

Keeping the Faith: Overcoming Religious Fundamentalisms

The impulse to strictly conform to sacred texts and moral codes dates back a long time.¹ To comprehend why and how such impulses arise, discussions on religious fundamentalisms and their historical contexts are necessary. More pragmatically, a fuller understanding of the dynamics of religious fundamentalisms—especially as they affect women's rights—helps identify and create potential spaces where strategic advocacies could be pursued.

Origins. The term “fundamentalism” came into existence in the US in the 1920s to describe conservative Protestants who supported the principles expounded in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. These pamphlets attacked the modernist theories of biblical criticism and reasserted the authority of the Bible. Their central message was that the Bible is the inerrant word of God; it should be read literally; and believers should lead their lives according to its moral precepts.

But this belief does not apply to religious fundamentalist movements that emerged in other parts of the world throughout the 20th century—Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Islam. Muslim theologians, for instance, rely for guidance and inspiration not only on the *Qur'an*, but also on the Traditions of the Prophet, and on transmitted theological and legal learning.² Among Hindus, the “fundamentalism” associated with the Sangh Parivar, a network of organisations that includes the Bharatiya Janata Party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, is more a nationalist than a religious movement. It does not have a specific sacred text to which conformity can be demanded and it does not attach importance to adhering to religious rules. For these groups, what matters most is *Hindutva* or Hindu-ness, their guiding philosophy, which is a symbol of national identity and calls for Indian unity.³

Religious scholars have long opposed the term “fundamentalism”⁴ not only because of its Christian origins but also because it connotes retrogression, backwardness, and ignorance and is automatically associated with Islam. “Fundamentalism” came into widespread usage during the Iranian revolution in 1978 when the media used it to evoke



Source: Adapted from Sandra Torrijos/Isis International Manila

the anti-modernism that Ayatollah Khomeini represented. Since then, it has been increasingly used to refer to “Islamic fundamentalism” and has become synonymous with terrorism, anti-Americanism and fanaticism.

Religious philosophers, however, have defended the use of this term. Sadik J. Al-Azm of Syria reviewed the doctrines of the new Islamic movements and found that they consisted of going back to the fundamentals. He concluded that the term “fundamentalist” in reference to these Islamic movements is “adequate, accurate, and correct.” Hasan Hanafi

of Egypt reached the same conclusion: “It is difficult to find a more appropriate term than the one recently used in the West, ‘fundamentalism,’ to cover the meaning of what we name Islamic awakening or revival.”²

To this day, the debates around the term “fundamentalism” still continue. Religious revivalism, nativism, integrism, among others, have not gained wide acceptance as alternatives. Although religious scholars continue to find the term “fundamentalism” unsatisfactory, they continue to use it as long as it is properly defined and qualified.

Understanding religious fundamentalisms. Various reasons have been attributed to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and its apparent predominance today. The 1995 *Fundamentalism Project* compared Protestant Christian, Catholic Christian, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Confucian and Shinto fundamentalisms. The authors grouped together significant resemblances shared by these religious movements and justified using the plural term “fundamentalisms” to underscore their diversity. They viewed fundamentalisms primarily as the militant rejection of secular modernity. Further, they contended that fundamentalisms are totalitarian as they seek to remake all aspects of society and government on religious principles.⁵

Similarly, other scholars view religious fundamentalisms as reactions against rational, secular modernisation, which is now taken to mean as Westernisation. Wherever a westernised secular state has established itself, a religious protest movement rises up

alongside it in conscious rejection.⁶ Such fundamentalisms reflect “a profound fear of annihilation,” and whether they are Jewish, Christian or Muslim, religious fundamentalists are convinced that secular society wants to exterminate them. Jewish fundamentalism, for instance, emerged after the Nazi Holocaust and was reinforced after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Iranian Shi’ite fundamentalism was a result of the aggressive secularism of Shah Muhammad Reza.⁷

Other thinkers point out that all discussions of fundamentalisms ought to take place within the context of the historical process of secularisation. This process has resulted in the separation of religion and state with the consequent removal of religious-based laws and prohibitions. Religious institutions and ideas have ceased to exert a dominant force in societies and individuals have moved away from them. Religious fundamentalisms reject and seek to reverse this process.⁸

Others argue, however, that to refer to religious fundamentalisms simply as “revolts against modernity” is reductive. It tends to downplay or ignore nationalism, the assertion of identity, as well as the social grievances that often fuel such movements.⁹ Sikh fundamentalism, for instance, became a nationalistic separatist movement. Although it stressed the need for conformity to a sacred text, the *Adi Granth*, and advocated for the creation of a Sikh state governed according to sacred law, its fundamentalist concerns were subordinated to nationalistic ones.¹⁰

Some observed traits. Religious fundamentalists tend to impose their worldviews and apply religious law to all aspects of life. Their religious ideology then becomes a political ideology embodied in a movement, which may gain mass support or even political power. Thus, they issue rules based on their religious ideology; they select aspects of modernity to advance their causes; they respond to their adherents’ physical needs to keep them within the fold; and they may come from the same source but have different streams.

Selectivity. Religious fundamentalists tend to identify selective aspects of modernity as threats to their identity. While they decry the “evils” of mass media, for instance, they use media technology to promote their cause. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini used the audiocassette to distribute his sermons throughout the country. These became the vehicle of opposition to the shah’s repressive regime. In the UK, Muslim fundamentalists distributed DVDs and books that condemned democracy and called for *jihad*; presented women as “intellectually congenitally deficient and in need of beating when they transgressed Islamic dress codes”; and recommended that “homosexuals... be burnt, stoned or thrown from mountains or tall buildings.”¹¹ In the US, the evangelicals have flooded the airwaves since 1944. Its organisation, the National Religious Broadcasters, represents “1,600 broadcasters with billions of dollars in media holdings and staggering political clout.”¹²

Religious fundamentalists, likewise, select certain aspects of their religious traditions while choosing to ignore others. When reading and interpreting the *Qur’an*, Muslims take it as a whole, understand the reasons and circumstances behind each passage, and are careful not to choose verses that may serve one’s interests

and arguments. But Muslim fundamentalists do otherwise. Those who justify polygamy, for instance, do not cite this verse in full: “If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one” (Al Nisa’, 4:3). They also ignore that a subsequent verse states: “You are never able to be fair and just between women even if that were your ardent desire” (Al Nisa’, 4:129).¹³ These two verses together have now become a compelling justification for monogamy.

The same is true with Christian fundamentalists. The Bible is a source of inspiration and guidance for Christians but fundamentalists concentrate on aggressive biblical texts that, for instance, justify war: “there is a time to kill” (Ecclesiastes 3:3) and “If you do not have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one” (Luke 22:36/37). This is unfortunate because like all religions, Christianity’s core value is to “love God above all things and one’s neighbor as oneself” (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31).

Influencing policies. Religious fundamentalisms are associated with conservative, authoritarian politics. But they also thrive in democracies and are usually engaged in shaping policies. The Religious Right, for instance, pressured Ronald Reagan to approve the Global Gag Rule (GGR) in 1984. This policy prohibited foreign NGOs receiving US funds, either directly or as sub-recipients through domestic NGOs, from performing or actively promoting abortions “as a method of family planning” regardless of whether the money used for those purposes was from the US government or other sources.¹⁴ Former president George Bush’s restoration and expansion of the GGR in 2001 was a way to repay his ‘pro-life’ constituency composed of conservative Catholics, Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists.

Efforts applied by religious fundamentalists on political leaders are not limited to the US. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva secured the support of Pentecostals and other evangelicals in the October 2002 elections. For the October 2006 elections, Lula’s Workers Party forged an alliance with the Brazilian Republican Party which one of Brazil’s largest Pentecostal churches helped organise. The Pentecostals defeated attempts to liberalise homosexuality laws but failed to block laws liberalising abortion.¹⁵

Service providers. Religious fundamentalists respond to their adherents’ needs to strengthen their mass base and support. Hamas, for example, combines Palestinian nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism. Its founding charter commits the group to the destruction of Israel, the replacement of the Palestinian Authority with an Islamist state on the West Bank and Gaza, and to raising “the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine.” Long before it won the elections, Hamas has devoted much of its estimated \$70-million annual budget to an extensive social services network. It funds schools, orphanages, mosques, healthcare clinics, soup kitchens and sports leagues. Hamas’s strategy to build political support through its social programs sealed the loyalty of many Palestinian women.¹⁶

Different streams. Within Christian fundamentalism, there are similarities and differences. Evangelicals and fundamentalists believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, i.e., it is without error or fault in all its teachings. They believe that the fundamental message of

Christianity is that one is saved only through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Evangelicals, however, believe that anybody who repents can be saved, while the fundamentalists believe that God intended to save only a small number of souls. Moreover, evangelicals are more pragmatic and willing to work with other groups than the fundamentalists.¹⁷

Recently, the evangelical lobby in the US, together with some feminist groups, succeeded in making human trafficking one of the priorities of US policy. At present, evangelicals are active in other parts of the world alleviating poverty and preventing diseases. Rick Warren, pastor of an evangelical mega-church in Southern California, has mobilised his 22,000 congregants to help combat HIV/AIDS worldwide and to form relationships with churches in Rwanda.

At the same time, evangelicals are against abortion, contraception and gay marriages. Many among them believe in women's subordination.

Creating spaces for change. Religious fundamentalisms may connote a sense of the absolute where accommodation is impossible and spaces for change are non-existent. This is not, however, the case. Opportunities to protect and advance women's rights may yet present themselves.

First, global events are happening that may be the beginning of processes leading to incremental changes. One significant event is the UN conference on interfaith dialogue initiated by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah in November 2008. World leaders called on followers of the major faiths to turn away from fundamentalisms and seek reconciliation. They also declared their commitment to respect freedom of belief and expression. The second event is the inauguration of US president Barack Obama. He is reversing controversial Bush administration executive orders on reproductive rights, stem cell research, climate change, among others. During his first week as president, Obama lifted the Global Gag Rule.

Second, political reforms are taking place in countries. In the Wahhabi state of Qatar, Sheik Hamad launched the country's first popular elections in 1999 where men and women were allowed to vote and run for office. His reforms encouraged women to go to school; now, women make up about 70% of the country's university students.¹⁸ Similarly, reforms in Saudi Arabia have created opportunities, even if limited, for women to participate in public life. In 2004, the first-ever syndicate for journalists was established and two female journalists were appointed to its nine-member board. And in 2005, the Saudi National Agency for Engineers admitted women as candidates and voters in its board elections.¹⁹ In the wider Arab world, a recent study shows that Islamist women are increasingly involved in political processes that could spawn a full-fledged Islamist movement for women's rights. The study argues that women's participation in Islamist movements reflects a growing trend toward women's activism in the Arab world, though quite different from Western norms.²⁰ While these may be small steps, they have set significant precedents in women's participation in the public sphere that cannot be reversed.

