funding agencies are significantly more likely to see this as the top need—twice as likely as those working in women's organizations.

**Table 4**  
What resources/support do you need in your work to be able to more effectively challenge religious fundamentalisms?



## Working with religious authorities

The Adolescent Health and Information Project ([www.ahipnig.org](http://www.ahipnig.org)) is active in 12 Northern states in Nigeria. It has so far trained 450 *Juma'at Imams* (leaders of Friday prayers in mosques) in five-day workshops that focus "on contemporary health and rights issues and reminds religious leaders of their crucial role in promoting safe motherhood and child spacing; better promoting women's rights; preventing HIV/AIDS; and reducing the stigma surrounding people living with HIV/AIDS."

"The strategy we have been using is to look at those that have *some* liberal understanding of what a healthy woman should be, of what the rights of women in the family should be. We make them become facilitators. We look for those that have worked with international agencies like Pathfinder, UNFPA, that have been trained and taken to countries like Egypt and Bangladesh, countries that have really fantastic reproductive health programs.

"[We] generate discussion among the imams and at the end of the day they come out with understandings about what the Quran has provided for women and what their rights are to health, education. That is a starting point for us.

"For topics like violence against women, we ask the imams to bring all the traditions of the Prophet, how he interacted with his wife, because nowhere it says the Prophet ever beat his wife. And we present that at a big meeting for discussion. Of course that person must be knowledgeable about contemporary issues, the incidence of abuse, violence and of course have the knowledge of the Quran. It's always a very rich discussion." (Mairo Bello, Nigeria)

## Experiences of alliances and shared activities with religious fundamentalists

At least 1 in 10 women's rights activists report that they or their organizations have participated in an alliance or a joint campaign that included religious fundamentalists. Women's rights activists focusing on sub-Saharan Africa appear more likely than others, and significantly more likely than those focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean, to have engaged in an alliance or campaign that included religious fundamentalists.

The trend mainly appears to involve women's rights activists who work outside of women's rights organizations, but covers a wide range of locally topical issues. For some, this engagement is a matter of principle. As one activist notes, "We regularly interact with people of various religious beliefs and political ideals" (survey respondent, Sudan). For others, the engagement with fundamentalists is less by choice than force of circumstances. "It would be hard in the US to campaign in the South and not have fundamentalists involved" (survey respondent, United States). Elsewhere, women's rights activists may have found themselves working alongside religious fundamentalists in situations where all major national social-political forces have mobilized, such as conflict zone aid and relief in Lebanon; peace or pro-democracy initiatives in Bosnia, East Timor, Egypt, Kenya, the Philippines, Togo and Uganda. In the Cook Islands, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, the Philippines, Somalia, and the United States, other common areas of collaboration include violence against women, domestic violence or FGM.

Alliances sometimes enable feminists to capitalize on shifts by religious fundamentalists away from positions of intolerance and absolutism. In Nicaragua, for example, some people "live a deep contradiction between their socio-political convictions and struggles on the one hand and their religious beliefs on the other, and follow the dictates of the conservative churches they attend. An example is the conflict experienced by those dealing with health issues in Movimiento Comunal-1 (Community Movement-1): they are in favour of therapeutic abortion due to their personal experiences in the field but at the same time feel anxiety and confusion due to religious reasons" (Enriqueta Ramírez de la Mota, Nicaragua). "There are a lot of religious conservatives who are breaking away from the Christian Right and who are concerned about poverty, the environment, ending torture, even reproductive health (though we may disagree specifically on abortion). Progressives need to engage them and build new alliances" (Jennifer Butler, United States).

Whether or not their ideological positions are flexible, fundamentalist responses to local realities have opened up the possibility of tactical collaboration on the ground, for instance in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Africa. In Swaziland, the Swazi Action Group Against Abuse ([www.swagaa.org.sz](http://www.swagaa.org.sz)) has started to engage clergy in Pentecostal and charismatic churches, providing them with training on violence against women and HIV and AIDS, including basic counselling skills and accurate information regarding prevention and treatment. "These fundamentalist groups have not changed their minds about what is legitimate sexuality. But everyone has, in order to serve the immediate crisis, agreed to do what needs to be done, and one would assume that, in the long term, this would have an effect on belief. There are hundreds of historical moments that have enabled people to get out of their mindset" (Frances Kissling, United States). In Nigeria, some churches and Muslim groups "will not perform a marriage solemnization without an HIV test. That is positive in the context of Nigeria where there's a practice, 'don't ask too many questions about the groom'" (Asma'u Joda, Nigeria).

Just as analysis of religious fundamentalist campaigning needs to be closely examined for its actual benefit to women's rights and human rights, the prospect of shared activities with fundamentalists also requires further research. Where such alliances do produce certain positive outcomes for women's rights, the potential longer-term costs of granting religious fundamentalists social and political legitimacy by working with them must also be calculated. At the same time, the question of entering coalitions and alliances returns women's rights activists to the complex issue of definitions and analyzing fundamentalist strategies: what is the basis for labelling an actor or their agenda as "fundamentalist", and how do we analyze apparently nuanced positions?



