

Religious Fundamentalisms

Ten myths
about religious
fundamentalisms

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INTRODUCTION

The myths exposed in this publication come from the experiences of more than 1,600 women's rights activists who responded to AWID's Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms survey,¹ as well as 51 key experts who were interviewed for the project. Together, these women's rights activists represent a diverse group: ranging in age from under 16 to over 65 years of age; working on different issues and affected by different religious fundamentalisms; working at local, national, regional or international levels in various regions, and in organizations that range from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) to government and multilateral agencies. They include academics, human rights defenders, youth and development workers, as well as members of religious organizations.

Despite this diversity, we found many myths in common: myths we hold about religious fundamentalisms, as well as myths that religious fundamentalists would like us to believe. Our research reveals that the behaviours and impacts of religious fundamentalisms are clearly more negative than they would like to admit or take responsibility for. But it also reveals that religious fundamentalisms are not as simple to analyze as we sometimes believe. In other words, some major myths, promoted both from the inside looking out and from the outside looking in, were exposed by our findings.

This publication is about the top ten myths common to all regions and religions covered in AWID's research. They can be countered by holding religious fundamentalists accountable for what they say and do, and by ensuring that our analysis most closely matches the lived experiences of women's rights activists. By exposing these myths, we hope that we can contribute to strengthening resistance and challenges to religious fundamentalisms.

1 In August 2007, AWID launched an online survey on the subject of religious fundamentalisms and women's rights. There were over 2,000 responses, of which 1,602 of the most complete were selected for analysis.

Myth #1: Religious fundamentalisms are about the fundamentals of religion

The myth and how it works

Many religious fundamentalist organizations claim that their work only involves promoting religious teachings. This myth gives religious fundamentalisms the image of a legitimate social force that rises above politics and power. It also suggests that it is only natural that all “good” followers of a religion share the fundamentalist viewpoint and that one who resists religious fundamentalisms is not a “true believer”. Forty percent of women’s rights activists have been labelled “atheist” or “unbeliever” by religious fundamentalists due to their work for women’s human rights. Moreover, in the experiences of nearly 60% of women’s rights activists, people from the same religion but with different political opinions are targeted for physical and verbal attack by religious fundamentalists.

Speaking with the support of God is something very different from speaking without it; God is an important source of legitimacy. They are speaking from the Good and for God. It puts you on the side of sin and the Devil. (Susana Chiarotti, Argentina)

Some women’s rights activists seem to agree with the religious fundamentalists’ claim that it is all about religion. In the AWID survey, about 18% of women’s rights activists from across the world, as well as some working in United Nations agencies, provide definitions of religious fundamentalisms such as “[b]elieving and acting by the basic principles of a religion”, or “[t]he use of or reference to deeply-seated and underlying religious beliefs, values, notions and/or practices.”



NOT ALL RELIGIOUS PEOPLE ARE FUNDAMENTALISTS!

Being religious and being a religious fundamentalist are two separate matters. What distinguishes religious fundamentalists is their far right political views, along with the conviction that they are divinely mandated to impose on others what they believe to be the singular truth. There are many rights activists who take a strong stand against religious fundamentalist viewpoints from within a religious framework. Examples include groups such as Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC)/Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD), the Metropolitan Community Churches, Kolech-Religious Women’s Forum, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), and Sisters in Islam, as well as individuals working within the Hindu tradition.

We work with sheikhs and religious scholars to show the people that the interpretation that is offered by religious fundamentalist groups is not the only one available. In most cases when people are offered an alternative interpretation, they take it, because they say it’s a suffocating life to live as is preached by those religious fundamentalists. (Azza Soleiman, Egypt)

I urge us not lump together as [a] negative phenomenon every time religion and politics have something to say to each other - Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, they are heroes for humanity. It's not all terrible when religion has something to say in the political sphere: it is a question of what it has to say and how it says it. (Debbie Weissman, Israel)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISTS WANT POWER!

Many women's rights activists highlight the political nature of religious fundamentalisms and their quest for political and social power. As one activist from Brazil puts it, "[t]he Association of Brazilian Bishops does more politicking than religion!" In Uganda and Brazil, for example, Pentecostal church leaders instruct congregations on which way to vote.

It's a struggle for power, not because of religion; most of them aren't really, really religious but want control of the population. The bottom line is how much followership they can get and how much resources they can generate from that followership. Every religion has it. (Mairo Bello, Nigeria)

Across regions and religions, religious fundamentalists have entered mainstream politics and stand for election to local and national legislative bodies. This is sometimes done through political parties that are clearly based on religion, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-i-Islami, Agudat Israel and Buhay (Catholic charismatics in the Philippines). At other times, a political party's apparently secular or nationalist name conceals a fundamentalist agenda or alliance: for example, the Republican Party in the United States is heavily influenced by the Christian Right; many leading figures in India's Bharatiya Janata Party are also members of the Hindu fundamentalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); Ministers in post-Sandinista Nicaragua are influenced by Opus Dei; and Sri Lanka's Jathika Hela Urumaya promotes Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy.

Religious fundamentalisms aim to capture public spaces and dominate public policy, to the exclusion of other influences. For example, the Serbian Orthodox Church has successfully lobbied for an end to the separation of church and state. This now exempts churches and religious communities from the restrictions on other non-governmental and social organizations.

They operate via the political class; if they didn't, they wouldn't be so effective. Women have abortions, use contraceptives, don't always do what the Church hierarchy says and are still Catholic or Protestant. In daily life, people don't put religious directives first. But when these directives become public policies, that's when the problems start. (Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua)

Myth #2: Religious fundamentalisms are only about politics

The myth and how it works

When women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms, about one-fifth mention the words "politics" and "power". For some, this is the central definition: religious fundamentalisms are "the use of religion for political purposes and for capturing the state". However, one must ask what kind of politics is being promoted through religion, and whether it seeks to restrict or advance human rights and people's moral agency. Since, for example, progressive Liberation Theology also has political aims, defining religious fundamentalisms just as "political religion" does not sufficiently highlight the rightwing aspects of religious fundamentalisms.