Third, within established religions, there are several groups ceaselessly working against fundamentalisms. Aside from the featured spotlights in this bulletin issue, there is also the Indonesian Society for Pesantren²¹ and Community Development, which uses Islamic jurisprudence to encourage religious schools to promote women's reproductive health and family planning. Sakyadhita works to create a communications network for Buddhist women throughout the world, to educate women as teachers of Buddhadharma, and to help establish a community of ordained nuns.²² The See Change Campaign seeks to change the status of the Holy See as a Non-member State Permanent Observer at the UN.²²

In the light of these encouraging global events, all these efforts, collectively and individually, are extremely crucial in resisting religious fundamentalists' efforts to curtail women's rights. To seize these opportunities, groups—secular and religious—should make a conscious, deliberate effort to study—and reclaim—religious texts that have been appropriated by fundamentalists for their own ends. Further, they should analyse fundamentalist groups, their histories and contexts, and understand the economic, political, and social conditions that breed and sustain them. They should forge partnerships with others locally, regionally, and globally; engage with an open mind in inter-faith or intercultural dialogues; and discuss concrete, pragmatic ways on how people could live together, justly and compassionately, despite religious differences.

Despite what religious fundamentalisms may represent, there is a space where changes can happen. There is hope. And we all should keep the faith.

Endnotes

- 1 Henry Munson, Professor of Anthropology, Maine University writes: "Fundamentalism is a type of militantly conservative religious movement characterised by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred texts and a moral code ostensibly based on them. It existed long before the word did. One could speak of the Maccabean revolt of the second century B.C.E. as having a fundamentalist impulse insofar as it insisted on strict conformity to the Torah and Jewish religious law." www.britannica.com/blog/2006/11/wbats-really-behind-fundamentalism
- 2 www.meforum.org/article/541
- 3 www.bjp.org/history/htvintro-mm-1.htm
- 4 Editors' Note: Women's rights activists and scholars have also long debated this term. See Correa, S.; Pitesky, R.; Parker, R. *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights*. London and New York: Routledge.
- 5 Marty, Martin E. and Appleby, R. Scott, (Eds.), *The Fundamentalism Project*, 5 vols.: *Fundamentalisms Observed* (1991), *Fundamentalisms and Society* (1993), *Fundamentalisms and the State* (1993), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms* (1994) and *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (1995).
- 6 www.newstatesman.com/200109240011
- 7 www.unaoc.org/repository/armstrong_interview.pdf
- 8 www.globalpolicy.org/cato/fundamentalism/0501def.htm
- 9 www.britannica.com/blog/2006/11/wbats-really-behind-fundamentalism
- 10 www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1191955/fundamentalism/252663/Christian-fundamentalism-in-the-United-States#topanel-sectionId=tc252663%2CtocId=tc252663
- 11 www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/wahhabism-a-deadly-scripture-398516.html
- 12 <http://gnarhires.org/issues/2005/3/blaks-evangelist.asp>
- 13 *Sisters in Islam*. [n.d.] *Islam and Polygamy*. www.epayasia.com.my/sistersinislam/products.aspx?prod_id=789d8d0a-2a2-4dd-93dd-b17d5e53516&emer_id=0611ff34-0512-4a98-9fa4-44fb3a9a2519
- 14 Crimm, Nina J. 2007. "The Global Gag Rule: Undermining national interests by doing unto foreign women and NGOs what cannot be done at home." *St. John's University School of Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 07-0085*, Cornell International Law Journal, Vol. 40, No. 587. <http://srni.com/abstract=1020702>
- 15 <http://pewforum.org/surveys/pentecostal/latinamerica>
- 16 www.cfr.org/publication/8968/
- 17 www.foreignaffairs.org/20060901faessay85504/walter-russell-meal/gad-s-country.html
- 18 www.foreignaffairs.org/20040501faessay83308/usob-coleman/the-payoff-from-women-s-rights.html
- 19 www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?id=views&id=18119&prog=zfp&proj=zme
- 20 www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cm22_women_in_islam_final1.pdf
- 21 A pesantren is a Muslim school in Indonesia operated by religious leaders.
- 22 www.catholicforbible.org/conscience/archives/2001/wsin_womenunderoppressive regimes.asp

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Hindu Fundamentalisms in India: Examining Impact and Responses by the Women's Movements



Photo by Manish Gupta.

"No more Gujarat," women's groups demand at an action initiated by the Forum Against Oppression of Women in Mumbai in 2007 to mark five years since the Gujarat carnage.

India is supposedly a secular democracy, with a constitution that grants legal equality to women. Over the years, however, India has witnessed the steady growth of Hindu fundamentalist groups and parties, and of their organising, influence and aggression. The last two decades have seen them come to power in many states and also for a term at the Centre. Under the patronage of political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Shiv Sena, organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal and their various offshoots (referred to as the Sangh Parivar or Family, indicating their close links and connections) have been steadily gaining ground.

These parties and organisations have worked for many decades to create a myth of a hurt Hindu pride through misinformed rewriting of history not only in their literature but also in school textbooks in states where they are in power. They have misrepresented facts by posing the Muslims as the outsiders responsible for most communal violence (using historical tensions between the two communities and the present global Islamophobia). Through informal militarised training and setting up of military schools in their regimes of power, there has been a growing militia ready to rise up for the "Hindu cause." Their attacks on the Muslim communities have been innumerable in the last two decades starting from the late 1980s and have culminated in the systematic violence in Mumbai in 1992-93 and in Gujarat in 2002. Due to rising concerns around forced conversions of Hindus to Christianity, of late there have also been attacks on Christian institutions

and individuals, which culminated this year in large scale violence in Orissa and Karnataka (both states are ruled by the right-wing Hindu parties).

The presence of a vocal and violent majority fundamentalist ideology has likewise meant a simultaneous escalation of fundamentalisms among minority groups. Further, the fascist ideology and actions of the Hindu right have led to a corrosion of democracy and its mechanisms. This in turn has paved the way for a more militarised and policed State. The worst outcome of the rising influence of such fundamentalism is a growing conservatism in society per se, and the general erosion of the democratic and secular mindset, some examples of which I give below.

Most conservatism is seen through direct and indirect controls around gender and sexuality and this has been a cause of great concern, especially for the women's movements. All women are victims of this increasing control but the brunt of it is faced particularly by women from marginalised communities, as well as by those who are marginalised due to their genders and sexualities. Recent examples of this control include the carnage in March 2002 against the Muslim community of Gujarat. Led by Hindu fundamentalist organisations with the connivance of the BJP-ruled state government, sexual violence was used as a cruel and brutal tool on many Muslim women. Apart from the torture and fear that all women live with after witnessing such a large scale attack on some, these attacks were also aimed at teaching the Muslim community a lesson: women were seen as symbols, and as

the property of Muslim men, and hence violated. Similarly, seeing Hindu women as belonging to the men in Hindu communities, the state had, even prior to the violence, set up cells meant apparently to monitor inter-religious marriages (i.e., to prevent Muslim boys from marrying Hindu girls).

Events such as these take all ongoing struggles of women to assert their right over their bodies and lives many steps backward. In the climate of such violence, many girls—in Gujarat and elsewhere—are being married off at younger ages, thus stunting their ability to make decisions or choices about their own lives. Violence against inter-caste and inter-religious heterosexual couples wanting to live with each other or marry each other makes national headlines every few days, from different parts of the country. A recent incident which gathered a lot of public opinion and mobilisation was of a Muslim man married to a Hindu woman in Kolkata where the woman's family is alleged to have killed her husband and posed it as a suicide with support from the local police. This case is being followed up and is under scrutiny, but for every such high profile case there are many others that do not even make news.

The increased overall conservatism in society is also seen in the way youth are being sought to be controlled. Many states¹ have in the last few years decided to ban sex education in schools. In this respect, even states ruled by the left parties like Kerala have taken the same steps as those ruled by centrist parties, as in Maharashtra, or right-wing-ruled states like Madhya Pradesh. The reason being cited by all of them is that talking about sex will corrupt young innocent minds and lead to an erosion of the so-called 'Indian culture and traditions.'

Indian culture and tradition are routinely evoked in the service of an ever-increasing moral policing and a constant re-constructing and reinforcing of the 'norm.' The rewards for falling in line and living a monogamous married life with a person from the same caste and community are foregrounded through popular representations in films and other popular culture. At the same time, the price to be paid for transgressing the norm keeps becoming dearer. The moral police swoop down on anything that they find violative of Indian culture and tradition. It could be a film depicting a lesbian relationship, a legal case being filed against the anti-sodomy law of the country, or the expression of a few people to lead their lives according to their chosen genders and sexualities. Each of these have faced retaliation from the Hindu right, who claims to have sole power to decide what is "Indian," what is "culture," what is "tradition"; in their understanding of these things, there is no space for the democratic processes of dialogue, debate and difference. The tragedy is that as the Hindu fundamentalists usurp more and more public space, they alter the space itself.

As mentioned in the beginning, in all these attacks by the moralists, the price is paid mainly by the marginalised, especially the women. Control over women's sexuality has been one of the multiple ways in which patriarchies have worked in all societies. They face active sexual violence from the more powerful communities (the Hindu majority in the

case of religious conflict, and upper caste Hindus in instances of caste conflict). Moreover, such an openly aggressive display of control by the more numerous or powerful elicits an equally violent response from within the beleaguered community, further restricting the nascent space claimed by women for a growing assertion of their rights, choices and freedoms.

The Indian women's movements have always acknowledged this control while addressing issues of sexual and domestic violence. But in cases of communal violence, while immediate relief to victims, striving for justice through legal mechanisms and bringing the issue to international attention have been some of the strategies used by at least some women's groups in the country, highlighting the internal and external politics of communities played over women's bodies and acknowledging women's participation in the violence have proved more difficult. Similarly, while there has been some consensus on the necessity for sexuality education, there are a lot of variations on what exactly it will contain.

In a country as diverse and large as India, we cannot speak of the women's movements² in any other way than in the plural. Strategies of how to deal with issues of community have always varied. But now in the face of this moralist onslaught, the divisions between women's groups are also growing more visible and irreconcilable on some fronts. The tension has been heightened because the last few years have also seen new organisations of women become more active—radical Muslim women's groups fighting fundamentalism in their own communities along with majority fundamentalism; *Dalit* and other lower caste women fighting not just against the dominant caste structure but also against the patriarchy within; single women asserting their rights over their own lives and sexuality; lesbian, bisexual and trans women challenging patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality; and sex workers' organisations asserting their rights as workers.