## Influencing Public Policy and Recapturing Public Spaces

As a social movement, women's rights organizations consciously seek to recapture the public spaces being denied to women by religious fundamentalists. This often includes strategies such as entering politics, using the legal system, and working to influence the state bureaucracy.

In Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, one-third quotas for women in local councils have opened up spaces for women to enter the political arena and counteract regressive cultural and religious practices at the very local level. In these contexts, women's engagement in the public sphere is in itself often a direct challenge to fundamentalisms.

In Mali, one women's rights organization used the legal system to confront a fundamentalist by filing "a complaint against an imam who married an 11-year-old girl, using the Quran to justify this. He was sentenced to imprisonment and a fine, as there is no religious justification for not obeying the law of the land (against marriage of minors)" (Yaba Tamboura, Mali). When the leaders of a Christian fundamentalist community persecuted a member who left the community, she countered by filing a lawsuit in federal court<sup>67</sup> against eight of the organizations and their leaders. "In September of 1998, a jury found in my favour and awarded me in excess of one million dollars, deciding that these organizations had conspired to restrain trade in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. While churches may establish their own rules and policies for members, the jury decided, they may not conspire together to destroy their members' businesses, reputations or lives" (Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, United States). It can be particularly important to challenge fundamentalists in the courts in those contexts, such as Western Europe and North America, where they have attempted to argue that abuses of women's rights are matters of religious belief or culture, and are not for the courts to adjudicate on.

Before the "war on terror" overtook British government policy, women's groups, especially those working with minority women, had made considerable progress in public policy on violence against women, and outweighed the voices of patriarchal "community leaders". Through a constant process of engaging with government policy-makers and bureaucrats, police, immigration officials, academics and legal professionals, they secured a policy commitment to "mature multiculturalism", meaning that while diversity was to be acknowledged, culture or religion were not to be accepted as excusing violence.

Some of the most successful efforts to resist the narrowing of women's options by religious fundamentalist campaigning, or to expand women's options in ways that challenge religious fundamentalisms, have been single-issue national campaigns around public policy that have involved multiple strategies. These are just a few examples (additional examples appear in case studies generated by AWID).<sup>68</sup>

In the context of the threatened introduction of "Sharia courts" in Canada (2003-2005), the Canadian Council of Muslim Women campaigned against religious arbitration in family matters, which was in effect allowed in Ontario under the province's Arbitration Act. "We were able to use the laws of Canada, which had women's equality embedded in them. We made partnerships with other people; we tried to make partnerships with Muslim groups but it was not very successful. We decided that our campaign was going to be on women's equality rights and on religious women's equality; it didn't have to do with Muslims anymore. So we combined with all the women's organizations. We kept saying 'This is not about Muslims, don't pity us, don't do it because you are feeling sorry for Muslim women. If it affects our rights to equality then it will affect everybody else's'" (Alia Hogben, Canada). In addition, reaching out to the public through the media and open meetings was a vital element. International feminist solidarity ensured support from Women Living Under Muslim Laws, which enabled an Iranian feminist Muslim scholar to go on a speaking tour in Canada. The campaign was successful in securing a change in policy in the province of Ontario, where religious arbitration is no longer possible in family matters.<sup>69</sup>

67 See Seelhoff v. Calvary Chapel, et al., U.S. Dist. Ct., W. Dist. WA, Case No. 3:97-cv-05383-FDB.

68 [http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case\\_Studies](http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-Initiatives/Resisting-and-Challenging-Religious-Fundamentalisms/CF-Case_Studies)

69 [http://www.ccmw.com/activities/act\\_no\\_religious\\_arb.html](http://www.ccmw.com/activities/act_no_religious_arb.html)

In 2007, the Mexico City Parliament decided to decriminalize abortion, but faced very strong opposition from anti-abortion advocacy groups that were supported by the federal government and that challenged the decision as unconstitutional before the Supreme Court. Feminists made alliances and built bridges with organizations working in favour of democracy and secularism and against authoritarianism, resulting in a very active response from progressive intellectuals in mainstream and alternative media debates. They articulated the defence of abortion as a key issue related to affirming the secular nature of the state and defending democracy in Mexico. After the case failed in the Supreme Court and first trimester abortion was confirmed as decriminalized in Mexico City, religious fundamentalists counter attacked. Since early 2007, many of Mexico's 32 states have introduced legal reforms that make it even more difficult for women to access the few exceptions to anti-abortion provisions and have begun increasingly prosecuting women who interrupt their pregnancies. Evidently, influencing public policy as a means to counter religious fundamentalisms requires unceasing commitment and energy.