Fundamentalist ambitions go beyond the border of politics to envision a complete re-ordering of society. When we see religious fundamentalisms as more than "only about politics", it becomes possible to develop responses to some of their successful social strategies, such as creating emotional communities and a sense of belonging and engaging in service delivery and charitable works. Finally, since religious fundamentalist strategies build on the importance of religion in many people's lives, an overemphasis on their political nature means that rights activists may overlook the place of religion in religious fundamentalisms.



RELIGION IS AT THE CENTRE OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS!

Religious fundamentalisms are clearly a political phenomenon. Yet, it is necessary to go beyond this assertion and recognize the importance of religious symbolism and texts for religious fundamentalisms. Engaging with the centrality of religion can enable progressive forces to reclaim this space from fundamentalists. It can allow activists to examine more deeply and critically that which has enabled patriarchal religious fundamentalisms to emerge out of religion, and to examine if and how these regressive aspects of religion can be reformed.

The historic antipathy to women found in the teachings, theology and attitudes of most of the world's religions... We need to understand that there is a historic, deeply embedded reality about religion itself. (Frances Kissling, United States)

We need to break the monopoly of the Ulema. Religion is in the public space; that is our reality. If we don't engage with religion it remains in the hands of the oppressors. (Zainah Anwar, Malaysia)

Recognizing that religion – especially in the form of religious institutions – is also at the centre of religious fundamentalist recruitment, funding and campaigning also helps rights activists to strategize more effectively. According to women's rights activists across

religions and regions, religious fundamentalists most actively recruit in places of worship and other religious institutions such as Torah and Bible study groups and *madrasahs*. Four out of five see religious leaders and local religious institutions/organizations as the most influential religious fundamentalist actors, placing them above religious political parties and apparently secular political parties with fundamentalist links.

Agudat Israel ideology says that you go to rabbis not only for specific Jewish legal questions but for any question - political or social. (Debbie Weissman, Israel)

In Uganda, Pentecostal churches mobilized their congregations to sign petitions against ratification of the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa in protest of its provisions around reproductive health and rights. (Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe, Uganda)²

Women's rights activists see local religious organizations as the most significant source of funding for religious fundamentalisms, and two-thirds regard money from followers as significant. Examples include donations of sacrificial animal skins during the Muslim festival of *Eid al-Adha* in Egypt, the Islamic tax, or *khums* (one-fifth of net income) mandated in the Shia tradition, the tithes paid by church followers in Ghana and Guatemala, and the sale of "good luck" items by Toitsu Kyokai (The Unification Church, whose members are known as 'Moonies') in Japan. Although some "donations" are forced, clearly some supporters see a spiritual gain that compensates for their material loss.

Even when the church leaders are riding limousines, [the followers are] still willing to drop their last penny in the collection box, and this is replacing food on their tables. (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria)

Zakat - every Muslim has to pay 2.5% of his or her income to the state or religious parties to help the poor, but this amount is being misused for violence. (survey respondent, Pakistan)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISTS WANT SOCIAL CONTROL!

Religious fundamentalisms have a broad goal of social control, beyond any capture of state or political power. As part of this goal, religious fundamentalisms in all regions and religions specifically target youth and the education system, which allows them to influence society without having to capture state power. For example, Opus Dei campaigned to discredit the leadership of Peru's Pontifical Catholic University, which is influenced by the Jesuit Order and known throughout the region for its openly progressive positions on issues of human rights and democracy. In many countries, religious fundamentalist organizations give scholarships and social support to talented but poor young men and women, which guarantees an educated cadre whose loyalty then often extends for generations. Examples of programs to shape youth include the personal

² Based on an interview with Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe, Uganda. Jessica Horn, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian Fundamentalism and Women's Rights in the African Context," 11 May 2008.

development courses run by Hindu fundamentalists in India, youth camps run by Christian Evangelical groups in the United States, and the speed dating organized by the Jewish youth organization Aish HaTorah.

Religious fundamentalisms use service provision to achieve political legitimacy and recruit support, but also to directly promote their vision of society. Church-run hospitals in Brazil and Zambia, for example, offer sexual and reproductive health services that promote a model of women that is submissive and marriage-normative.

A woman was widowed. She was given a lot of support from a group of conservative Muslim women. They visited her, took her shopping and provided her with emotional support. Along with this support came the message of what a good Muslim woman should be. For example, she started covering herself and stopped swimming as these were seen as identifying a good woman. So social welfare is delivered with a strong particular message of what Islam is. (Alia Hogben, Canada)

For 85% of women's rights activists, an important religious fundamentalist strategy is presenting rigid gender roles within the family as "natural". One young feminist explains this goal of social control:

Controlling women is the key to controlling a culture. These religious fundamentalists are afraid of women's inherent power, especially in regards to childrearing. If women are treated as children, they cannot be as effective in shaping children. When women cannot control their fertility, they cannot get access to education and cannot challenge those in power. It is a vicious cycle to keep half of the population in servitude, maintaining the status quo. (Lonna Hays, United States)

Religious fundamentalists also have impact as individuals; they seek social control within their families and all spheres of life where they may have decision-making power. For example, contrary to any public legislation requiring dress codes in public services, the medical superintendent of the public Lahore Services Hospital in Pakistan ordered all nurses to be veiled, with cloth that he had received for free from Saudi Arabia.

What General Zia ul-Haq did in terms of laws was to replace the written text as a reference point for decision-making with people's interpretation of religion as a reference point... As a judge, you are not supposed to say "my understanding of Islam"; you are supposed to say "according to the law of this land and the text and [previous] rulings" and to argue the case. (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan)

Myth #3: Religious fundamentalisms are like any other political force

The myth and how it works

National and foreign governments as well as multilateral agencies often see some religious fundamentalist groups as simply a normal part of the political process and democratic spaces. As a result, for example, foreign embassy officials in Bangladesh frequently interact with religious fundamentalist groups, including senior figures facing criminal charges for murder. This grants such groups legitimacy and further strengthens them.

When some religious fundamentalists are seen as “only moderates” or are accepted as a normal political force, the entire political arena shifts to the Right, and rights activists may find themselves criticized for not being open to collaboration and partnership with such groups. Progressive forces such as women’s and human rights activists then become de-legitimized as “extremist” and “marginal”. In Britain for example, complaints from human rights defenders about local Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist groups that were receiving government funding were ignored for years. Religious fundamentalisms have a way of operating that makes them a particularly dangerous political and social force; their impact thus requires a different strategic response from rights and development movements.