Each of these movements has challenged multiple fundamentalisms—religious, community, patriarchal, of binary genders, and sometimes even the tacit moralist stances of the women's movements themselves. For each of these, besides the struggle against heteronormative patriarchies,³ one of the major battles is against religious fundamentalisms. The challenge for the more "mainstream" women's movements is of building alliances with these newer women's movements, because within that alliance lies the possibility of posing a real challenge to religious fundamentalism.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Most, but not all, ruled by the right-wing parties.*
- ² *In my description, "women's movements" includes only those organisations that recognise and critique the structural nature of patriarchy. Hence I do not include the outright, right-wing women's organisations.*
- ³ *The system maintained by patriarchy that there are only two, complementary genders (male and female), and that heterosexuality is natural and inevitable, while other sexual expressions and orientations are unnatural.*

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Challenging Islamic Fundamentalism:

Asserting Muslim Women's Sexuality and Rights in Marriage, Family and Society

Muslim women in most contemporary Muslim societies face many challenges and dilemmas, especially with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and political Islam¹ globally. Knowing how important, influential and powerful *Shari'ah* (system of Islamic laws) is in Muslim societies, Islamic fundamentalists and political Islamists use their interpretation of *Shari'ah* to enforce a misogynistic view of women and their lower status in marriage, family and society. They impose strict regimentation of sexuality, gender relations and cultural identity by regulating dress, public presentation of self, behaviour, belief and lifestyle of women.²

Sisters in Islam (SIS), like other Muslim feminists and women's rights groups, have raised concern and awareness of this re-assertion of a neo-traditionalising and fundamentalist worldview. Since 1993 and in line with emerging feminist voices in Islam, SIS has argued that patriarchal interpretations of the *Shari'ah* can and must be challenged at the level of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), which is what Muslims as humans are able to understand of the *Shari'ah* in this world at the legal level. This distinction between *Shari'ah* and *fiqh* enables SIS and a number of other Muslim feminists to argue for gender justice within the framework of Islamic faith.

SIS employs a multi-pronged and multi-layered strategy in combating religious fundamentalism and political Islam in Malaysia, regionally and globally. SIS's strategic framework for action and the foundation of its advocacy is to promote a reform agenda (conceived within a long-term project for Islamic renewal or *islah* and Islamic transformation or *tajdid*) and establish a movement for equality and justice in Muslim marriage, family and society. Within this strategy, SIS has undertaken a series of activities that includes research projects, consultation and advocacy work, public education, study sessions, training and capacity building programmes for grassroots and professional Muslim women.

SIS contends that equality in the family is necessary (if not mandatory) because many aspects of our current Muslim family laws and practices are unjust and do not respond to the lives and experiences of families and individuals. SIS argues that equality in the family is possible and achievable through a holistic and integrated approach that brings together Islamic teachings, universal human rights principles, fundamental rights and constitutional guarantees of a modern democratic nation-state, and the lived realities of women and men today.

SIS's legal reform agenda builds on decades of tireless effort by women's groups and activists in Muslim contexts to campaign for reform of Muslim family laws that discriminate against women and resist regressive amendments demanded by conservative groups within society. SIS's *tajdid* or social transformation project has gradually been developed over the course of its 20 years of existence. SIS has worked locally (i.e., with grassroots women and community leaders), nationally (with politicians and members of parliament or MPs), regionally, and globally with a variety of Muslim activists, scholars, academics, NGOs and legal practitioners to conceptualise the main principles and framework of action for establishing egalitarian and just laws to be applied in Muslim states. These individuals and groups have regularly come together for networking, building alliances and coalitions, and to undertake collaborative work and discussion towards establishing a movement to work for equality and justice in Muslim families and society.

Since 2002, SIS has drawn up a number of proposals to build an international network of empowered Muslim women who believe in equality and justice for women in Islam. Muslim activists and scholar-activists in the SIS network felt the urgent need to build their knowledge on Islam and reclaim their identity as Muslims and as feminists. They also note that grassroots women's groups are a formidable source of support if they are empowered and encouraged to work together with other women's groups toward protecting women's rights, autonomy and agency at the local and transnational levels. SIS and her networks are aware that Muslim women's groups have to find a way of coming together and identifying the different areas of their social life that need their joint cooperation, collaborative action and solidarity. They need to network and support each other in their projects of ensuring positive developments within Muslim family laws of their respective countries.

Muslim women's groups are aware that they must help each other in providing various resources to help promote greater awareness among women and the public of the idea that the construction of gender in Islamic legal theory is long overdue for a critical study and re-evaluation. This is the basis for Muslim women to achieve their long overdue collective "Agenda for Gender Equality in Islam."

Strategies to challenge and resist religious fundamentalisms

Sisters in Islam and other Muslim feminists and organisations have, with conviction and passion, formulated various strategies to promote Muslim women's rights. These include:

1. Networking. Groups have built alliances to promote their agenda. In Iran, women's groups worked closely with women MPs, who felt isolated from a parliament that is dominated by clerics, and lobbied for reform on women's issues. In Malaysia, SIS engages with the larger civil society movement and in collaboration with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), to push for reform within Islam, particularly in the area of women's rights. In Turkey, the Capital City Women's Platform is trying to bridge the huge gap between secular and Islamist feminists to work on common grounds and common interests.

2. Reclaiming Islam. It is crucial that we engage in reclaiming Islam and in the production of knowledge in Islam, be it the interpretive process, codification, or implementation. Without this knowledge, it is easy for women to be silenced by those who do not want their authority and monopoly over the religion challenged. Defining which interpretation becomes the one Truth to be obeyed by all others, is a political decision, and not a religious act. Women's groups in Iran, Indonesia and Malaysia are at the forefront in engaging with religion and offering alternative views to challenge patriarchal and extremist interpretations of Islam. There are two approaches that have been adopted by SIS and a majority of Muslim feminists, namely: (a) going back to the primary texts (*Qur'an* and *Hadith*) in order to 'unread patriarchy,' proposing or doing *ijtihad* (interpretive reasoning), and providing an alternative reading of the texts; and, (b) studying and engaging with juristic constructs and theories to uncover or demonstrate the theological and rational arguments embedded in them, the legal theories that underlie them, and to understand the classical conception of justice and the notion of gender that permeate family law in the Islamic legal tradition.³

3. Building courage and confidence in creating a dissenting voice. Muslim women must be encouraged, trained and supported to speak out in order to claim their rights and to create the public space to engage with Islamic matters. In countries where there are no alternative voices in the public sphere, Islamist groups have set the agenda and defined what is Islamic and what is not, and commitment to Islam is measured by the obscurantist and discriminatory standards they set.

Their dominance and monopoly need to be challenged and broken. In Malaysia, SIS has successfully created the public space for women and the 'lay' as well as 'non-Muslim' citizens to engage publicly in debate on matters of religion and Islam. In Indonesia, graduates of State Islamic Institutes are at the forefront of the democracy movement pushing for progressive Islam against the rising tide of conservatism and extremism.

4. Working with the media. Since most progressive groups are small and based in the capital cities, the mass media is crucial for this small voice to be heard widely and throughout the country. SIS employs a number of media strategies (e.g., issuance of letters to the editor, having weekly columns in the mainstream media) to generate a more informed public debate on contentious issues in Islam. Muslim women have to learn to create an active public sphere that can open the space for participation of other faithful but silent or politically-muted Muslims. In the case of multi-religious countries, they likewise need to include the voices and opinions of citizen of other faiths who have the right to express support or dissent to actions of state or non-state actors that may be harmful to their fellow citizens and the country's democratic system.

5. Reforming the Islamic curriculum in schools and universities to promote progressive Islamic knowledge and women's rights. Indonesia is far ahead of other Muslim countries in this area. The state Islamic institutes have undergone reform of its curriculum to produce critical and progressive Muslim graduates who are at the forefront of the women's rights, human rights and democracy movements in Indonesia. In the Jakarta and Jogjakarta campuses, women's studies centres have been set up to integrate gender studies in the curriculum and to train the teaching staff and students on gender issues.

6. Writing and 'pamphleteering.' Publishing easy-to-read, cheap and accessible publications on progressive Islamic ideas is critical to make a dent in the market of Islamic literature that is currently dominated by Wahhabi values of an intolerant and misogynistic Islam. Indonesian and Malaysian groups have produced simple booklets on women's issues in Islam, including the right to equality, and the issues of domestic violence, polygamy and family planning.

7. Participation of men. Involving men in the struggle for women's rights is crucial to the cause. We need to establish contact with progressive Muslim men to get them to speak out on issues of women's concern. Again, Indonesia is ahead at this as many male graduates of the Islamic institutes and key gender-sensitised male Muslim leaders and scholars are already working closely with women's groups to push for women's rights in Islam.⁴

Endnotes

- 1 Islamic fundamentalism refers to narrow, punitive-inclined religious teachings, perspectives or world views; political Islam refers to Islamist movements that support fundamentalist perspectives and whose main objective is to attain political power and establish an 'Islamic state' throughout the Muslim world.
- 2 Discriminatory or inequalitarian notions of gender ordering are implicitly and/or explicitly embedded in the assumptions of legal reasoning and rulings of Malaysian Islamic Family Laws (IFLs). For example, a Muslim woman is not seen as an independent autonomous person in her own right as Malaysian IFLs requires a wali (male guardian) for her to enter into a marriage contract. The husband has a unilateral right to divorce his wife based on *talaq* (utterance of his intention). Marital rape is also a completely alien and incomprehensible notion in traditional *fiqh*. The rights and privileges of a wife within this fundamentalist view—such as providing her with domestic support or house-servants and allowing for some nurturing assistance in the form of a nanny for their children—are all predicated upon the assumption that a wife's primary function is for fulfilment of the sexual and reproductive needs of her husband.
- 3 In the first category are the works of Muslim feminist scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Riffat Hasan, Amina Wadud, Aziza Al-Hibri and Asma Barlas. In the second type are the works of Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Siti Musdah Mulia and Kecia Ali. See also Ziba Mir-Hosseini's "The construction of gender in Islamic legal

thought and strategies for reform" in *Hawraa: Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World* Vol.1 No.1 2003, pp. 1-28.

- 4 Such men include Fathi Osman, Khalid Masoud, Kiyai Hussein Mubammad, Abdullahi A. An-Nai'm.

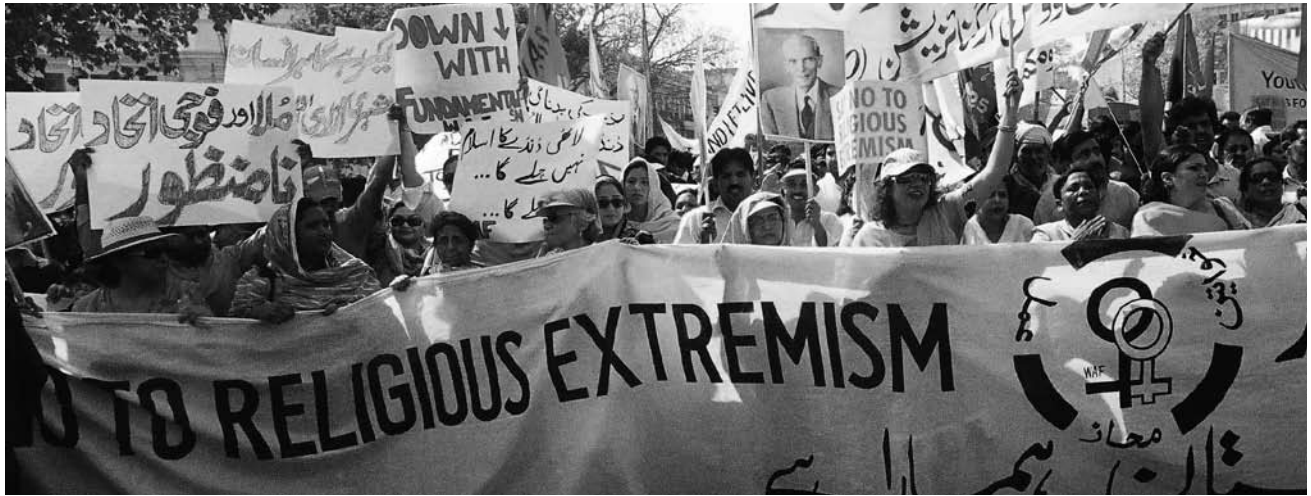
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Growing Fundamentalisms:

A Grave Apprehension for Women's Rights in Pakistan



A protest rally against Talibanisation and Violence against Women by women's organisations in April 2007, Lahore, Pakistan.