A women's rights activist from Nigeria describes the multi-faceted campaign conducted by women's and human rights groups to prevent anti-homosexual legislation that was supported by religious fundamentalists. "In 2006, the Nigerian federal government sought to build its political constituency ahead of national elections by presenting a Bill to 'prohibit gay marriage' (but also restricting all advocacy of LGBTQI human rights) even though this was previously hardly a major public issue. The Church groups mobilized and even though they're supposed to love all people, they consider same-sex relationships as sinful. There was a massive campaign and mobilization of religious groups to preach against homosexuals and to salute the President for presenting a bill prohibiting gay marriage in Nigeria. The opposition was so blind that it did not see other forms of human rights violations that were contained in the Bill. If it wasn't for the strong NGO community, the few who could come out openly and protest against that law, it would have been passed into law because there was such mobilization. They resisted by educating the media on the full contents of the bill; by mobilizing other NGOs, mainstream HR NGOs and giving them a breakdown of the bill; by educating people in the House of Assembly on the full extent the law would go in infringing people's fundamental human rights; by making presentations during the public hearing discrediting the bill; providing material to policy-makers..." (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria).<sup>70</sup>

Feminist reclaiming of public spaces also goes beyond policy and includes asserting a physical presence in the public space that is denied by fundamentalists in many contexts. Women have found many ways to resist their exclusion. An example is the "Women and Sport Campaign which has been launched by a lot of young women in Iran. This is not only to allow women to play sports but also go to the stadium, a space traditionally reserved for men. They want to open up and de-politicize public spaces" (Homa Hoodfar, Canada/Iran).

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/03/22/letter-nigerian-president-obasanjo-regarding-bill-criminalize-gay-rights>

## Individual Women's Strategies of Resistance and Challenge

Religious fundamentalisms are being challenged and resisted at the individual level by women—and men—in countless ways that are less visible nationally and globally but which are also significant. “These are ordinary people who never thought of themselves as political or women’s rights activists but felt that their very basic rights were being taken away... and they find the initiative to fight it in the street” (Homa Hoodfar, Canada/Iran). Nearly half of women’s rights activists (46%) report that religious fundamentalists frequently attack people who do not match their expected norms of behaviour. This in itself indicates there are many people out there who resist by refusing to adhere to fundamentalist norms. Since many of these norms affect their daily lives, resistance can be very personalized.

In contexts such as Iran, where collective action may experience considerable state repression, individual strategies come to the fore.

In Iran, they stop women if they are walking on the street wearing even a little bit of lipstick. In the mid-1990s individual women counter-strategized by getting tattoo makeup done: lip-liners, eyebrows and eyeliners. So, on the street when the moral police ask them to wipe off the makeup, the women say ‘Clean it yourself!’ (and most of the moral police are male who are not expected to touch women). On one occasion, I said [to my women friends], ‘I don’t think you look more beautiful like that; actually it is very strong and it does not suit you’. One of them responded saying, ‘That’s not the point, the point is to get them angry’, and others agreed with her, adding their own emphasis indicating that they cannot be subjugated by these laws, at least not without resistance.

[My friend tells another story]: “There were people gathered in front of a busy road and I went to see what was

happening. There was a young Revolutionary Guard who had stopped a woman for her ‘un-Islamic appearance’; she was about 40 years old, had her toenails painted and was wearing slippers. He tells her, ‘Why are you out like this?’ And the woman just grasped his hands, and she said, ‘I so admire you, you see my toes like this and you find it attractive and exciting! I do all these things for my husband and he does not even notice. Come home with me and let my husband hear you!’ Other women were laughing their heads off and the Revolutionary Guard, who did not seem to be more than 20 years old and probably from a very religious and traditional background had gone red and embarrassed, trying to release his hand and run away.” (Homa Hoodfar, Canada/Iran)

Elsewhere, young women involved as Change Makers in Oxfam’s *We Can!* anti-VAW campaign have been taking up the issue of domestic violence, particularly focusing on their father as a person to influence and question, and using patriarchal traditions and whatever space does exist to their benefit to challenge religiously-justified norms that support VAW. “It’s partly they are using what is a traditional thing: ‘fathers have a soft-spot for their daughters’. Boys would find it more difficult to challenge. We have quite a few young women in Bangladesh who are in *burqas* but who are very actively engaging with the Campaign. That’s been an interesting learning” (Mona Mehta, India).

There are also examples of personal solidarity among individuals who resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms through private actions such as leaving fundamentalist sects. One woman who left a fundamentalist Christian community after several years of total immersion has found common ground with former fundamentalist women throughout the world, whether Muslim, Amish, fundamentalist Mormons or members of other extremist fundamentalist cults (Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, United States).



## Factors Complicating Resistance to Religious Fundamentalisms

AWID's research sought to understand what women's rights activists see as critical to a more effective challenge to religious fundamentalisms. This chapter has outlined their numerous suggestions for strengthening feminist counter-strategizing, resistance and challenge. However, activists also identified certain social and political realities that obstruct effective resistance. These lie beyond the factors that contribute to the rise in the phenomenon and cannot simply be resolved by strengthening women's

analysis and movements; they are matters that are essentially beyond the reach and control of women's rights movements or that women's rights movements cannot tackle alone. The implications for feminist strategizing are not only that broad alliances with all rights-based forces such as human rights and development organizations are needed, but also that feminist advocacy regarding religious fundamentalisms needs to consistently highlight these broader contextual factors.