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISTS HAVE GOD-APPEAL!

Religious fundamentalisms promote unequal power relations within society, especially within the family, as “God given” and natural. What one women’s rights activist calls “the reordering of notions of masculinity and femininity by religious fundamentalisms” thus becomes difficult to challenge. This can be especially harmful for marginalized groups in society, such as victims of domestic violence in Thailand who are told by Buddhist monks that they are beaten as a result of “bad *karma*”.

If Al-Azhar says that something that you are doing is *haram* [prohibited in religion], that is the ultimate taboo. For young women now, to show your hair is *haram*, to not obey your elder brother is *haram*, to do this is *haram*, to do that is *haram*, to the point where her entire life is governed by *haram*, while a young man has nothing of that sort. (Azza Soleiman, Egypt)

Religious fundamentalisms are different from other rights-violating ideologies such as ethno-nationalist and cultural fundamentalisms or neoliberalism, because religious fundamentalisms appear to address metaphysical questions. This makes them particularly hard to resist. As one women’s rights activist from Canada explains, “[t]hey start to define who you are and your very reason for being here – and therefore in challenging them you are challenging the essence of your very being.” In many contexts,

religion has become a sensitive subject that can elicit highly polarized reactions – where a challenge to religion is often perceived as a threat to individual or communal identity. This makes it especially difficult for young women to work on the issue of religious fundamentalisms while still trying to determine where they stand with regard to religion, culture and society.

When, for example, Ugandan Pentecostal and Charismatic Church leaders promise their impoverished congregations future wealth, they play on the human need for hope in a complex and sometimes hopeless world. Religious fundamentalisms offer a vital grand narrative. In some contexts, they provide emotional communities that respond to the need for belonging. In Brazil, for example, one women’s rights activist notes that religious fundamentalists focus less on providing charity services than on building emotional communities around personal subjectivities:

They work on people’s emotional responses in terms of big meetings where people come together. This is something they’ve learned from the evangelists (the Catholic Church). They have big rallies where [the experience] is very mystical and spiritual. They invest a lot in this kind of thing. For example, where a figure like the Pope comes, everything they do is to create emotional spaces so that people can identify with the discourse or the speeches that he makes. (Maria José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil)

The fundamental attraction of religious fundamentalisms is their capacity to provide identity, certainty, and quick and seemingly unquestionable definitions and solutions. It is impossible to seriously work on sexuality and offer that. On the contrary, the only thing we can offer are ‘uncertainties’, risk and multiple possibilities that then open up and add more and more complexities. (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)

Religious fundamentalism is a form of defensive community identity that gives this kind of security and safety. When I did my work on Jewish fundamentalism, people said to me ‘I didn’t know what it meant to be Jewish but now I know!’ [This meets] such an existential need. (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom/Israel)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE ABSOLUTIST, INTOLERANT AND VIOLENT!

No matter what religion is dominant in their contexts, women’s rights activists most commonly define religious fundamentalisms as “absolutist and intolerant”. In the over 1,500 comments that AWID received defining religious fundamentalisms, phrases such as “lack of acceptance for alternative worldviews and lifestyles”, “lack of respect for difference of opinion” and “intolerance of questioning” are repeated by women’s rights

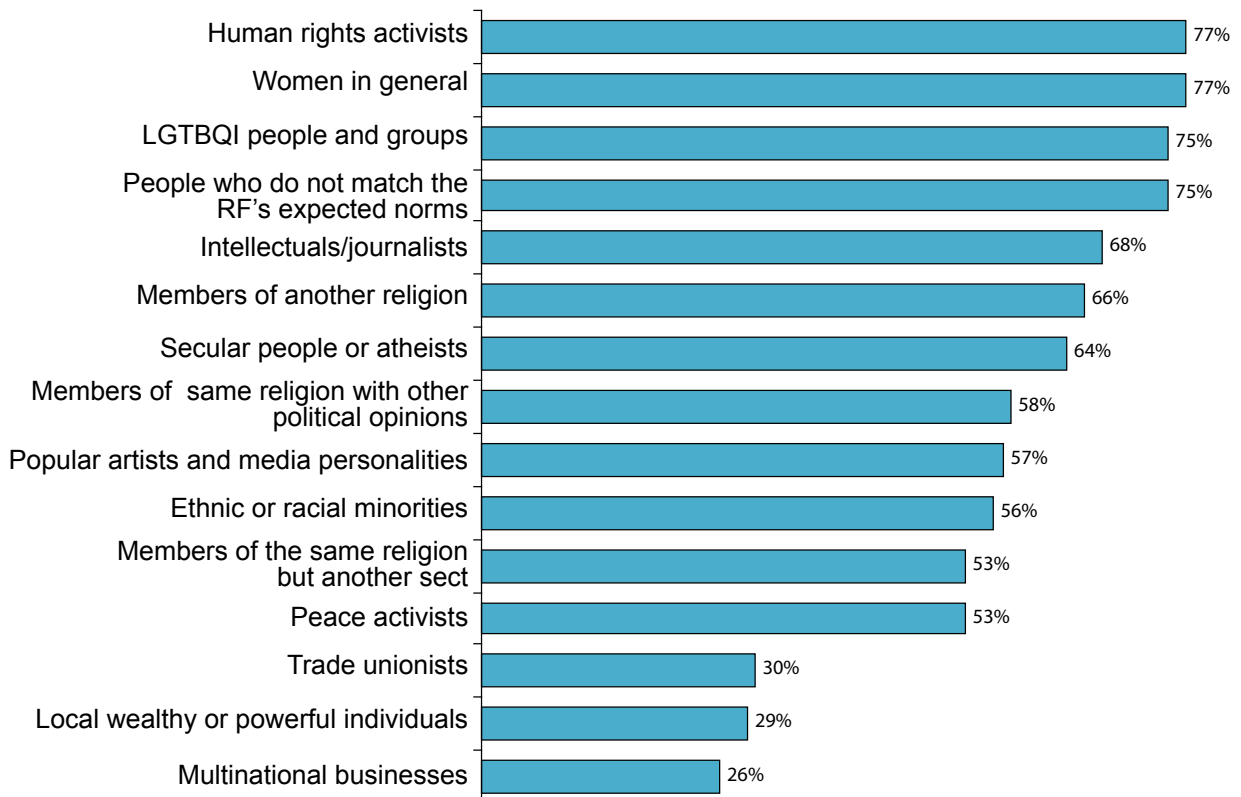
activists from every region. This claim to the Truth is not just another manifestation of rightwing political thinking:

Conservatives think for themselves; religious fundamentalisms want everyone to think their way. I can debate with people that disagree with me but not with people who think they have a direct line to God. (Rev. Debra W. Haffner, United States)

Some of the most extreme religious fundamentalist violence targets those who air opposing views, including artists, intellectuals, journalists and other public figures. Under the banner of “morality” or “blasphemy”, there have been public attacks on artistic freedom by religious fundamentalists in recent years, including Hindu fundamentalist attacks on Indian artist M.F. Husain and filmmaker Deepa Mehta; Sikh fundamentalist attacks on *Behzti*, a play in Britain about sexual abuse in Sikh temples; the murders of several journalists and popular artists by Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria; bans on the screening of the film *The Da Vinci Code* following pressure from the Catholic Church; and the Christian Right’s attempt to close down *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

Figure 1 shows high levels of verbal and physical violence by religious fundamentalists against various targeted groups – with human rights activists and women in general perceived as the most frequently targeted.

Figure 1: Thinking about your work over the past ten years, which of the following people or groups have been targeted by fundamentalists for verbal or physical attack?



Note: These are the combined percentages of women’s rights activists who respond “sometimes” or “frequently” to each type of target.

Base: 1,380 survey respondents



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISTS ARE AGAINST PLURALISM AND DEMOCRACY!

In the name of political pluralism and social diversity, religious fundamentalists claim the right to be treated like any other political or socially influential force. But in the view of women's rights activists, in practice they divide rather than unite society. In Azerbaijan, religious fundamentalisms have caused social polarization between the religious and the non-religious, and rifts between sects in Pakistan. In India, this has culminated in a Hindu fundamentalist campaign to make villages "Muslim-free", with armed Bajrang Dal activists driving Muslim families from their homes. In each context, opposing groups have what one women's rights activist calls "this need for power and strength in numbers that has created fear and intimidation".

Religious fundamentalists strategize to restrict resources available to those who oppose them. In Mexico, for instance, the fundamentalist-influenced Health Ministry has obstructed funding for NGOs working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people. In Bangladesh's coalition government, a Jamaat-i-Islami member became the Minister for Social Welfare, which played an important role in allowing religious fundamentalists to operate in the guise of NGOs and also in restricting the space for NGOs who challenged them. This impact on funding can undermine democratic accountability: in Canada, the Evangelical-influenced Conservative Government has cut funding for women's groups that actively monitored government performance.

Religious fundamentalists attack collective organizing by women and progressive religious groups. For example, they strategically undermined the infrastructure of the progressive church in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, and in Latin America attempts have been made to de-register *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* (Catholics for a Free Choice).

When we started our work in the slum areas, religious leaders started giving us threatening messages, destroyed our vehicle and claimed that we would sell the girls from the slum. They spread false messages about our team, so that women would not come to our meetings. It took more than three years to deal [with this]; we spent so much energy on the *mullahs*. (survey respondent, Pakistan)

When religious fundamentalists campaign for democracy, it is largely based on a limited vision of pluralism that enables their own political participation but seeks to restrict that of others. For example, Muslim fundamentalist groups in Kenya have strongly campaigned against a proposed anti-terrorism bill and issues related to fighting terrorism as most of those targeted are Muslims, but "the same people involved in this campaign are also the champions of anti-women[s] rights policies and laws".

Religious fundamentalist campaigns for separate religious schools undermine pluralism in society and ultimately contradict fundamentalist claims to campaigning in favour of political pluralism. In Nigeria for example, religious fundamentalists have tried to undermine federal government “unity schools”; these schools are part of a deliberate attempt to counteract ethno-religious polarization and have quotas to ensure students come from every state. A researcher on the Orthodox Jewish community found that “the one thing that made a difference was being exposed to other world views as legitimate, which you can get only if you have the same school”. (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom/Israel)

Imagine the fragmentation: so the Wiccans, Baha'is, the five kinds of Muslims, 16 kinds of Christians are all going to send their children to separate schools. (Alia Hogben, Canada)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS OBSTRUCT RIGHTS MORE THAN OTHER POLITICAL FORCES!

As a development rights worker in India notes, “[f]or a long time people have dismissed some of these groups as just fringe extremist groups and had not really seen them until they became powerful enough to have an impact” (Mona Mehta, India). Yet the negative impact is felt across a wide range of rights. The five most frequently mentioned impacts are: reduced health and reproductive rights; reduced general autonomy for women (such as the imposition of dress codes or reinforcing women’s inequality in the family); increased violence against women; reduced sexual rights and freedoms; and reduced rights for women in the public sphere.

For about 7 out of 10 women’s rights activists, religious fundamentalisms obstruct women’s rights more than other political forces: 44% say that they obstruct women’s rights “much more” than other political forces. Nearly 80% of women’s rights activists regard religious fundamentalisms as having a negative impact on women’s rights in the context of their work.

The task for those of us who work on human rights is to persuade people that we are not attacking an ideology, we are talking about grave crimes – whether state or non-state. We are not talking about some nasty people in funny clothes that many largely Northern and Western organizations feel uncomfortable about criticizing. Many people have no idea what is meant by ‘attacks on women’s rights’ either in scale or ferocity – so we have to analyze them as human rights violations, and we have to document them, to increase their visibility... But women under the worst threat quite often do not document because they are doing so many other things. (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom/India)

Myth #4: Religious fundamentalists are those backward extremists

The myth and how it works

Religious fundamentalisms are sometimes dismissed as arising from “archaic texts”, “traditional beliefs”, or “old myths”. Within the women’s movement and beyond, some also see modernism and religious fundamentalisms as two completely opposite forces. This myth means that religious fundamentalisms become stereotyped as an object of ridicule instead of being seen as a flexible social force that requires a sophisticated strategic response. The presumption that religious fundamentalists are only those easy to spot medievalists who wear “strange clothes” and are visibly “extremist” can lead governments, multilateral agencies and international NGOs to collaborate with and legitimize groups that women’s rights activists warn are, on the contrary, fundamentalist. It allows the religious fundamentalist who wears a smart suit, appears to be concerned about women’s rights, and co-opts human rights language to go unchallenged.