Women remain a central entity in all fundamentalist movements as is customary in prevailing patriarchal ideologies. Women are considered by fundamentalists as the custodians of family norms and honour; thus, their bodies and sexualities become the first sites of fundamentalist control.

Defining “fundamentalisms.” When analysing religious “fundamentalism” in Pakistan, it is evident that it is an undertaking of so-called politico-religious groups to further their political and ideological agenda, and serves their hunger for power. Currently, various terminologies such as Islamist, extremist, *Jihadi* (Islamic militants), politico-religious group, talibans and fundamentalists are being used interchangeably to indicate these kinds of groups. Shirkat Gah has always used the term “fundamentalism” with reservation as it felt the generic use of it “obliterates historical and/or contemporary specificities within countries, communities or regions that give rise to such groups and forces, erroneously suggesting there is only one specific problem that needs to be addressed and that through a singular strategy.”¹

Fundamentalism in Pakistan. The roots of fundamentalisms in Pakistan can be traced back to the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq when in the late 70s, the Pakistani Government got enlisted as a front line state by the United States of America against the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. After coming into power through a coup, General Zia-ul-Haq sought to gain legitimacy for his rule through Islamisation.

This Islamisation process overturned some of the progress made towards women's rights that were achieved during the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto period (1971-1977).² General Zia's administration adversely affected women's participation in all aspects of life through introducing highly discriminatory laws, such as the *Hudood Ordinances* (1979) and *Qanun-e-Shahadat* (Law of Evidence 1984), as well as issuing directives such as ordering government employees to adopt Islamic clothing. Women's basic rights to drive, participate in sports, work and vote amongst others, were debated in the context of the role and the status of women in an Islamic society. Shahla Zia recounts, “Women were targeted at various stages. A social climate was deliberately created whereby the public was insidiously encouraged to believe that they had the right to intervene where the code of ‘Islamic morality’ was being violated by women.”³

Even after General Zia's death in 1988, the process of Islamisation continued. During his 11-year rule, bigoted thinking that denounced everything that did not fit in the narrow framework of religious tenets as prescribed by the fundamentalists had penetrated the educational curriculum, social institutions and people's mindsets.

General Pervez Musharraf's government (1999-2008), which was replaced by a popularly elected government in February 2008, saw a disturbing growth and influence of Talibanisation.⁴ With Talibanisation, militant and armed

Photo courtesy of Azhar Jifri - Photographer DAWN (Shirkat Gah, Archived).

politico-religious elements/groups that use the pretext of religion to manipulate the civil liberties of citizens have increasingly gained voice and power. Mutihida Majis-e-Amal, the coalition of religious political parties in North West Frontier Province (NWFP), provided the Taliban and other “fundamentalists” (concentrated in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas or FATA, which is lying between Afghanistan and Pakistan) an opportunity to extend their influence and activities in other parts of the country. These groups have declared the start of the Islamic revolution by demanding that the government enforce their version of *Shari’ah*⁵ and let them take matters in their hands.⁶

Talibanisation’s impact. Promoting rigid and staunch views of what they define as Islam, this brand of “fundamentalists” oppose human rights in general and women’s rights in particular. They tend to hamper the freedom of women and impede their access to basic rights. They have declared girl’s education un-Islamic, are burning down girls’ schools in different locations in NWFP (125 schools were burnt and bombed by militants from November 2007–August 2008⁷), and are threatening female teachers. Some 300,000 girls have reportedly been deprived of education so far.

Pakistani women from different spheres of life, especially those living in remote areas, are also not given the freedom to wear attires of their own choice. Since the growth of Talibanisation, women not dressed according to their perception of *Shari’ah* are generally condemned. A recent example in Peshawar, the capital of NWFP, is the decision to impose a fine of Rs10,000 (US\$125) on any woman not wearing a veil and on the driver of any public transport carrying an unveiled woman.⁸ These groups settle disputes through locally constituted forums. For instance, in April 2008, a man and a woman were stoned to death by militants after a *qazi* court⁹ found them guilty of adultery. This was the first publicised incident of stoning to death carried out in FATA. Such acts reflect existing negative customary practices, wherein women’s lives, sexuality and reproduction are subject to male control.

Fundamentalists have also increasingly interfered with citizens’ right to health and have forced parents to refrain from getting their children vaccinated under a government-sponsored polio-vaccination scheme. Doctors have been killed, medical workers attacked and nurses threatened of dire consequences if they administered vaccines to children.¹⁰ Fundamentalists have also launched virulent campaigns against contraceptives. Women in the conservative northern region are also not allowed to see male doctors.¹⁰ In a society where the issues related to abortion and other aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights generally remain taboo subjects, the intensifying control over women’s lives forces them to refrain from claiming related crucial services and rights.

Local and international NGOs have likewise been a major target of fundamentalists, particularly in NWFP and the tribal areas. Many of the NGOs providing health and education to

women in these areas have been forced to shut down. In some cases, the federal government has reportedly asked national and international NGOs working in the earthquake-hit districts of the NWFP to limit their field activities and adopt extra safety measures.¹¹

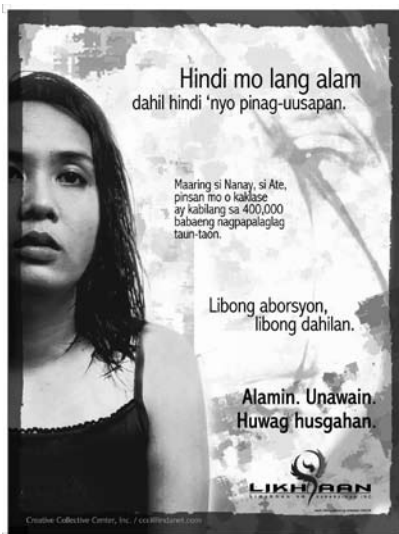
Some responses. The women’s movement and civil society in Pakistan have remained vocal and vigilant against the growing fundamentalism in society and have highlighted the issue at different national, regional and international forums, including the United Nations. Their rigorous efforts are propelled by the realisation that the fundamentalists’ actions are centered on manipulating women’s bodies, minds and freedoms. Strategies adopted by various groups, such as the Women’s Action Forum and the Joint Action Committee for Peoples’ Rights, include raising awareness, disseminating information and arranging demonstrations at different levels to demystify the notion of widespread popularity of the fundamentalists, and highlighting alternative opinions to the one propagated by the extremists and bringing forward feminist/progressive points on religious interpretations.

There have also been some initial localised responses; for example, some organisations have devised precautionary measures to continue the provision of education to girls and women (e.g., only students with school/college ID cards are allowed to enter the institution, security personnel are placed around the girls’ schools). However, these efforts by individuals and organisations are not enough to deal with such an extensive problem; state intervention is essential. Shirkat Gah thus highlighted this grave concern in its second Shadow Report to the CEDAW Committee in 2007, *Talibanisation and Poor Governance: Undermining CEDAW in Pakistan*, calling on the committee to extract commitments from the Pakistan government to address the issue. Shirkat Gah continues to highlight the issue in reminding the government to fulfill its obligation to control and check the fundamentalists’ infringement of women’s rights.

Endnotes

- 1 *An interview with Farida Shabeed.* 2001. Available at [http://arwid.org/eng/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/An-Interview-with-Farida-Shabeed/\(language/eng-GB](http://arwid.org/eng/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/An-Interview-with-Farida-Shabeed/(language/eng-GB)
- 2 During this period, for example, all the government posts and services were opened to women for the first time; women were appointed as provincial governors, university vice chancellors and deputy speaker of the National Assembly.
- 3 Zia, Shabla. 1998. “Some experiences of the women’s movement: Strategies for success.” In Farida Shabeed et al. (eds). *Shaping Women’s Lives, Law, Practices and Strategies in Pakistan*. Lahore, Pakistan: Shirkat Gah. pp.371–414.
- 4 This term is now being used interchangeably with fundamentalism to refer to the intensifying influence and efforts to install a Taliban style of governance by identified and unidentified groups after the dismissal of the Taliban government from Afghanistan post-9/11.
- 5 Islamic law, including both the teachings of the Qur’an and the traditions of the prophet.
- 6 For example, on 6 April 2008, two Taliban brothers declared the start of the Islamic revolution from the red mosque in Islamabad. As a part of their campaign, they trained a baton wielding battalion of heavily veiled female students to confront women they adjudged as “immoral” and to “purify” society and make it sin free.
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- 9 The judicial structure in tribal areas that does not come under direct control of government.
- 10 “Conservatism stonewalling healthcare in quake zones.” *Daily Times Monitor*. 5 December 2005.
- 11 Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. 2007. *State of Human Rights in 2007: Annual Report*. pp. 63.

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"You just don't know about it because it's not talked about. Your mother, elder sister, cousin or classmate can be one of the 400,000 women getting abortions each year. Thousands of abortions, thousands of reasons. Find out about the issue. Understand. Don't judge." This poster by Likhaan highlights the need for public discourse on abortion in the Philippines and the need to respect women's choices.

Beyond Legality:

Abortion and Reproductive Health in the Philippines

Policy debates around women's rights and gender present opportunities for political engagement as well as consciousness-raising within broader movements. However, feminists also warn us against the limited frameworks of the law and how couching the terms of critical debates about women's empowerment solely within the terms of "legal rights" can often muddle the issue.¹ Debates about sexuality and reproductive health within the frame of legality may also turn out to be more counterproductive than productive.

In the Philippines, the policy debate on reproductive rights made possible through the Reproductive Health (RH) bill has aided activists in moving the discussion forward from population and demographics to rights and reproductive decision-making. However, according to a recent media study by the Ateneo School of Government (ASG), which analysed media reports between 2004-2007, reproductive health continues to be referred to by many in the Philippine media as a policy on "population control" and not as a policy about rights.²

Indeed, the current bill has come a long way from its earlier versions. When the opposition proclaimed reproductive health as synonymous with abortion, several authors of the bill opted to steer clear of the term "reproductive health" and reverted to "population" and "family planning." The uproar by the 'Pro-Life'³ opposition over abortion in the original bill's explanatory note before the 12th Congress in 2001 (in the context of recommending a review of policies affecting women's reproductive health) put many advocates in a defensive position. Authors of the bill pointed out that the bill does not "legalise abortion" and

only mandates humane treatment in legal post-abortion care.