### The powerless lack legitimacy to challenge patriarchy and religion

The weight of patriarchy narrows spaces for questioning and challenge from those with lesser power, which places women's rights activists at an automatic and double disadvantage when challenging religious fundamentalisms. Religious women who support human rights have to struggle to have their voices heard even by progressive male scholars, while in secular spheres of activism, feminists find human rights and development organizations at times pay scant attention to the gendered impact of religious fundamentalisms.

The ageism inherent in patriarchy also silences the voices of young people on issues such as sexuality and religion. According to a respondent to the Young Feminist Activist survey, the particular problems facing young women's resistance to religious fundamentalisms are that "we face a society which believes that young people have no legitimacy to speak on these topics" (YFA survey respondent, Honduras).

### The difficulties of taking on religious fundamentalist structures

Another complicating factor broadly relates to the structure of religious institutions: over-centralized as well as decentralized institutional structures present difficulties for responses from feminist movements that lack comparable resourcing.

On the one hand, the monolithic structure of the Catholic Church makes it extremely difficult for less powerful institutions and voices to be heard both within the Church as well as in contexts where the Church has a powerful social and political role. On the other hand, the decentralized structure of the Christian Evangelical movement, the absence of any internal regulatory authority, and the sheer number of fundamentalist Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers and churches, for example across Africa, make it a tremendously complicated set of discourses and actors to tackle and hold to account. To some extent the same may be said of Hindu fundamentalism which, at least at the level of institutions, has no central "authority" that feminists and others can hold to account. Meanwhile, Islam falls somewhere in between these ends of the spectrum. While Sunnis have no theologically required central structure or mediating authority between the deity and believers, Shia schools tend to have a more centralized, hierarchical structure; all sects have their own centre of scholarship that is often taken as a final authority on matters of interpretation. In this context, opposing monolithic visions and holding religious leaders to account is possible but very challenging.

## The state's handling of religious fundamentalisms causes divisions

Additionally, the state's handling of the confrontation with religious fundamentalisms can divide human rights and women's rights activists and complicate responses to fundamentalisms. In some contexts, as in Algeria in the 1990s and Pakistan in the 2000s, where the military confronted religious fundamentalisms for its own purposes, rights activists, including women's movements, have become divided over whether or not to support the military. In Turkey, some feminists found themselves at odds with the country's fundamentalists, its military and certain secularists: "The army threatened the ruling conservative (Islamist) JDP with military intervention and that triggered a huge reaction in society, rather pushed them to support the JDP even if they were at odds with its policies. The majority of the Turkish people don't want any military rule. While on the one hand, the so-called secularists are becoming more and more anti-democratic in the name of protecting secularism, on the other hand the religious Right, neoliberal Justice and Development Party has become for many liberals or human rights activists almost a symbol of democracy against the army. And we, as feminists, are against all: the army, militarization, the religious Right, conservatism, neoliberalism" (Pinar Ilkcaracan, Turkey). Such situations not only call for great understanding and respect within global feminist movements for the contextual analysis of local women's groups (which may not even speak with one voice), it also calls for great global solidarity since, in such situations, women's rights activists can find themselves isolated in their struggle against fundamentalisms. "Historically, it has been the secularists who have supported women's rights, but because of this conflict over democracy in Turkey, the feminist movement is becoming more and more isolated here" (Pinar Ilkcaracan, Turkey).

## Racism and religious prejudice as factors complicating resistance

There is a tendency in people's daily lives, in political debate and state policy to treat cultures (including religions) as homogenous and to ignore internal diversities. This facilitates discriminatory presumptions such as "all Catholics are against xyz" or "all Muslims promote abc". Equally, ethnicity, race and religion are often knotted together, which means that in some contexts racism and discrimination against certain religious groups go hand-in-hand. According to women's rights activists in some regions, the existence of prejudice against a particular religious community, and the conflating of ethnicity and religion both complicate the process of developing feminist strategies to challenge religious fundamentalisms.

Women's rights activists provide diverse examples of how entire religious communities have been labelled and discriminated against. The prejudiced discourses of the "war on terror" dehumanized Muslims and allowed the justification of large-scale international military interventions as well as extraordinary measures such as the torture and detention without trial of suspected Muslim fundamentalists at Guantanamo Bay. While the "war on terror" is an extreme example, it is not uncommon in LGBT circles to hear essentialized comments about Muslims (or indeed Catholics) as a whole, rather than critiques of the specifically fundamentalist homophobic interpretations within these religions. Those on the political Left are just as capable of labeling as the Right. "[In Israel] unfortunately, very often it's this secular Left which is very racist and dealing with religious fundamentalism in a very racist, classist way" (Nira Yuval-Davis, UK/Israel). Indeed, when AWID's survey asked respondents to name a fundamentalist actor that influenced their work, some answers seemed to label an entire religion; answers included "Christians in Nigeria", "Presbyterians", "Muslim (immigrant students from Morocco-Turkey)" and "Catholics".