Muslim fundamentalists have successfully lobbied human rights organizations, the Left at large, the anti-globalization movement, and even feminists in Europe, etc... i.e., all the political forces that should be our natural allies. (Marieme Hélie-Lucas, France/Algeria)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE THOROUGHLY MODERN!

Religious fundamentalisms all share a critique of modernity, but it is a highly selective critique; they work in a globalized way, support or exploit neoliberal politics and discourse, and use technologies that are all essential aspects of modernity. No matter how much they may refer to a “pure tradition” or “glorious past”, religious fundamentalisms are very much part of today’s world, shaping it and also being shaped by it.

More than four out of five women’s rights activists state that religious fundamentalisms use modern technologies (e.g., Internet, cable TV, satellite technology) to promote their messages. In Zimbabwe, fundamentalist churches use PowerPoint for preaching, offer business management workshops and have sophisticated sound equipment; in the Philippines, religious fundamentalists hold rock concerts to fundraise and appeal to youth; and in Fiji, Radio Light, one of only two free channels, devotes much of its airtime to Evangelical content from overseas.

There are almost 40 new TV channels that are addressing Iraqis and all the surrounding countries, but I would say that 80% of them are religious. If you have the mass media under your control, you can manipulate millions of people. (Yanar Mohammed, Iraq)

The double standards of such tactics have not gone unnoticed in Nigeria: “[i]f you analyze their own private lives, it’s not going the way they preach. If they are anti-West, they have satellites; they use the Internet; they use airplanes...”

Religious fundamentalisms also appear perfectly comfortable with globalized big business. Popular multinational food chains fund anti-abortion groups such as Operation Rescue in the United States; fundamentalist groups in Mexico have bought up privatized public companies; and fundamentalist Hindu temples in Britain are places where important business relationships are built.

In tune with the contemporary world, most religious fundamentalisms are transnational movements, and take advantage of aspects of globalization to spread their influence. For Indonesian women's rights activists, the transnational Hizb ut-Tahrir (founded by an Arab Israeli) is a locally influential religious fundamentalist force, and women from Latin America say the same about Opus Dei (founded in Spain). Distinguishing between what is transnational and what is local is almost impossible in the case of Sikh fundamentalisms.

While many movements operate transnationally, religious fundamentalisms have also recognized the importance of operating at the level of regional and international fora, influencing the development and direction of international standards. One women's rights activist highlights the impact of this trend within the European Union:

The fundamentalists succeeded in freezing policies of the European Union as far as sexual and reproductive health and rights are concerned. Due to strong pressure from conservative forces, including members of the EU Parliament, any progressive initiatives to address sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe are being rejected. Polish fundamentalists sitting in the European Parliament, supported by their Slovakian colleagues and others with close collaboration with the Vatican, have undertaken a number of initiatives that could inhibit the implementation of already adopted policies. (Wanda Nowicka, Poland)



THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A TYPICAL RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALIST!

AWID's research found that there is no "typical fundamentalist". They may operate at local or global levels; through religious or secular institutions; as individuals or through institutions; and as leaders or followers. Many religious fundamentalists even traverse some of these dichotomies and can, for example, work through religious and secular institutions at the same time. When women's rights activists name the most influential fundamentalist actors in their contexts, they name a wide variety. In addition, nearly every religion in every region has a similar recurrent cast: politicians in secular and religious parties, religious leaders, charities and NGOs, local and international religious organizations, missionaries, and ordinary followers in our communities and families.

When asked to rate the relative influence of a range of fundamentalist actors in their work, 62% of women's rights activists name NGOs and/or charities with fundamentalist

tendencies or links, and 59% name secular political parties whose leaders have fundamentalist links. In AWID's research, these less obvious examples were mentioned more frequently than the expected category of armed groups. This indicates that physical violence is not the only defining characteristic of religious fundamentalisms.

A women's rights activist in Fiji notes that religious fundamentalist groups mostly operate not through public campaigns, but rather through quiet lobbying and high-level access to political decision-makers. The content of an actor's agenda is, for some women's rights activists, more important than that actor's specific label as "religious" in defining an institution or an individual as "fundamentalist". In this sense, civic or political leaders can be considered part of the phenomenon if they defend a fundamentalist agenda.

It always works this way: a 'pro-life' group makes noise, religious leaders condemn the Ministry of Health or Education, and finally the President recalls the document. It's the same format in all these countries. (Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua)

Myth #5: Religious fundamentalisms only exist in some religions or regions

The myth and how it works

Part of the myth that religious fundamentalisms are medieval and purely extremist means they are also seen as somehow not being part of the local landscape here but "out there". The term was originally a proud self-labelling by early 20th century American Christian Evangelicals, but in the context of today's 'War on Terror', religious fundamentalism is often presumed to mean only Muslim fundamentalists. The result is that one religion is demonized and by extension, all its followers presumed to be "fundamentalist". This is discussed further in AWID's publication "Shared Insights: Women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms" (2008). In Latin America and the Caribbean often only the Catholic hierarchy is identified as fundamentalist, which overlooks the rising influence of fundamentalist Pentecostals and Charismatics.

Also, seeing religious fundamentalisms as a distant phenomenon "out there" means the influence of their ideas within parts of the women's and human rights movements themselves can be overlooked. In some countries, despite the presence of active women's movements and women's NGOs, there can be a noticeable reluctance to wholeheartedly sign up to issues of reproductive choice and sexual diversity. Women's rights activists from Africa and the Pacific region echo the concern raised by a Fijian activist that "[m]any who would call themselves human rights activists do not even recognize the churches they belong to as fundamentalist, nor wish to challenge their teachings".

The other side of this coin is the presumption among some women's rights activists that their own experience of religious fundamentalisms is worse than any other, and not

shared by others in different contexts. It is important to build the recognition that religious fundamentalisms are found in every religion and region, and that there are commonalities in the ways they work, grow and impact women's rights that rise above regional and religious variations. This shared understanding can help develop more effective transnational and regional alliances as well as strategies for resisting and challenging religious fundamentalisms.