Eventually, politicians who used to favor population and demographic frameworks came around and adopted framing RH as human rights. The disavowal of abortion, however, has remained a mantra in defending the RH bill. Pundits agree that there is still a chance that the reproductive health bill (first filed seven years ago before the 12th Congress) may pass before the 14th Philippine Congress. Likewise, for practical reasons, advocates of the bill position it as "anti-abortion." While a lot is said about how the proposed law can prevent abortions through universal access to family planning, the position can imply that advocates also support the continuing criminalisation of abortion.

Many reproductive health advocates will still not touch the issue of abortion with a ten-foot pole.⁴ In this country, where aborted fetuses are offered before church altars and posters with sinister figures depicting reproductive health as evil are the imagery by which the conservative anti-choice lobby carries out its campaign against reproductive health legislation, most advocates fear the moral panic that the mere mention of the word "abortion" can whip up.

In countering misinformation by the Catholic opposition, which insists that the provision of contraceptives does not only open the gates to abortion but that contraception literally causes abortions, issuing a disclaimer on the issue of abortion has often meant losing opportunities to deepen the discussion not only on sexual and reproductive rights but also on sexual ethics. The strategy also reinforces how discussions about abortion continue to be framed solely within the terms of criminality. The moral position is almost

always equated with the legal one.

What needs to be highlighted, however, is that when it comes to the issue of women's rights, particularly when it concerns sexuality and reproductive health, the Catholic Church, is in fact divided. The divisions are rooted in the *Humanae Vitae*, the source of Roman Catholic teaching against contraceptives. The controversial encyclical issued by Pope Paul VI in 1968 reportedly went against the majority opinion of the papal Birth Control Commission, which held the view that "conjugal morality should be measured by 'the totality of married life,' rather than the openness of each act of intercourse to conception." The encyclical followed the "Minority opinion," which reiterated the classical position that "contraceptives violated the natural moral law by sundering the procreative and unitive dimensions of sexuality."⁵

Recently, the Catholics for RH Speak Out! Movement and a group of prominent faculty members from a Jesuit-run university, Ateneo de Manila, came out in support of the RH bill. They based their positions on Catholic social teachings on human rights and the dignity of persons, particularly women. Their dissent from the 'official' view brings the discussion of reproductive health not just to the level of the basic human right to health but also conscience and morality, which is founded on the freedom of thought, religious belief and expression.

In 1986, conservative Catholics fought hard to adopt a provision patterned after Ireland's 1983 Constitutional amendment "protecting the life of the unborn from conception," with the view of not only instituting an absolute ban on abortion, but also a ban on contraceptives founded on Catholic teaching. Despite the reference to "conception" in the Constitution however,⁶ the Constitutional Commission did not agree on a categorical definition of conception and even unanimously voted that to do so would run counter to the Constitution's non-establishment clause and violate the essence of the bill of rights, which "ensures the protection of the minority from the majority." According to Commissioner Romulo who sponsored the unanimously backed revision of the provision, "The Bill of Rights is supposed to protect the individual from the state and the minority from the majority. This original proposal impinges on the right of the minorities who do not believe in this Catholic concept."⁷ This same principle is reflected in another Constitutional provision wherein the State is mandated "to defend the right of spouses to found their families in accordance with their religious beliefs."⁸

Indeed, the growing virulence of Catholic anti-choice attacks against beliefs and practices different from the Catholic Church's official position are fundamentalist in character.⁹

When 'Pro-life' Catholics equate reproductive health with abortion or invoke their opposition to an imagined state population control agenda, they downplay the conflict

of beliefs around sexuality and reproduction. By doing so, they refuse to tolerate different beliefs held by both those outside Roman Catholicism and within it.¹⁰ By insisting that their own position should be adopted as the sole legal standard, they impose their beliefs on others. The irony is of course that fundamentalists also couch their claims in the frame of legal rights, particularly, the Church's right to free religious exercise. Lynn Freedman notes that the "law" and the "state" occupy a central place in virtually all fundamentalist projects where both law and religious authority are treated as "sacred" and considered absolute.¹¹

A braver, more respectful way forward needs to include abortion in the public discussion as it affects women's health and lives. And while we do not expect to be able to settle the issue of abortion's "legality" with finality anytime soon, we also need to realise that whatever our position on abortion, treating women who undergo abortions as criminals hardly passes as a morally defensible position.¹² There is, after all, a difference between opposing the blanket legalisation of abortion and simply condemning abortions by supporting penal prohibition. Penalising abortion as a response to widespread abortions has been proven the least effective means of preventing abortions. Worldwide, there is already a growing consensus that outlawing abortion leads to more unsafe and clandestine abortions.¹³

Endnotes

- Olsen, Frances. 1984. "Statutory rape: A feminist critique of rights analysis." *Texas Law School Review*.
- Presentations by Prof. Antonio La Viña and Prof. Clarissa David, emailed to the author, Ateneo School of Government. <http://www.asg.ateneo.edu>
- Reference to the 'Pro-Life Opposition' in this article refers specifically to the group 'Pro-Life' Philippines but does not in any way mean that the dichotomy of "Choice/Life" is considered acceptable or adequate to describe the Philippine context. Just as there are Filipino Roman Catholics whose views on sexuality differ from official church teaching, there are reproductive health advocates who do not support the legalisation of abortion. See also: Michael Lim Tan, "Fetal discourses and the politics of the womb," *Reproductive Health Matters*, 2004 (24 Supplement).
- Feminist organisations in the Philippines that have publicly acknowledged a position supporting women's rights to safe abortion information and services include Linangan ng Kababaihan (LIKHAAN), Womenlead Foundation, Inc. (WOMENLEAD), Engenderights, Inc. and the Reproductive Rights Resource Group (RRRG).
- Weigel, George. 1999. *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*.
- Article II Section 12 of the 1987 Constitution states that "It [the State] shall equally protect the life of the mother and the life of the unborn from conception..."
- 18 July 1986 Record of the Constitutional Commission, Volume One, p. 721-722.
- Article XV, Sec. 3 (1), 1987 Constitution provides: Section 3. "The State shall defend: (1) The right of spouses to found a family in accordance with their religious convictions and the demands of responsible parenthood;"
- Frances Kissling defines fundamentalisms as "reactive movements within religion that base their values and positions on literal interpretations of religious texts." In Cassandra Balchin, "Interview with Frances Kissling." 2008. www.arrow.org/eng/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/Confronting-Religious-Fundamentalisms-from-within-Reflections-of-a-Feminist-Catholic-Activist-and-Scholar-Challenging-Fundamentalisms-interview-with-Frances-Kissling
- Religions, such as Islam, the Iglesia ni Kristo (Church of Christ) and an inter-faith alliance of Christian Churches, have come out in support of RH.
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Tackling gender and sexual discrimination in Buddhism



Photo by Sivananthi Tharenthiran

Displaying traditional gender roles in Buddhism, women line up early in the morning at Luang Prabang, Laos to give alms to monks in order to gain merit.

Patriarchy, the context of society since Buddha's time, continues to influence and shape contemporary Buddhism until today; it is the fundamentalism within Buddhism. Buddha's original teachings over 2,500 years ago did not discriminate against women. However, because his teachings were passed down orally only through male teachers after his death and were only recorded 400 years later, Buddhism today is filtered, formed and designed through patriarchy. We can see this in the belief system about women and men, in some religious texts and ceremonies, as well as in the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Buddhist institution in all three major schools of Buddhism.

Some of the ways in which patriarchal views and actions manifest within Buddhism are the following:

- The misinterpretation which is taught by some influential temples, monks and scholars that being born a woman is a result of previous bad karma and is a misfortune because women will experience many difficulties in life.
- The teaching that the male body is sacred, higher and more important/superior than the female body. Thus, only male monks can teach and lead Buddhism. In many Buddhist countries, women are not allowed to take full ordination (as a female monk); the reason given by the Buddhist institution is that there is no lineage for female ordination in that country or in that school of Buddhism. Male monks and lay men are also served/sit first in temple and ceremonies.
- In Thailand and a few other Theravada Buddhist countries, women are not allowed to sit beside and touch monks because they are told that they are temptations against the monks' enlightenment. Women are also not allowed to enter certain sacred sites.
- Women who are abused by their husbands and partners are experiencing the results of a previous life's karma. Thus, they cannot do anything about it except make more merit in this lifetime.

None of these actions or teachings can be found in the *Tripitika*, the Buddhist bible.

The fundamentalist view and practice of male supremacy and heteronormativity¹ also influence some Buddhist monks and nuns with regards to people who do not conform to gender and sexual norms. In Thailand, for example, some monks and nuns teach that homosexuals and transgendered people are, like women, paying for their previous life karma because they committed inappropriate sexually behavior. Buddha's original teachings do not see gender or sexual orientation as an issue.²

Our response. The International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP), a spiritual-based feminist organisation working to support grassroots activism in South and Southeast Asia, responds to these issues by working among Buddhists to deconstruct patriarchy and teach women and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) peoples what the Buddha really taught about them.

We run workshops with Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people, including grassroots women and GLBT activists, on feminism and the main Buddhist teachings, using these to

analyse structural violence, particularly on issues of gender, violence against women (VAW) and GLBT issues, and create ways to take action.³ We use feminist analysis to help bring back the true meaning of the Buddha's teachings and make it relevant to women's lived experiences. At the same time, we use the Buddha's teaching of mindfulness and compassion to move our feminist intellectual analysis to the 'heart' level, to understand gender oppression and violence against women. We incorporate the terms and language of Buddhism when talking about the concepts of activism or feminism. For example, the feminist analysis of structural oppression is collective karma. When we work for social change, it is about practicing wisdom and compassion, which is a core teaching by the Buddha.

We bring back the Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths, which are the core teachings of Buddhism. Largely no longer taught by most monks, they are extremely helpful for people to understand gender oppression and other social issues. In naming the first noble truth, that life consists of suffering, we ask participants to identify all forms of gender oppression or violence against women. Then we talk about the second noble truth, the root causes of the violence, which women identify as patriarchy and misinterpretations of Buddhism.

We ask the participants to visualise the third truth, which is the picture and vision of an enlightened society, one that no longer has gender oppression. This challenges the teaching by most monks that enlightenment is something beyond this life and is confined to just the individual experience. Finally, the fourth truth, the eightfold noble path, is about using wisdom and compassion to form concrete ways of working towards the vision of an enlightened gender-equal society.