Such prejudice helps feed religious fundamentalisms and complicates feminist responses in a variety of ways. Firstly, prejudice and racism reinforce rigid community boundaries. Thus anyone, including feminists, who presents an internal critique is more easily dismissed as a “traitor” to the community; anyone who is a victim of prejudice, such as religious fundamentalists, is more easily regarded as a “hero”, or at least someone who is deserving of sympathy and who has a legitimate cause; and all concepts associated with the oppressor are delegitimized. This report has already discussed how Muslim fundamentalists use their victimization in the “war on terror” to mobilize against concepts such as human rights and women’s rights that are claimed to be “western”. Similarly, during the Yugoslav Wars, extreme ethno-religious violence by all parties made it deeply challenging, even life-threatening, for feminists to critique their own communities.

Secondly, any criticism of fundamentalism within a particular community (whether by insiders or outsiders) can feed into racist stereotyping of the community by right-wing groups. For instance, feminist critiques of the impact of Muslim fundamentalisms on women were frequently used by United States officials in the run-up to the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Yet these critiques have been conveniently forgotten now that it is seen as expedient to begin dialoguing with “moderate Taliban”. In the United Kingdom, the extreme Right British National Party, whose activists have been involved in violent demonstrations outside mosques, refer to the status of Muslim women as an explanation for why they see Islam in general as “wicked and evil”.

Some women’s rights activists are concerned about how their work impacts on racism and prejudice. Half of AWID’s survey respondents feel that their efforts to challenge religious fundamentalisms in certain communities contribute to prejudice or racism against that religious or ethnic community. For those women’s rights activists focusing on the Middle East, North Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, Central Asia and South Asia, between 21% and 25% feel this is “*greatly* increasing prejudice or racism”. Elsewhere, this is significantly less of an issue. Regional differences are matched by a difference in terms of religion; women’s rights advocates affected by Hindu and Muslim fundamentalisms are significantly more likely to report a great increase in prejudice and racism due to efforts to combat fundamentalisms.

Thirdly, the essentialization that lies behind racism and religious prejudice also produces political correctness and cultural relativism, even among human rights activists and those who see themselves as part of the political Left, which again silences open debate about religious fundamentalisms. “Because people are afraid to be racist then they accept this multi-faithism which fundamentalists then utilize” (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom). A priority need in challenging fundamentalisms is “a space to be able to discuss: it is currently absolutely not politically correct. Politicians go along with this for the religious vote. We need a space to question the influence” (survey respondent, no country specified).

Fourthly, the state itself is guilty of racism, which undermines the concept of citizenship and boosts the power of absolutist, male “community leaders”. Because of its racialized approach, the state has “failed to see people who live in communities as citizens. This doesn’t help to construct accountability mechanisms within communities” (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom). This lack of accountability has enabled fundamentalists to claim leadership of entire communities. Racist presumptions about what a “real fundamentalist” looks and behaves like (due to their migrant origins) also partly explain why Muslim fundamentalists who appear “modern” (i.e., “western”) in their dress and education, are legitimated as “moderates” by European governments.

Feminists do suggest ways of addressing these challenges that require the development of sophisticated responses:

[We] need a critical anti-racist, anti-oppression framework to combat fundamentalisms; one that does not promote atheism or Islamophobia or racism and one that does not look at the global South or racialized women in the North as “victims” in need of rescuing by “white western feminists”.  
(Survey respondent, Canada/Pakistan)



Conclusion:

## Towards Strengthened Feminist Resistance to Religious Fundamentalisms

This report was designed to advance our collective knowledge and meet a need expressed by women's rights activists for greater information and analysis on religious fundamentalist strategies and on feminist strategies in response, especially comparing diversities and identifying commonalities across regions and religions. We hope this report will make a useful contribution to strengthening both local and transnational resistance and challenge to religious fundamentalisms.

This concluding chapter very briefly summarizes the learnings that AWID's Challenging Fundamentalisms Initiative and its research has identified as regards (i) the factors contributing to the rise in religious fundamentalisms over the past 10 years; (ii) religious fundamentalist strategizing; and (iii) feminist strategies of resistance—each represented by a separate chapter in this report.

Towards strengthened feminist responses, this conclusion will then identify some priority challenges that remain in the area of research and analysis regarding religious fundamentalisms. It will end by highlighting some of the conclusions we draw from the experiences and analysis shared by the women's rights activists involved in the research.

# Understanding Religious Fundamentalist Strategies and Feminist Responses

Feminist strategizing to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms takes place against the background of factors that facilitate the rise in fundamentalisms. As discussed in Chapter 1, these factors can be categorized as economic (poverty and inequality; the failure of state institutions and services; neoliberalism and global capital); political (authoritarianism and the absence of political alternatives; the state's use of religion; the promotion of religious fundamentalisms by political forces; the absence of rights-based religious alternatives); and social (a possible link between religion and religious fundamentalisms; the rise in religiosity and religion's promise of certainty; the global rise in identity politics).

Women's rights activists see these factors as diverse but also shared across regions and religions; each providing religious fundamentalist actors a local entry point for increasing their power and influence.