ALL RELIGIONS HAVE FUNDAMENTALIST TENDENCIES!

Women's rights activists in every region find fundamentalist tendencies within the world's major and minor religions. AWID's research found their work is negatively affected by fundamentalisms whether the context is Buddhist, Catholic, Christian (including Evangelical forms such as Pentecostal or Charismatic churches), Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh. Localized religious traditions such as ethno-religious movements, e.g., Kenyan Mungiki, Congo's Kimbanguists and Bundu dia Kongo, Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, Mexican indigenous Tepehuán and Nepali shamanism, and new religions, e.g., the Unification Church ('Moonies') or the Shinto-related Seicho-No-Ie in Japan also show some fundamentalist tendencies.

Fundamentalism is therefore not the monopoly of any one religion, nor is any religion covered by AWID's research free of fundamentalist actors.

Religious fundamentalisms are a global phenomenon. In the last ten years, women's rights activists in all regions have observed a significant rise in these movements – both globally ("out there") and in their work. For 76% of women's rights activists, the strength of religious fundamentalisms has increased globally in the past decade, and for 60%, it has increased a lot in their work.

WOMEN HAVE SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS!

Despite the diversity of their experiences of religious fundamentalisms, women's rights activists have a shared understanding of the phenomenon. There are no significant differences in terms of how they define religious fundamentalisms (see "Shared Insights: Women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms", 2008). The same types of main fundamentalist actors also reappear in each region and religion. No matter what the religion, fundamentalists campaign most frequently on "morality" and issues of sexuality.

Indeed, there are often similarities in areas where religious fundamentalisms are presumed to work very differently. For example, Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Pentecostal fundamentalists are broadly seen as obsessed with obstructing abortion and sexual and reproductive rights, while Muslim fundamentalists are perceived to focus more on dress codes. However, Pentecostal fundamentalists also impose dress codes and Muslim fundamentalists are also anti-abortion – they simply vary with regard to their emphases.

For each aspect of how religious fundamentalisms campaign and strategize, link transnationally, fund their work, and impact on women's rights and human rights, AWID's research found that commonalities overwhelmingly outweigh certain specificities according to region and religion. Emphasizing religion as a feature of national identity is also an almost universally significant strategy for religious fundamentalisms. The closely related strategy of asserting moral superiority over a foreign culture or other religious communities is seen by women's rights activists as an important strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, in Latin America and the Caribbean, blaming social problems on a "decline in morality" or the "disintegration of the family" is the topmost important strategy in the region, which is closely related to presenting gender roles as "natural" – something that resonates across all other regions.

Myth #6: Religious fundamentalisms promote clean politics and honesty

The myth and how it works

The myth that religious fundamentalisms promote clean politics and honesty makes them apparently different from other influential social and political forces, and is central to their claim to legitimacy. Claiming to be concerned with our souls and protecting the social fabric, they are purportedly upright and incorruptible. When they enter politics, they are supposedly above the usual nepotism. As a reaction to declining standards in public and private "morality", they say what they mean and do what they say. It is a short, easy step for religious fundamentalisms to then set up a world that contains only opposing pairs and no grey areas, which matches their absolutist vision: Good and Evil, the Believer and the Unbeliever, with all political opposition falling into the negative category.



INDIVIDUAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL CORRUPTION

While some religious fundamentalist groups may be recognized for their charitable works, there have been many documented cases of gross misuse of donations. For example, a women's rights activist in Indonesia reports that in 2004, followers of a local religious fundamentalist group sought donations in public places such as sidewalk eateries, masquerading as fundraisers for orphanages or street children. Rights groups in Britain have published information about how SEWA International, a charity with links to the British wing of the Hindu fundamentalist RSS, gathers donations after natural disasters and uses them for the political purposes of the Hindu Right. In the United States, the name of a popular Christian Evangelist television show co-hosted by Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye, *The PTL Club*, was meant to be an abbreviation for "Praise the Lord" and also "People that Love", but was more cynically known as "Pass the Loot".³ In 1989, Bakker, an Assemblies of God Minister, was convicted for fraud and conspiring to defraud congregations of \$158 million, and sentenced to 45 years in prison.

³ See http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-07-21-tammy-faye_N.htm.

Public resources are also diverted to fundamentalist movements for political and personal use. In 2003, Mexican civil society organizations monitoring funds assigned to women's programmes by the Chamber of Deputies discovered that 30 million pesos⁴ earmarked for HIV/AIDS care had been allocated to Provida, an extreme Right group opposed to the government's health policies on HIV and sexual health. The group was found to have spent over 80% of the funds on publicity challenging emergency contraception. Also, listed under the budget item "support for women", they had purchased a range of items such as Mont Blanc pens, high-end clothing, and thongs and brassieres.⁵

The self-declared moral superiority of religious fundamentalists must be challenged wherever they engage in outright illegal behaviour, such as extracting protection money from nightclub owners in Indonesia or from matatu (local mini-buses) routes in Kenya. Examples of criminal activities by religious fundamentalists cover a broad scope. In the United States, an internal bartering system allows access to services that avoids taxation, as well as active tax evasion, while in North Africa, fundamentalists are often involved in the black market, drugs, trafficking and smuggling. As one women's rights activist observes, "some drug barons and smugglers help finance the Islamists as a way of buying a passport to paradise, while others may lend financial support out of pragmatism, in the event that these political groups one day come to power". (Rabea Naciri, Morocco)

The fundamentalists have no hesitation in getting involved in the black market, smuggling and all kinds of trafficking. In fact, they state that they are least bothered about the law of the land because they are not living in an Islamic state governed by the Sharia. (survey respondent, Algeria)

Religious fundamentalist groups are also not as politically "clean" as they claim:

While they may not have a history of having their noses in the trough as much as other mainstream political parties, they certainly have engaged in massive abuse of power by putting their own party people in positions that they're not remotely qualified to be in – that is nepotism too. (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh)

At some level, women's rights activists themselves seem to have accepted fundamentalist rhetoric on certain social justice issues. For example, 39% of women's rights activists state that religious fundamentalists campaign in favour of reducing corruption. But when asked to give actual examples of religious fundamentalist campaigning, only two out of 657 examples even mention campaigning on corruption – and these simply name the Cameroonian Catholic Church and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria without giving any details. As one women's rights activist from Mexico notes, "[w]hile they appear to be in favour of democracy and against corruption, their actions are diametrically opposed".