IWP debunks the traditional interpretation of karma as being just a personal issue as patriarchal and incorrect, which in turn leads to wrong thinking and action. We share the original teaching of the Buddha that karma means action and that there are two kinds of karma, individual karma and collective/structural karma. While having an abusive husband is an individual karma, believing that it is because of your previous life's karma or because you are not a good wife—a patriarchal teaching—is collective karma. We share with the women that only the Buddha knows people's previous lives and that rather than dwelling on the past, he emphasises the present life where one can create change and influence future karma.

IWP also uses the Buddha's core teachings to help women reconcile with conflict and the trauma they experience from gender oppression. We share the new

interpretation of the teaching on the Four Abiding Abode to be the guidelines for a healthy and harmonious relationship. This principle talks about the practice of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, which means no control, no possession and no ownership between couples. We challenge the women to use this teaching to reflect if their partners practice this teaching with them.

Some results. These workshops result in the awakening of the participants to the difference between patriarchal teachings and Buddha's original teachings, and in resolving personal issues. Most women said it was the first time they learned about the four noble truths, the core teaching of

Buddhism. One of the women from Sri Lanka, like others, said that after attending our six-week-engaged Buddhism course, she regained her faith in Buddhism. Most women said they go to the temple, hear the chanting but never knew the real meaning of the Buddha's teachings; others were not interested in Buddhism because they did not feel comfortable with the way monks and temples treat women. A gay man said after the course that he no longer felt guilty about not going through ordination.⁴ Women who experienced gender-based violence realised that their male partners are also victims of a patriarchal culture and thus need education and support

in order to change. While most of these results are at the personal level, the participants are also expected to link Buddhist philosophy and practice of active non-violence, peace building, as well as gender and sexual justice into their community work and activism.

Through our experience, we conclude that feminism and Buddhism work to help transform each other; their integration is the core foundation in our peace activism.

... the feminist analysis of structural oppression is collective karma. When we work for social change, it is about practicing wisdom and compassion, which is a core teaching by the Buddha.

Endnotes

- ¹ *The view that the only normal relationship is between a man and a woman, and that other forms of gender and sexual orientation and desires are not right.*
- ² *Enlightenment is about transforming the mind, thus the physical male and female forms are not taken into account. As well, one of the basic rules of the monastic life is celibacy; thus, sexuality is out of the question for those who take that path. On the other hand, Buddha's teachings do not see sexual relationship for lay people—regardless of sexual orientation—in a negative sense. What the Buddha emphasises is that the attachment to sexual pleasure—as any other worldly desires, such as wealth, fame and so on—can be a challenge to achieving enlightenment.*
- ³ *IWP also produces publications and films that talk about gender oppression and violence against women (VAW).*
- ⁴ *In the Thai Buddhist tradition, ordination is seen as a way for boys and men to express gratitude to their parents since the merit gained from the act accrues to the parents as well.*

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International

The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) combats political and religious fundamentalisms by bringing the realities of women's lives to bear in Washington's debates, emphasising public health and insisting on human rights.

In solidarity with organisations worldwide, CHANGE continues to seek removal of the anti-prostitution loyalty oath (APLO) from U.S. global AIDS policy. The APLO requires recipients of U.S. global AIDS funding to have a policy opposing prostitution and to not use any funds to advocate legalisation of prostitution. The policy was injected into U.S. law in 2003 by religious and political forces seeking to insert their ideology and moral code into the U.S. government's response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Although the Bush administration claimed the APLO is necessary to reduce the practice of prostitution (as a step to reduce HIV infections), the policy is a failure. Not decreasing prostitution in the slightest, it instead has created confusion and fear among U.S.-funded service providers because at any time they could be accused of supporting prostitution through their outreach and HIV prevention activities. Those who refused to sign have seen drop-in centers and empowerment programs close for lack of funds.

CHANGE has responded by researching the impact of the APLO, presenting the findings and advocating removal of the policy. CHANGE published a policy brief (www.genderhealth.org/pubs/ProstitutionOathImplications.pdf) and blog (www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2008/09/10/perpetuating-prostitution-pledge-allegiance-failure) that highlight the human rights and public health problems emerging from the pledge. CHANGE delivered the policy brief to key Congressional leaders and will work with them to reform U.S. policy. The organisation is also working in coalition to ensure that the Obama administration is aware of and will mitigate the pledge's harmful impact.

*Source: Mary Beth Hastings, Deputy Director, CHANGE.
Email: mbhastings@genderhealth.org*

When the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) launched their Challenging and Resisting Religious Fundamentalisms initiative in 2007, they found that there was little existing research on young women and religious fundamentalisms, and how young women were responding to this threat in their contexts. AWID's Young Feminist Activism Program decided to convene an institute to explore the issue further.

The Young Women's Institute on Challenging and Resisting Religious Fundamentalisms, which was held on 18–21 November 2007 in Istanbul, Turkey, brought together a diverse group of young women from around the world to exchange experiences and strategies. Participants discussed the impacts of religious fundamentalisms on women's rights and the ways these specifically affect young women (e.g., denial of abortion

to young, unmarried women; lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education; forced marriages; control of young women's sexuality and diversity of sexuality). Young feminists are engaged in responses to religious fundamentalisms, but often feel isolated in their efforts. Participants felt that they need to work collectively to strengthen their activism in this area.

The participants identified networking—creating a contact list, identifying issues by context, linking national and regional campaigns with international ones, and engaging young men who are affected by religious fundamentalisms—as well as the use of ICTs in constructive, tactical and supportive ways as pivotal for dealing with religious fundamentalisms. Participants were also adamant that feminists need to understand the evolution of religious fundamentalisms' views and engage with progressive religious leaders and religious fundamentalisms to better understand emerging threats to their rights, and effectively bring about counter-change. Research done using a young feminist lens is also critical, not only to help the feminist movement better address young women's rights, but also to raise the general public's awareness on how religious fundamentalisms are affecting young women specifically.

Source: Ghadeer Malek, Program Assistant, Young Feminist Activism Program, AWID. Email: gmalek@arwid.org

The first international training on sexuality in Muslim societies, the CSBR Sexuality Institute, took place in Malaysia in August 2008. Organised by the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR), an international coalition working to promote sexual, reproductive and bodily health and rights in Muslim societies, the training brought together leading sexual rights activists, researchers and practitioners from 14 countries throughout Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

The Institute was an invigorating and inspiring experience in a number of ways. The pressing need for information, insight and exchange on the issue was evident. Most participants worked in isolated and challenging contexts, and the opportunity to have the space to come together with advocates from different Muslim societies was empowering in itself. The holistic approach of the training, which combined historical, theoretical and conceptual frameworks of sexuality in Muslim societies, with emerging issues, field experiences and thematic analyses provided an innovative, interdisciplinary curriculum. The discussions on gender and sexual diversities were the most liberating sessions, challenging both the myths that sexual diversities is a 'western' phenomenon, as well as participants' own preconceived notions around sexuality. What also rendered the Institute unique was that it was built upon the experience and discourse of CSBR in Muslim societies, as well as participants' various areas of expertise.

From the discussions throughout the training, the diversity of contested sexuality issues in face of rising conservatism was evident, ranging from female genital mutilation to moral policing, LGBT issues to sexual harassment, discriminatory civil and penal codes to sexuality education. However, participants

also noted that in most cases, the opponents of sexual rights employed similar discourses and arguments based on claims of what is 'moral' vs. 'immoral,' 'Islamic' vs. 'non-Islamic,' as well as through dichotomising the Islamic vs. the Western. In this context, as a participant stated, "In face of the rise of the so-called fundamentalism or hardline Islamic revivalism, I think the Institute gave me the basic paradigm to see and analyse how the women's movement should take position in order to challenge the repression."

Source: Liz Ercevik Amado, *Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR)*–New Ways. Email: amadoliz@yahoo.com

Indonesia

More than 200 signatures were collected at AWID Forum 2008 (Cape Town, South Africa) by the Indonesian delegation to support their struggle against the anti-pornography bill.

The anti-pornography bill was passed by the Indonesian parliament in October 2008 despite widespread protests throughout the country, demonstrating the growing power of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the public policy arena. The bill enacts moral policing by the state. The bill's obscure definition of pornography criminalises all forms of sensuality and expands the prohibition to dressing considered to suggest nudity, following a confusion on the meaning of sexual exploitation (i.e., not as a form of sexual violence but as an evidence of the corrupted minds of those who deliberately choose to display their sensual bodies). Although the bill ostensibly aims to combat violence against women, it disproportionately discriminates against them, women being the symbol bearers of morality and thus the target of the bill's enforcement. The bill also reinforces the perception of homosexuality as deviant sexual behavior, akin to bestialism and necrophilia.

In response to the bill's passage, the Indonesian women's rights movement conducted a series of discussions with experts and rights organisations to develop a strategy to challenge the bill before the constitutional court. Signatures collected at the AWID Forum will be submitted with the complaint. A media strategy is yet to be decided; however, it is always crucial to alert people that international eyes are watching closely how the Indonesian government, which ratified CEDAW in 1984, carries out its commitment to eliminate discrimination against women. The women's rights movement believes that the continuation of the struggle against the bill and fundamentalism is crucial: in reaffirming women's autonomy over mind, body and sexuality; and in exercising women's movement leadership in advancing the state's fulfillment of its responsibility to enforce human rights.

Source: Andy Yentriyani, *Indonesian National Commission on Violence against Women*–KOMNAS. Email: andyce95@yahoo.com

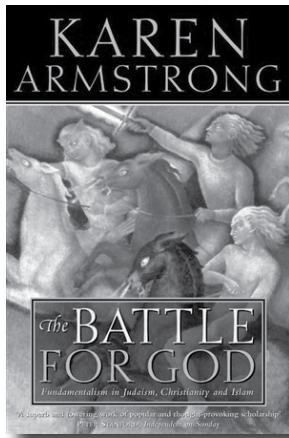
One effective initiative to challenge religious fundamentalisms in Indonesia was the formation of a study group of progressive Islamic scholars, women's studies lecturers, and women's rights activists in 1999 (the author was one of them). The group, *Forum Kajian Kitab Kuning* (FK3), was initiated by Ibu Nuriyah Abdurrahman Wahid and aimed to research gender bias in a text book used in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) since 1910 in Indonesia, with the goal of making it gender sensitive. FK3 reinterpreted this book on the code of conduct between husbands and wives and found the following: a) many of the religious texts in the book were translated literally from the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (reports on the sayings and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad) and taken out of context; b) the author presented some texts from the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* without considering basic Islamic principles such as humanity, compassion, liberation/independence, equality and justice, including gender justice; c) several texts on husband-wife relationships exhibited gender bias (e.g., the husband has absolute authority on his wife); and, d) almost 60% of the texts were found to have no valid sources.

FK3 subsequently published and disseminated this gender-sensitive text book in 2001. Two years later, a group of conservative *Ulamas* formed a counter-study group. However, FK3 and *Puan Amal Hayati*, an NGO also established by Ibu Nuriyah which aims to empower women in *pesantrens*, initiated a constructive dialogue with this conservative study group, leading the latter to understand FK3's methods of reinterpretation and perspective. *Puan Amal Hayati*'s activities also involved men, with husbands disseminating the new text book in *pesantrens*. Male teachers were regularly invited to join FK3 and *Puan Amal Hayati*'s activities and now read the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* from a gender-sensitive perspective and join other activities to disseminate Islamic regulations (*fiqh*) that support women's rights. Two years ago, a more popular version of the text book was published and several months ago, a second edition was printed, demonstrating wider acceptance among *pesantrens* and the public.