As illustrated by the fact that the rise in religious fundamentalisms can be a backlash to progress in women's rights and sexual rights, factors often have interconnected economic, political and social dimensions. Beyond being just a backlash, religious fundamentalisms are also self-perpetuating and pro-active, with their own reasons for being.

Chapter 2 discussed how religious fundamentalist movements strategize to build their movements and influence politics and society. This collective analysis by women's rights activists reveals these movements to be flexible—able to respond to contextual differences and changing realities. Yet there are very noticeable similarities in strategies across regions and religions. These include: promoting an absolutist and discriminatory vision of the family, gender roles and sexuality; promoting intolerance of people from other religions, sects, ethnicities, and political perspectives; manipulating the language of hope, fear and contemporary discourses but also responding to opportunities presented by communications technologies and people's need for services; a focus on mobilizing youth and women in their movement-building; transnational networking; a tendency to use physical and psychological violence to build their influence; and a determination to monopolize public spaces and influence public policy at national and international levels, including through the use of tactical alliances with civil society.

As discussed in Chapter 3, women's rights activists provide numerous examples of successful feminist strategies that resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms both at the collective and individual levels. These include: promoting and protecting pluralism, and challenging absolutism; promoting secularism and citizenship; reclaiming a feminist vision and building knowledge of religion; dialoguing and debating with religious conservatives and fundamentalists; influencing public policy and public spaces through mainstream politics, using the legal system and the state bureaucracy. For many of these, they find new and old media and the power of speech particularly effective vehicles.

Women's rights activists also provide many more suggestions for additional strategies and ways to strengthen feminist responses. These include sharpening analysis of fundamentalist campaigning in order to unmask its real content and uncover the long-term structural impact on women's rights and human rights; improving how women's rights activists communicate the impact of religious fundamentalisms; reclaiming a feminist vision of the family and taking back the initiative in setting the public agenda; and ways to strengthen feminist movement-building through broadening the base of feminist movements, intergenerational approaches, and strengthening alliances, especially working in collaboration with development and human rights groups.

Although treated separately in this report, the issues each chapter addresses are closely connected. Religious fundamentalist movements clearly respond to contextual factors that provide an opening for increasing their power and influence, while these contextual factors also shape feminist responses.

## Remaining Challenges in Feminist Research and Analysis

AWID's Challenging Fundamentalisms Initiative is one of a number of initiatives, primarily led by feminists and some more recent than others, that have specifically addressed the issue of religious fundamentalisms.

In addition to many at the national level, at the transnational level some of these include: networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), Catholics for a Free Choice/Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, and Secularism Is a Women's Issue (SIAWI); as well as campaigns such as Contra los Fundamentalismos lo Fundamental es la Gente (the People are Fundamental against Fundamentalisms, Articulación Feminista Marcosur). Examples of other transnational initiatives and networks which find themselves particularly confronting religious fundamentalisms include the Coalition on Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, the Women's Learning Partnership, Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts; the September 28 Campaign for the Decriminalization of Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean; and Astra—Central and Eastern Europe Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

Recently there have also been a number of international action-research projects that have focused on the issue. These include: the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)/Heinrich Böll Foundation research program on Religion, Politics and Gender Equality; and the HIVOS program Promoting Pluralism.

Each of these is making a distinct and valuable contribution to the field, yet at the international and at the local level, there remain a number of areas where women's rights activists feel that efforts to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms would be strengthened by further research and analysis, further dialogue and, as a consequence, greater sharing of information and experiences as well.

### The challenge of definitions and terms

As has been AWID's experience throughout this Initiative, this report raised several issues relating to terminologies and definitions.

AWID's research has found a great deal of common ground about how women's rights activists characterize religious fundamentalisms.<sup>71</sup> Having a shared understanding of what religious fundamentalisms are is an important step towards sharing experiences and analysis of the phenomenon amongst women's rights activists as well as collectively unmasking fundamentalist agendas to the wider world. However, there remain differences in

understandings among feminists that have important implications for analysis of the phenomenon and consequently for the development of feminist strategies. For instance, precise figures are difficult to assess but it is clear there is a considerable number of women's rights activists who label *all* religious actors as 'fundamentalist' rather than distinguishing between religion and religious fundamentalisms. Additionally, some define fundamentalism as "literalism" but does this adequately account for the selectivity of fundamentalist interpretations and re-invention of "tradition" which have been identified as effective fundamentalist strategies? Does it enable analysis of those fundamentalists who may not insist on literal interpretations of religious texts but are nonetheless absolutist?

71 See: AWID, *Shared Insights: Women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms*, <http://www.awid.org/eng/About-AWID/AWID-News/Shared-Insights-Women-s-rights-activists-define-religious-fundamentalisms>

Observations from two women's rights activists working in similar contexts appear to offer contradictory perspectives on the utility of labelling. For some, labelling aids counter-strategizing: "I am able to name what I see and by naming it am able to address it or lobby. Until it was named, I had not been able to study it the way I have" (Hope Chigudu, Zimbabwe/Uganda). On the other hand, some feel that the term "religious fundamentalist" is potentially divisive and not helpful in encouraging people to reflect critically on their beliefs: "I think it just makes the people who join these religious sects [Christian fundamentalist churches] more defensive or feel persecuted. I would prefer the term 'Charismatic' " (Winnie Sseruma, Uganda/United Kingdom). Does this hint at a different strategic advantage in labelling a phenomenon or a movement and labelling individuals?