4 Approximately 2,309,100 USD.
5 See <http://www.dawnnet.org/publications/docs/mexico-2520news-2520aug-252004.doc>.



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS DO NOT OCCUPY THE MORAL HIGH GROUND!

In several countries where Catholic fundamentalisms are active, women's rights activists report the use of deception in fundamentalist anti-abortion strategies and campaigns to control sexuality. Notices in the small advertisements sections in newspapers offer telephone help-lines to young women seeking abortion: "If you're pregnant, call us!" When a woman calls, she finds herself talking to people who are trained by Provida, an Opus Dei linked organization,⁶ who try to convince her to keep the baby and who embark on manipulative "psychological treatment".

In Uganda, Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe remarks that Christian fundamentalists, with an excessive emphasis on sexual "morality" and gender norms, and relative silence on structural inequality and government corruption, are starting to get caught in their own doublespeak. When Nsaba Butoro, Minister for Ethics and Integrity, banned a conference on sex workers' human rights, there were a number of critical responses from the public. For example, a Ugandan pastor wrote in the government-owned *New Vision* newspaper: "A big moral problem that inflicts society in Uganda is not so much that prostitution is not immoral, but the high moralistic accent in our society seems to absolve those who daily swindle the public of exorbitant sums of money while they want to hunt down prostitutes!"⁷

Religious fundamentalists also spread rumours designed to build popular opposition or support for legislative reforms. For example, Christian fundamentalist groups in Nigeria mobilized opinion against the Reproductive Health Institutions Bill by calling it "the Abortion Bill", even though the Bill made no mention of abortion at all. In Morocco, fundamentalists have misinformed people about the new family law. They claim that the law requires that women obtain a male guardian's consent to marry, and that upon divorce a woman is automatically entitled to half of a man's wealth; as a result, young girls do not trust the new law and men are delaying or avoiding marriage.

[Hindu fundamentalists] are claiming that Christian charities are undertaking forceful conversion – this is why most of the states ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party have framed laws against this. [This] is basically anti-democracy and anyone from minority [communities] can be booked under [these laws] on one or [an]other pretext. The whisper campaign that goes on through their volunteers across the rural areas is really frightening. (survey respondent, India)

Language is also used in subtle and deceptive ways, with religious fundamentalists adopting progressive terms and discourses. For example, since the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, religious fundamentalists in Argentina have started to use the word "gender" without changing the content of their vision. In Africa, Christian fundamentalists have selectively referred to science to "prove" that condoms "do not work" against HIV. The use of double discourse is another

6 See http://www.ceped.org/cdrom/avortement_ameriquelatine_2007/en/chapitre2/page1.html.
7 Rev. Amos Kasibante, "Uganda's enemy is not sex workers!" *New Vision*, 23 April 2008. <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/21/623819>.

common strategy: French feminist Caroline Fourest has also exposed this pattern among Muslim fundamentalists, who say one thing to an outside audience and the opposite to their followers.

Operating front organizations is also a common fundamentalist practice. In Poland, as one women's rights activist notes, "[i]t's not just that church organizations are creating NGOs, but that they are using the possibility of being treated as NGOs". A similar dynamic emerges in Bangladesh, where religious fundamentalists have "very intelligently understood that you have to position yourself in a particular way within civil society. Being a religious party is one way, but getting your people into non-denominational positions is [also] important. It's crucial for an Islamist party to have an organization called, for example, the 'Centre for Human Rights', which doesn't sound affiliated with a religion or any political wing, but actually has people who are nothing but members of a fundamentalist party who will then push their agenda through that space." (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh)

Some doubt the motives even when they do appear to take a positive stand:

Even though all religions support the values and mechanisms [that] promote female foeticide, they officially or superficially condemn the practice so as to be politically correct, while doing nothing to address the causes. Addressing the problem superficially is like pruning a diseased tree while at the same irrigating the roots for it to flourish. (survey respondent, India)

According to women's rights activists, there is a sharp contrast between active fundamentalist campaigning on issues such as abstinence and against LGBTQI rights, and their significant silences regarding the plague of violence against women. The failure to publicly condemn religious figures guilty of sexual abuse or defrauding followers has raised questions about the moral commitment of religious authorities. For example, the Catholic Church was widely criticized for attempting to conceal cases of sexual abuse of minors by priests; bishops who had knowledge of cases of abuse opted not to remove those accused, but rather to reassign them. In 2001, a number of high-profile lawsuits were finally filed in the United States, and while some priests resigned, others were defrocked or imprisoned, or negotiated financial settlements with victims. Yet, in the face of scandal and hypocrisy, religious fundamentalist movements have demonstrated a surprising resilience. Within the Christian Right, for example, frequent sexual abuse and corruption scandals involving high-profile televangelists have not brought about the downfall of the movement.

Myth #7: Religious fundamentalisms stand for the poor and the downtrodden

The myth and how it works

With slight variations according to context, religious fundamentalisms claim to stand for the rights of the poor and the downtrodden, for "justice for the little guy", or to be anti-

capitalist and anti-globalization.

In many ways their language is the language of the Left: very anti-imperialist and based on social justice. They ran under the banner of the Sharia, which in the mind of Muslims, in their religious belief, in their popular belief, is synonymous with justice and equality. (Ziba Mir-Hosseini, United Kingdom/Iran)

In today's world, where state institutions are failing to provide for communities, and there is a growing gap between rich and poor, between and within nations, flying the banner of justice is a powerful means of gaining support for the fundamentalist cause. Nearly 70% of women's rights activists say religious fundamentalists actively recruit in community centres in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The claim to stand for justice also gives religious fundamentalist movements significant legitimacy among external organizations, such as foreign donor agencies, which can have concrete results. Nearly half of women's rights activists report that bilateral and multilateral donors as well as international NGO donors are a significant source of funding for religious fundamentalisms in their context, and 34% say that international development aid and post-disaster relief has actually strengthened fundamentalisms.

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE BAD FOR THE POOR!