Source: Atasbendartini Habsjab, *Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan* (YKP). Email: atashabsjab@yahoo.com

Recent Campaigns and Petitions

- *Declaration of Support for the Immediate Passage of the Reproductive Health Bill into Law: Petition to Philippine Congress.* www.petitiononline.com/rhan2008/petition.html
- *The Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women!* www.stop-stoning.org
- *Malaysia: Statement against Mandatory HIV/AIDS Testing* myplus@mac.org.my
- *Musawab: A Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family.* www.musawah.org
- *Petition for Sexuality Rights in Malaysia.* www.petitiononline.com/psrmsia/petition.html
- *The Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.* www.yogyakartaprinciples.org

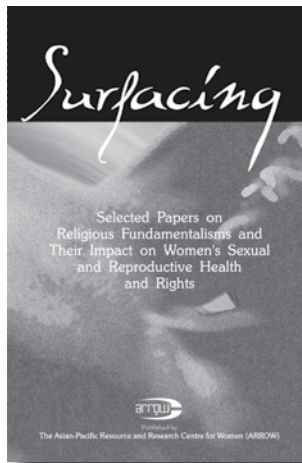


Armstrong, Karen. 2001. *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism.* New York: The Random House Publishing Group. 480p. "Introduction" available at www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/rc/library/display.pper?isbn=9780345391698&view=excerpt
Tel.: +1 410 848 1900.
Fax.: +1 410 386 7049.

This notable book from one of the foremost 20th century religion scholars addresses the question of how and why in this age of reason and technology, fundamentalism has emerged as one of the most powerful forces at work in the world. Karen Armstrong focusses on Protestant fundamentalism in the United States, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, and Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt and Iran, and traces their development chronologically, side by side, to show how similar they are. Maintaining that fundamentalism often exists in symbiotic relationship with an aggressive modernity, Armstrong strongly advises against coercion and suppression. Rather, she recommends compassion as a way to defuse what is now an intensifying conflict.

ARROW. 2008. *Surfacing: Selected Papers on Religious Fundamentalisms and Their Impact on Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.* Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: ARROW. 76p. Available at www.arrow.org.my

Surfacing offers papers that came out of a 2007 ARROW symposium on the impact of religious fundamentalisms on Asia-Pacific women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Elizabeth Aguilong-Pangalangan (the Philippines), Jashodhara Dasgupta (India), Kalpana Kannabiran (South Asia) and Zaitun Mohammad Kasim (Islamic countries) problematise and articulate the varied impact of Catholic, Hindu and Islamic fundamentalisms on SRHR, and begin the discussion on strategies for addressing these obstacles. Michael Tan, in his synthesis, draws out the convergences around the various types and forms of religious fundamentalisms across the region. The book concludes with Rashidah Abdullah's paper on ways to move forward



toward meeting the challenges of religious fundamentalisms, while ensuring that advocacies are contextualised in the spiritual lives of women in the region.

Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). 2008. *Religious Fundamentalisms on the Rise: A Case for Action.* Available at www.awid.org Tel: +1 416 5943773. Fax: +1 416 5940330.

This publication addresses how religious fundamentalisms are impacting women's rights. It seeks to give an introductory overview to how this global rise is affecting women's rights in different contexts, and how this is a source of concern for anyone working on human rights and social justice issues. There are two other publications in the series: one busts the top ten myths about religious fundamentalisms; the other seeks to distil definitions and understandings of religious fundamentalisms drawn from AWID's global survey and in-depth interviews to arrive at shared understandings.

Catholics for Choice (CFC). 2008. *Truth and Consequence: A Look behind the Vatican's Ban on Contraception.* Washington, DC, USA: CFC. 28p. Available at www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/reform/documents/TruthConsequencesFINAL.pdf Tel.: +202 986 6093. Fax.: +202 332 7995.

Launched on the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, this report examines the impact of this Vatican document that cemented the ban on contraception. While the denial of an updated ethic regarding human sexuality has harmed the Catholic church itself, it has had even more serious consequences on public health. Because of *Humanae Vitae*, the Vatican has influenced public policy and prevented women and men (Catholics and non-Catholics alike) in the developing world from accessing reliable contraceptive methods and condoms to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS. The publication ends with a challenge to the Catholic church to "craft a more modern sexual ethic that recognises a role for sexuality beyond procreation and a role...that offers women full equality within the church."

Correa, S.; Parker, R.; Petchesky, R. 2008. "Chapter 3: The sad 'return of the religious.'" IN *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights.* London and New York: Routledge. pp. 53-79 of 312p. See www.routledge.com

Sexuality, Health and Human Rights surveys how rapid changes taking place at the start of the 21st century in social, cultural, political and economic domains impact on sexuality, health and human rights. Chapter 3 of this new work discusses the return of religious fervour and extremism as a major factor in determining the contours of the current global 'sex' wars. In this chapter, the authors deconstruct the

usage of the term “the growth of religious fundamentalism,” situate religious extremism in relation to and separate from religiosity and spirituality, and examine closely how religious extremism intersect with political, cultural and economic influences. The chapter also revisits secularisation and examines its potentialities and limits.



Dubel, I.; Vintges, K. (Eds.). 2007. *Women, Feminism and Fundamentalism*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: SWP Publishers. Translated from Dutch into English by HIVOS. 160p. See: www.swpbook.com
Tel.: +31 0 20 33007200.

Featuring authors who argue that a struggle for women's rights is possible within non-secular contexts, *Women, Feminism and Fundamentalism* is divided into three sections: “Concepts and theories,” wherein articles reflect on the relationship between fundamentalism and feminism in religious contexts; “Islamic feminism,” which provides a link between theory and practice; and “Strategies.” The latter chapter includes articles comparing strategies of feminists working for women's rights within Iran vis-à-vis those of secular feminists in the diaspora, striving for women's liberation in a religious idiom in Latin America, global cooperation of feminists of different religions, and the diversity of feminist strategies as practiced by members of Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

Imam, A.; Morgan, J.; Yuval-Davis, N. 2004. *Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms*. Nottingham, UK: Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). 182p. Available at www.wluml.org/english/pubsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B87%5D=i-87-98541

This seminal publication presents many of the papers at WLUML's 2002 conference on the warning signs of fundamentalisms. Some of these pieces analyse the common danger signals indicating the rising intensity of right-wing political projects, and some focus on specific strategies of resistance. The papers cover a range of geographical contexts and global issues (the latter includes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, multiculturalism, legal systems, the media, as well as fundamentalisms in Catholic, Hindu and Jewish contexts). Of particular note to Asia-Pacific readers are the articles by Chayanika Shah (India), Zainah Anwar and Nora Murat (Malaysia), and Sara Hossain and Tazeen Murshid (Bangladesh).

Othman, Norani. (Ed.) 2005. *Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Sisters in Islam. 215pp. Tel. +603 77856121. Fax.: +603 77858738. Email: sistersinislam@pd.jaring.my
Website: www.sistersinislam.org.my

This book showcases eight essays describing experiences of women's groups from Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore) and the Middle East (Egypt, Iran and Morocco) in challenging Islamic extremism. All papers were originally presented at the international roundtable “Muslim Women Challenge Religious Extremism—Building Bridges between Southeast Asia and the Middle East,” held in October 2003. Norani Othman provides the introduction, while Othman and Zainah Anwar give the conclusion.

Reproductive Health Matters. 2007. Vol. 15, No. 29: “Male circumcision for HIV prevention and taking on the opposition to sexual and reproductive rights.” 235p. Email: S.Evans@elsevier.com
See: www.rhm-elsevier.com
Tel.: +44 20 7267 6567. Fax.: +44 20 7267 2551.



Aside from featuring a roundtable on male circumcision, this RHM issue tackles strategies for taking on the opposition to sexual and reproductive rights. Amongst others, papers discuss abortion law and policy vis-à-vis religious support and opposition, parliamentary agendas and public opinion (Middle East and North Africa, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago); the role of advocates, donors and governments with regards to emergency contraception (Latin America); sex workers' right to health (Brazil); legislating against sexual violence (Nigeria); and fighting for minority and poor women's access to health services (the United States).

WLUML. 2006. *Dossier 28: A Collection of Articles*. 113p. Available at [www.wluml.org/english/pubsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[87\]=i-87-552888](http://www.wluml.org/english/pubsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[87]=i-87-552888)

Dossier 28 contributes to a much-needed discussion on moving beyond resistance and threshing out concrete alternatives to extreme right politics, in order to develop a movement that is more inclusive and more effective. The articles in this volume presents various analyses of secularism, from the perspective of theory as well as lived experience in contexts as diverse as Algeria, Argentina, China, Egypt, France, India, Italy, Senegal, South Africa and Sudan.

Other Resources

Austrian Society for Family Planning. 2008. *Reproductive Health and Religion: Factsheet*. Available at www.oegf.at/dokumente/reproductive_health_religion_en.pdf

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). 2004. *DAWN Special supplement for the World Social Forum, Mumbai, 16–21 January 2004: Religious Fundamentalism*. Nigeria. 12p. See: www.dawnnet.org

Emerson, M.O.; Hartman, D. 2006. "The rise of religious fundamentalism." *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol. 32, pp. 127–144. Emails: moe@rice.edu, david.hartman.34@nd.edu

Girard, Francoise. 2004. "Global implications of US domestic and international policies on sexuality." International Working Group for Sexuality and Social Policy Working Papers, No.1. 31p. Available at http://mailman.columbia.edu/sms/cgsh/iwgssp_english.pdf

Ilkcaracan, Pinar. (Ed.) 2008. *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*. UK: Ashgate. 218p. www.ashgate.com

Isis International-Manila. 2008. *Women in Action*. "Reproductive justice, resisting religious repression, abortion battles." No. 1, 2008. 112p. Available at www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&cid=1065&Itemid=200 Tel.: +63 2 9281956. Fax No.: +63 2 9241065.

Likhaan, ReproCen, and Center for Reproductive Rights. 2007. *Imposing Misery: The Impact of Manila's Ban on Contraception*. Philippines. 53p. Available at www.reproductiverights.org/pdf/Philippines%20report.pdf

Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts. 2008. *Women Empowering Themselves: A Framework that Interrogates and Transforms*. Pakistan. Email: info@wemc.com.hk Tel.: +852 3442 6214

Shirkat Gah. 2007. *Talibanisation and Poor Governance: Undermining CEDAW in Pakistan; Second Shadow Report*. Lahore, Pakistan: Shirkat Gah. pp.41. Available at [www.shirkatgah.org/CEDAW%20report%20\(PDF%20format\).pdf](http://www.shirkatgah.org/CEDAW%20report%20(PDF%20format).pdf) Tel.: +92 5836554. Fax.: +92 425860185.