Related to these questions is the fact that the nature of the relationship between conservative and fundamentalist forces is not always easy to characterize. This is especially because neither conservatives, nor fundamentalists nor the context are homogenous and unchanging. Nevertheless, whether it is a relationship of convenience or conviction or both, it would seem that religious fundamentalisms tend to flourish more where conservative governments are in power. Moreover, shared positions on some issues may lead conservatives to see only the commonalities they have with fundamentalists rather than the dissimilarities. As one women's rights activist observes, "Because there's so much hostility still towards gay and lesbian people [within the Muslim community], a lot of Muslims actually think that 'Because we don't accept them [LGBT people], maybe we are more like the orthodox.' ...The extremists have played on that" (Parvin Ali, United Kingdom). Understanding the relationship between conservatism and fundamentalism, and if and how it may be possible to characterize their distinctions and commonalities, is therefore essential to effective feminist responses.

At the same time, terms such as "conservative", "right-wing", "traditional" and their apparent opposites, "progressive" or "liberal", "left-wing" and "modern" are increasingly inadequate for describing specific contemporary social, economic and political actors and capturing the realities shaping feminist strategizing. This is a world where the Christian Right-dominated Republican Party in the United States can have openly gay men in senior policy positions; the presumption that political figures hold consistently right-wing or consistently left-wing views on all social and economic issues today faces the challenge of apparently contradictory positions held by one person. This is particularly true when the positions of the actor that is being labelled change over time. Equally inadequate are labels such as "secular" and "religious". Two examples from Latin America illustrate these challenges. Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) has historically has been categorized as a "social democratic" party (and continues to be part of the Socialist International); it was responsible for decades of authoritarian government and has implemented neoliberal economic policies, but (at least until recently when PRI politicians openly voted in favour of banning access to abortion in many state-level legislatures) it has been largely supportive of sexual and reproductive rights both nationally and internationally. Classifying the PRI as a "progressive" or "right-wing" party is evidently not an appropriate or helpful characterization. Daniel Ortega was cast as a revolutionary during the 1970s Sandinista struggle against the Nicaraguan dictator and faced intervention by the United States under Republican President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Yet in recent years, as President of Nicaragua and leader of the Sandinista Party, he has supported the Catholic Church's position and the introduction of laws in Nicaragua that make access to legal abortion impossible, has publicly allied with the Catholic Church on other matters of public policy, and is openly persecuting civil society organizations and international donors, as well as feminists and women's rights activists through various actions at the state and non-state levels.

## For further feminist research and analysis

Areas for further feminist research and analysis in the context of challenging religious fundamentalisms include:

- **Regional variations in the significance of addressing causes:** There are significant regional variations in how important women's rights activists regard global efforts to address the factors behind the rise in religious fundamentalisms. These variations need to be further analysed towards the development of concerted global feminist responses to what is, after all, a global phenomenon. For example, 64% of activists focusing on the Middle East and North Africa, and 52% focusing on Central and Eastern Europe regard solutions to the factors behind rising fundamentalisms as a top need in their work, whereas this view is shared by only 27% of women's rights activists focusing on Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Are these variations because of diverse assessments about the *likelihood* that effective solutions to these factors can ever be found? What does this variation imply for the priorities (regional and global) in feminist strategizing?
- **Examining contexts where fundamentalisms are weak:** In some contexts, religious fundamentalisms have failed to take root strongly or have weakened in recent years; feminist strategizing may learn from examining how and why this occurred.
- **Deepen understandings of the local factors to which fundamentalist strategies and campaigns respond:** For example, in the experience of women's rights advocates who responded to AWID's survey and who focus on South Asia as compared to other regions, campaigning against LGBTQI rights and violence towards LGBTQI persons is not such a focus for religious fundamentalists in their region. Similarly, atheists are reported as less likely to be attacked in sub-Saharan Africa than in other regions. What does this tell us about how fundamentalisms operate in these regions and how this may shape feminist responses? Does this suggest that religious fundamentalists in these regions are somehow more tolerant respectively towards LGBTQI people and atheists; or that such identities are not publicly visible in these regions; or that fundamentalists judge that these issues would not mobilize popular support in these contexts?
- **Building knowledge about inter-linkages between fundamentalist actors:** It is important to build and share greater information about religious fundamentalist actors' patronage and networking connections, especially their links with front organizations such as charities, as well as with political organizations that take apparently more "moderate" positions. What is the connection, for example, between mainstream political groups that are under some religious fundamentalist influence with armed extremists, militias and vigilante groups?
- **Deepening analysis of the relationships between religious fundamentalisms and other discriminatory political ideologies:** such as patriarchy, nationalism, racism, identity politics, and neoliberalism.
- **Documenting impact on Women's Human Rights Defenders:** Consistent documentation is needed of attacks against Women Human Rights Defenders by religious fundamentalist actors, particularly non-state actors. Yet this is not a simple task, as "women under the worst threat quite often do not document—because they are doing so many other things" (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom).
- **Deepening feminist analysis of the impact of religious fundamentalisms:** is needed to understand certain paradoxes in the way fundamentalisms affect women's lives, including their livelihoods and psychological well-being.
- **Effort is needed to unpack the appeal these movements hold for marginalized groups:** and explain how religious fundamentalists succeed in "turning people, who are amongst the poorest people, into fighters against their own interests" (Chetan Bhatt, United Kingdom). This also means recognizing the existence of women fundamentalists and developing effective analysis to address the phenomenon, beyond dismissing this as "false consciousness".
- **Address regional gaps in knowledge and analysis:** There are particular regional gaps in feminist knowledge of religious fundamentalist strategizing. For example, in AWID's survey women's rights activists focusing on the sub-Saharan Africa region were significantly more likely than women's rights activists in other regions to regard the need for more information on fundamentalist strategies as a top need in their work to challenge the phenomenon. Similarly, women's rights activists from Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand were the most likely to indicate they were "not sure" about the content of religious fundamentalist campaigning. Does this reflect a research gap, or the complexity of fundamentalisms in their context, or something else?



