

by Jenny Morgan

As this preface was written, there were reports that some members of the US-sponsored interim administration in Iraq, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), support a proposal to replace Iraq's secular Personal Status Law - in force since 1959, and giving women divorce, child custody and inheritance rights, amongst others - with confessional law. In the case of Iraq's majority Muslim population, this would mean *shari'a* law. Even if *shari'a* were to be interpreted liberally, Iraq's women would nonetheless cease to hold the same individual rights as citizens as their brothers, husbands, fathers and adult sons.

This development is shocking evidence for two of the major contentions driving this publication - that women's rights, women's control over their own sexuality and their own freedom of movement, are major areas of irritation and concern for the religious right-wing; and that political forces of all colours - including the secular left, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini describes in **The Lesson from Iran** - readily sacrifice women's rights when it appears strategically useful.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws organised a conference in London from November 11 to 14, 2002, on the theme, 'Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms'. This publication includes many of the papers presented at the conference. Its aim is to draw together experiences and information that will assist women's and other anti-fundamentalist organisations to prevent the religious right and ethnic nationalist movements transforming their societies in ways that are harmful and destructive (principally, but not only, to women).

Much of the discussion at the conference revolved around definitions of 'fundamentalism'. Is the present US administration, for instance, 'fundamentalist' in any respect? Elfriede Harth's paper, **America's Mission of Saving the World from Satan**, carefully details the systematic entry into Republican party politics of the religious right, in the shape of televangelist Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. There was agreement at the conference that although since 9-11, as Gabeba Baderoon's insightful paper says, 'religion' for the West has become synonymous with Islam, the major threat from religious fundamentalism is embodied in the US Christian right, with its huge financial resources and access to federal power. In **Jewish Fundamentalisms and Women**, Nira Yuval-Davis reports how American Christians are funding Jewish religious seminaries in the Palestinian territories Israel illegally occupies. These Christian Zionists believe the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will only happen once all Jews have congregated in Palestine: for them, as for the Jewish settlers they support, the indigenous Palestinian population is so much chaff in the wind.

This is one of the themes of this book - that religious and ethnic fundamentalisms kill. And women, unfortunately, are sometimes amongst the killers. In Chayanika Shah's account of the terrible slaughter in Gujarat in March 2002, when Hindu mobs attacked their Muslim neighbours, one of the most chilling aspects is the fact that Hindu women watched avidly while Muslim women were raped and killed. Similarly, Urusaro Karekezi from Rwanda described to the conference how in 1994, some women politicians and journalists were amongst the most vigorous inciters to violence of the Hutu militias.

There are contradictions in the aims of what are, by any definition, fundamentalist movements. Not all Islamists, for instance, are opposed to the participation of women in the political process. Nahda Younis Shehada told the conference that *Hamas*, the main Palestinian Islamist organisation, reserves 30% of the seats in its ruling bodies for women. (Nonetheless, during the first Palestinian *Intifada*, *Hamas* ran a huge pro-*hijab* campaign, with wall posters accusing women who didn't wear head-scarves of being collaborators with the Israelis; Shehada reports 'tens of women' were murdered.)

The conference divided over the degree to which it's possible to resist fundamentalisms from within a faith. Elfriede Harth belongs to the Catholics for a Free Choice network, which campaigns against the Vatican's conservative stranglehold on sexuality and women's right to determine their fertility. Zainah Anwar and Nora Murat are active in Sisters in Islam in Malaysia, a country with, as Anwar says, 'the most advanced Personal Law in the Muslim world', under attack from Islamist forces. By stimulating debate through letters in the press and petitions to government and legislators, Sisters in Islam aims to give Muslims information with which to challenge conservative interpretations of the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*, and shame the government into standing by its commitment to women's rights. The Nigerian organisation, BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, campaigns across Africa for women and NGOs to be better informed about the progressive tradition in Islam. There was much discussion at the conference about whether and how to enable Muslim women who are feminists to see that their feminism isn't a betrayal of their religion, and how to prise notions of morality out of the grip of the fundamentalists.

However, for Louisa Ait-Hamou, from Algeria, all talk of working from within a religious faith was already too much of a concession. She dismissed the notion of a 'Muslim feminist'. Her argument was that anti-fundamentalist movements need to stand up clearly for the rights of the individual. For Urusaro Karekezi from Rwanda, Catholic churches in the country are 'genocide sites', because of the Church's participation in the 1994 slaughter. What emerged from the discussion is that different situations respond to different initiatives. Nahda Younis Shehada argued that the important thing is to make space in the public domain for arguments in favour of women's rights. Shehada herself spent nearly two years in the late 1990s chairing the Palestinian Model Parliament for Family Law Reform, which galvanised what remained of the secular Palestinian liberation movement post-Oslo: 'The same nationalists who were apologetic *vis-à-vis* the Islamists during the first *Intifada* became supporters of women's rights'.

As several of the papers in this publication discuss, some analysts consider neo-liberalism a form of fundamentalism. But the conference offered a more persuasive insight: fundamentalisms appeal to people precisely because they mediate - or appear to mediate - some of the destructive economic and societal effects of neo-liberal policies. Most 'fundamentalist' organisations engage in 'charitable' work in some form or another, as Shah shows to riveting effect in her account of the Hindu right's establishment of schools in the

so-called tribal areas in India, and their appeal to a historical identity different from that of the West - even if this ethnic or religious identity is a fake, as Shah also shows - gives solace to people.

The papers collected in this publication are from very different sources. Some are by academics; some by activists in the field. Amie Bojang Sissoho is a radio journalist using private radio stations in The Gambia to campaign against Female Genital Mutilation (while state radio allows the State House Imam to inveigh against women's rights every Friday live). Stasa Zajovic works with Women in Black in the former Yugoslavia. After wars that killed thousands of people in the name of ethnic or religious 'cleansing', her paper documents a further ironic (and tragic) development: the implicit alliance between supporters of the Serb Orthodox Church and conservative Muslim clerics - former enemies - to close down sex education projects and establish a puritanical, patriarchal, religiously-based social order in the fragments of what was for nearly fifty years a secular state.

Anisa de Jong campaigns for the right of sexual minorities - lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) people - to be included in all struggles for human and women's rights against the authoritarianism of religious fundamentalism. Of all the papers in this book, hers is probably the most challenging. If certain organisations won't take part in demonstrations against Muslim, Hindu, or Christian fundamentalist movements because you have gay and lesbian groups on the same march, what do you do? If campaigners against fundamentalisms do, from time to time, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini argued for at the conference, have to make 'expedient alliances', does this mean the visibility of sexual minorities will always and inevitably be sacrificed?

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, 'fundamentalisms' of every hue are gaining strength. One participant proposed speaking of contemporary totalitarian movements rather than fundamentalism. Women Living Under Muslim Laws has been documenting both the impact of these movements, and resistance to them, for the past 20 years. We hope this publication will be a contribution to the urgent elaboration of strategies of resistance.