Sobritchea, C.; Estrada-Claudio, S.; Mohideen, R. 2008. "A Centennial conversation: Women contesting fundamentalisms and other forms of intolerance." University of the Philippines Centennial Lecture. NISMED Auditorium, UP Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines, 11 March 2008, 2p.m. Video available at <http://dilc.upd.edu.ph/streaming/sobritchea.html>

Viado, Lalaine. 2005. *Reproductive Health Politics, Health Sector Reforms and Religious Conservatism in the Philippines*. Nigeria: DAWN. 47p.

ARROW's Publications

Thanenthiran, Sivananthi & Racherla, Sai Jyothirmmai. 2009. *Reclaiming & Redefining Rights: ICPD+15: Status of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Asia*. ARROW. 162p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 2008. *Advocating Accountability: Status Report on Maternal Health and Young People's SRHR in South Asia*. 140p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 2008. *Surfacing: Selected Papers on Religious Fundamentalisms and Their Impact on Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights*. 76p. US\$5.

ARROW. 2007. *Rights and Realities: Monitoring Reports on the Status of Indonesian Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights; Findings from the Indonesian Reproductive Health and Rights Monitoring & Advocacy (IRRMA) Project*. 216p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 2005. *Monitoring Ten Years of ICPD Implementation: The Way Forward to 2015, Asian Country Reports*. 384p. US\$10.00

ARROW, Center for Reproductive Rights (CRR). 2005. *Women of the World: Laws and Policies Affecting Their Reproductive Lives, East and Southeast Asia*. 235p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 2003. *Access to Quality Gender-Sensitive Health Services: Women-Centred Action Research*. 147p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 2001. *Women's Health Needs and Rights in Southeast Asia: A Beijing Monitoring Report*. 39p. US\$10.00

Abdullah, Rashidah. 2000. *A Framework of Indicators for Action on Women's Health Needs and Rights after Beijing*. ARROW. 30p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 2000. *In Dialogue for Women's Health Rights: Report of the Southeast Asian Regional GO-NGO Policy Dialogue on Monitoring and Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, 1–4 June 1998, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*. 65p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 1999. *Taking up the Cairo Challenge: Country Studies in Asia-Pacific*. 288p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 1997. *Gender and Women's Health: Information Package No. 2*. v.p. US\$10.00

ARROW. 1996. *Women-centred and Gender-sensitive Experiences: Changing Our Perspectives, Policies and Programmes on Women's Health in Asia and the Pacific; Health Resource Kit*. v.p. US\$10.00

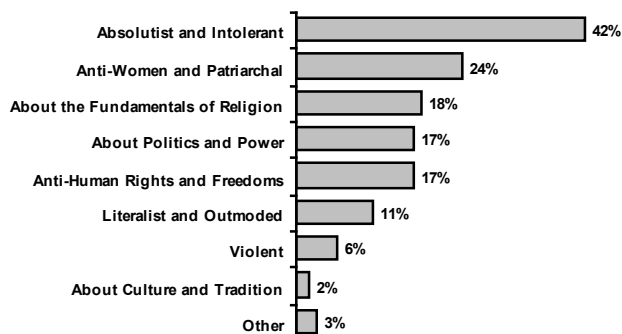
ARROW. 1994. *Towards Women-Centred Reproductive Health: Information Package No. 1*. v.p. US\$10.00

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Definitions

How do women's rights groups define "religious fundamentalisms"?

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)'s "Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms" initiative initially sought to develop a definition of religious fundamentalisms using the results of a global survey, interviews with women's rights activists with a long history of working on the issue and stakeholder input. However, "drafting one that responded to the understanding held by women's rights activists from diverse organisations, religions, regions or perspectives, proved impossible as no brief, concise statement could encompass the distinct ways that religious fundamentalisms operate or shift in focus from region to region or between religions, their relationship to other fundamentalisms, or concerns with the term itself."¹ Rather than drafting a catchall definition, the team then considered "family resemblances" or shared characteristics between different manifestations of religious fundamentalisms as an analytical tool.² What has emerged is a common understanding among women's rights activists of the most pervasive characteristics of religious fundamentalisms that hold true despite differences across regions and religions (shown below).^{2,3} "It is these shared understandings that provide a critical basis for women's rights activists to forge alliances and develop effective strategies to challenge religious fundamentalisms."⁴



Note: The survey question "How would you define 'religious fundamentalisms'?" was coded to categorise how 1,483 respondents described religious fundamentalisms. Multiple responses accepted.

What now?

Despite concerns about the term "religious fundamentalisms,"⁴ many women's rights activists still find it useful. "Religious fundamentalisms" remains the most widely used descriptor of these varied phenomena and will likely to do so until an alternative term has gained more currency.

What is important when using the term is to provide caveats, recognising its limitations and the various debates surrounding it. It is also crucial that future discourses on this issue examine the alternative terms currently offered—such as religious extremism, religious exceptionalism,⁵ religious dogmatism, and others—and explore new ones. It is also important to clearly state why these terms might be better and how they escape the drawbacks of "religious fundamentalisms." For more effective strategising, it

is extremely critical to look at these phenomena vis-à-vis the socio-political contexts they emerge in, capture the nuances, and examine how all these movements—Christian fundamentalism, Catholic dogmatism, political Islam, *Hindutva* and others that fall under this rubric—are different from each other, even as we explore commonalities and shared understandings.

Endnotes

- 1 AWID: Definitions & Understandings, unpublished article by Shareen Gokal
- 2 Vagionne, Juan Marco. 2008. *Shared Insights: Women's Rights Activists Define Religious Fundamentalisms*. Canada: AWID.
- 3 A more in-depth discussion of these characteristics can be found in *Shared Insights*.
- 4 For a thorough discussion of these concerns, see the Editorial and Correa, Petchesky & Parker (details in the References section).
- 5 "Religious exceptionalism" was introduced as an alternative by Michael Tan at the ARROW-Packard-Global Fund for Women symposium on religious fundamentalisms and SRHR at the 2007 Asia Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights. Tan defined "religious exceptionalism" as "the view that one's own religion has a monopoly on truth and the interpretation of 'good,' usually accompanied by a notion that one's own God is the only 'true' God." He added that "religious exceptionalists lobby to impose their values on an entire community, or even country, through public policies and laws."

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Special thanks as well to the ff.: Jetsada Taesombat, Norhayati Kaprawi, Ranjani Krishnamurthy, Rozana Isa, Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, Surwannee Hanmusiewatkoon & Zainah Arwaz

ARROWs For Change (AFC) is produced twice yearly, primarily for Asian-Pacific decision-makers in women's rights, health, population and sexual and reproductive health and rights organisations. It is translated four times a year to selected Asia-Pacific languages. The bulletin is developed with input from key individuals and organisations in the Asia-Pacific region and ARROW's Information and Documentation Centre. Articles in AFC may be reproduced and/or translated without prior permission, provided that credit is given and a copy of the reprint is sent to the Editors. Copyright of photos belongs to contributors. AFC receives funding support from Oxfam Novib and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

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Impacts of Religious Fundamentalisms on Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights

The research conducted by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)'s "Challenging and Resisting Religious Fundamentalism" initiative affirms that one of the most commonly felt effects of the global rise of religious fundamentalisms is a negative impact on the sexual and reproductive rights of women. While this is far from surprising, AWID's survey on religious fundamentalisms does bring to light the gravity of the situation. When participants are asked to provide examples of the impacts of religious fundamentalisms (recalling that these impacts may relate to matters as broad as freedom of movement, education, dress codes, economic participation, and a variety of other factors), 46% of respondents cite examples relating directly to health and reproductive rights. Additionally, when respondents are asked for examples of religious fundamentalist campaigns they are aware of, the most commonly mentioned subject of such campaigning is abortion (64%).

Manifestations of the impacts of religious fundamentalisms on women's sexual and reproductive rights and health can be incredibly diverse across regional and religious contexts. A survey respondent from Liberia notes how certain ministers deter women from seeking medical care during labour as 'God will provide.' A respondent relates how the Teej festival in Hinduism, involving a 24-hour ritual fast for the husband's longevity, may offer no respite or exception for a woman who is pregnant or lactating. In Nigeria, certain Christian colleges have instituted virginity testing for female students to obtain scholarships or be allowed to graduate. The Christian right in the United States promotes virginity through the wearing of 'purity rings' or events called 'purity balls' where fathers pledge to protect their daughters' virginity and daughters pledge to wait until marriage.

The most frequent negative impacts that women's rights activists point to are those relating to the right to accurate knowledge about and access to safe and legal contraception and abortion. The growing opposition to abortion in the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc states is such that in Poland, doctors may refuse to participate in abortions on the basis of 'conscience,' and so even on the limited grounds upon which abortions are now legal, it may not be possible to obtain one. In Georgia, a campaign against sex education in secondary schools initiated in 2007 used the slogan "you don't need sexual education to give birth to children!" Conservative governments in North America have ties to Evangelical and right-wing religious groups that are well documented. The Canadian government has

attempted to introduce legislation to protect the right to life from conception, and in the United States, a recent Supreme Court ruling (*Gonzales v. Carhart*) has banned partial birth abortion, a procedure that is primarily used by low-income, minority women and women whose health may be at risk from the pregnancy. Resorting to unsafe abortion procedures risks physical complications (including infections or secondary infertility) or death. Campaigning against abortion in many contexts involves sensationalist, graphic and violent language and imagery—in Serbia, for example, nationalist youth distributed flyers with pictures of beheaded babies and the slogan "mothers who are not mothers."

The impacts of religious fundamentalist campaigning is clearly transnational however. Catholic hierarchies in different states have used the threat of excommunication against politicians and leaders who support women's rights or the right to choose (for e.g., against Mexican parliamentarians who voted on the legalisation of abortion or US priests supporting the ordination of women). A respondent from Puerto Rico points out how television spots against abortion often show actors with non-Puerto Rican accents, showing that the media campaigns are orchestrated and prepared in one location and then disseminated in different markets across Latin America. A number of survey respondents from countries as varied as Australia and the Czech Republic refer to the existence of helplines for pregnant women which are publicised as though they would provide impartial advice and support, but then turn out to be supported by religious fundamentalist organisations and focussed on dissuading callers from choosing abortion.

Sometimes religious fundamentalist forces of different stripes collaborate to support each other, as in the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and its subsequent follow-up meetings. In Kenya in recent years, one survey respondent recounts that Catholic and Muslim organisations cooperated and burned thousands of condoms in a public park.

While the ways in which religious fundamentalisms are affecting women's sexual and reproductive rights and health are myriad, what is clear is that, across regions and religions, fundamentalist forces do seek to limit the choices and freedoms women have gained. More concerted efforts at understanding the broader goals, agendas, and strategies of religious fundamentalist actors is critical in order for feminists to deepen their understanding of the phenomenon and craft effective responses to resist and challenge their efforts.

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