## Some Conclusions

There are several conclusions we can draw from this in-depth study and this section highlights just some that we feel are most important towards strengthened feminist resistance and challenge to religious fundamentalisms.

Developing a single, commonly agreed definition of “religious fundamentalisms” would likely prove impossible given the diverse manifestations of the phenomenon. However, working towards greater clarity and a shared understanding of the types of agendas and positions that we characterize as “fundamentalist” is essential. Presently there is the dual danger that some feminists throw the net too wide, whereas others bring too few actors into the scope of their analysis; this also negatively impacts the scope for feminists effectively to raise concerns with human rights and development organizations about protection of women’s human rights in the context of fundamentalisms. Instead, greater clarity and a shared understanding among feminists will ensure, first, that they accurately identify potential allies in their strategizing regarding fundamentalisms, and second they can more effectively unmask the range of actors that pursue a fundamentalist agenda.

The complexities and constant shifts that are characteristic of the current historical moment mean that the old categories and existing terminologies are inadequate for capturing this reality and do not help feminists convey what is happening on the ground. A tendency to resort to what is familiar in terms of language can severely limit feminist analysis and consequently our strategizing. A first step towards resolving this will be to acknowledge the present challenges and limitations of the existing terminology. These complexities also suggest that it may be more effective to label *agendas* rather than actors as “fundamentalist”; it may at times be strategic to “name and shame” a fundamentalist leadership or organization, but the advantages of labelling followers is far less certain.

Religious fundamentalist strategizing is sophisticated, responsive to the context and fluid over time. Feminist analysis and strategizing therefore needs to be equally if not more flexible, responsive and sophisticated—in each of the strategic areas discussed in this report. The co-optation by some fundamentalists of terms such as “justice”, “oppression”, and “human rights” means that it is inadequate for feminists simply to call for “more justice” or to presume that calls for the “upholding of human rights” will bring a sufficient response from states or the human rights system. The call for protecting and promoting a secular state similarly needs to be elaborated in order to have meaning for a wider range of women’s rights activists in diverse contexts.

Feminists also need to acknowledge and adjust their strategies to take into account the challenges external to women’s rights movements, such as racism and the global economic environment, that impact on religious fundamentalisms.

At the same time, across regions and religions there are over-arching similarities in religious fundamentalist strategizing. One approach which may help enrich feminist strategizing in this context is to expand the sharing of analysis and strategies across regions and religions. Apart from building and deepening a common understanding of religious fundamentalisms, it will also indicate the points where shared, transnational feminist responses may be most effective.

One such point is the area of analyzing and conveying the impact of religious fundamentalisms on women’s human rights, human rights more broadly, and the international human rights system itself. Sharing of information about impact across regions and religions will help develop an analysis of impact that is holistic, focused on structural discrimination and long-term social change, and that does not lose sight of the bigger picture even while taking account of certain paradoxes in relation to women’s empowerment.



With a clear yet comprehensive analysis of the strategies and consequent impact of religious fundamentalisms available, feminists will also be better positioned to convey their concerns regarding women's human rights and the negative impact of fundamentalisms on all aspects of human rights and social progress to other social actors, notably human rights and development organizations. Finding the intersections in the work of all rights-based movements must be the way forward.

When asked what is needed to counter religious fundamentalisms, first and foremost women's rights activists want greater global efforts to find effective solutions to the factors that give rise to fundamentalisms. This includes addressing major global issues such as poverty, neoliberalism and globalization, authoritarianism, militarism and violence and the lack of pluralism, as well as the cynical manipulation of religion by the state and non-state actors. The wide-ranging nature of these factors means that feminist responses must include strengthening linkages with other rights-based social actors and movements to develop concerted actions, as well as advocacy that highlights the responsibility of all relevant global and national actors to address the factors behind the rise in religious fundamentalisms.



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