The rhetorical campaigning of fundamentalist groups must be measured against their concrete actions and impacts. Evangelical Christian sects active in communities in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and Central and Eastern Europe and the Newly Independent States provide food as well as employment and educational opportunities to disaffected groups, encouraging a movement toward personal renewal and deliverance rather than a challenge to structural inequality. Revealing the common threads among fundamentalist strategies, women from Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan argue that religious fundamentalisms thrive on the lack of economic opportunities for youth, especially young men, by providing them with services and resources to meet basic needs – rather than supporting them to challenge the root causes of injustice in their communities.

They do not eliminate the causes of poverty or create the conditions for development, but rather, they give donations to homeless people without creating sources of income. [They] only combat immediate hunger and cold, without attacking the roots of poverty, even with their great capacity to create opportunities. (survey respondent, Argentina)

Contrary to the claims of religious fundamentalist movements, women's rights activists provide no concrete examples of religious fundamentalist campaigning against capitalism and neoliberalism. Instead, they offer many concrete examples of the links between religious fundamentalists, global and local business, and neoliberalism.

The Christian Right has played a major role in undermining public support for policies and federal programs that lift the poor out of poverty. Economic and social conservatives invest in the Christian Right in part because Christian Right leaders have been willing to build arguments that undermine biblical teachings on economic justice. This includes undermining Catholic social teaching, which has traditionally made the case for public policies that work for the common good, the poor and oppressed. (Jennifer Butler, United States)

Although Muslim fundamentalisms – more than other fundamentalisms – are credited with campaigning against capitalism and neoliberalism, some perspective is needed. In fact, only a minority (35%) of women’s rights activists focusing on the Middle East and North Africa region feel that Muslim fundamentalisms campaign against these forces. Moreover, does their campaigning actually oppose inequitable economic structures, or just the economic policies of “the West”?

Women’s rights activists observe that religious fundamentalisms undermine the economic security of impoverished communities, not only by encouraging passive acceptance of present economic structures, but also by demanding contributions from congregations. Examples include the almost mandatory *diezmos* (10% of earned income) expected by Evangelical churches in Guatemala, and tithes demanded in Ghana. Both the Governor of Khartoum in Sudan, influenced by Muslim fundamentalisms, and the state government of Bavaria in Germany, influenced by the Catholic Church, have barred women from working in public places or withdrawn public childcare facilities and access to abortion. The notions of “honour” and “family values” that were used actually exposed entire families to poverty and economic dependence.

In many regions, religious fundamentalisms impact on the intersections of gender and class, and deepen the economic exploitation of marginalized women. In Australia, the men’s movement, supported primarily by wealthy and influential Christian fundamentalists, successfully lobbied the federal government to remove Single Parent Pension once a child turns five. This forced many women who were full-time caregivers into low-paid labour, in a context where changes to industrial relations laws have decimated labour rights.

We have seen the rise of a new aristocracy, often older wealthy white males on their second or third wife, and of a new servant class of maids, housekeepers and nannies – predominantly poor women and single mothers. Single mothers have become the new social lepers. (survey respondent, Australia)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS PROMOTE DISCRIMINATION AND TARGET THE MARGINALIZED!

Normally in human rights and development language, to stand for justice is understood as promoting and protecting the right to non-discrimination and the rights

of the marginalized. In contrast, 59% of women's rights activists say that religious fundamentalists frequently target LGBTQI people for verbal and physical violence. They also obstruct positive developments: for example, the Fijian Methodist Church opposed provisions protecting common law couples and same-sex couples in the draft 2002 Family Law Bill. Indeed, campaigning against LGBTQI rights seems to unite religious fundamentalists across boundaries: "The campaign against the Pride Parade (LGBTQI) in Jerusalem was led by all the religious leaders of all religions in Israel."

Strikingly similar comments come from women's rights activists in the Christian-majority United States and in Britain's Muslim community, which highlight how religious fundamentalists, far from protecting marginalized groups such as LGBTQI, have instead exploited homophobia.

This rightwing coalition has really latched on to and invented homophobia in the U.S. as a way to build its base, drawing on literal interpretations of the Bible. George Bush rallied the whole anti-gay marriage crowd in the 2004 elections in a way that gave him the narrowest majority against all those people who thought that lying to get us into a war, promoting torture, devastating civil rights and liberties, running up a \$400 billion deficit was a problem. He was able to convince a cohort of people... that gay marriage was more of a problem than all of that. So, you have this homophobic wedge that has been carefully cultivated and developed. (Mab Segrest, United States)

Religious fundamentalisms frequently operate in conjunction with ethnic fundamentalisms, for example in Sri Lanka where Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has contributed to a long-running civil war. At times, religious fundamentalisms sustain racist attitudes.

[Since the 1990s] an interesting thing has happened: first, there has been a convergence of the rightwing of some, not all, but some of the religious Zionist rightwing and some of the ultra-orthodox. There is now a new phenomenon called ultra-orthodox nationalist, and in my opinion, they combine the worst features of the two groups because religiously they are very similar to the ultra-orthodox – they have all the anti-modernist, anti-democratic, to some extent anti-feminist features of ultra-orthodox – but they also have the army, they have guns, they have a racist ideology. I am very worried about them. (Debbie Weissman, Israel)

One women's rights activist from Australia eloquently describes how Christian abolitionism works as a form of racist oppression:

The influence of a growing Christian fundamentalist morality has underpinned, in subtle ways, the recent commonwealth

government intervention in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory of Australia. All Aboriginal people are being taken off employment programs and placed on welfare programs, to make it easier to control the income expenditure of individuals in the form of vouchers, goods, etc. While intended to reduce alcohol abuse and illegal activities, and increase school attendance, it punishes everyone to get at those doing the wrong thing. It diminishes individual dignity, self-determination and control over daily life. It doubly punishes women for the violence and alcoholism of their men. It is an inherently racist solution to a very complex problem. (survey respondent, Australia)

Although in some contexts, religious fundamentalisms are seen as a form of resistance to dominant power structures, they clearly recruit among the powerful and the elite, seeking out the most influential and intellectual, such as Opus Dei's recruitment within professional associations of doctors, lawyers and engineers.

Religious fundamentalist campaigning on "people-centred" issues needs to be examined taking the impact of their projects into account. On a number of issues that many in the human rights and development spheres or progressive circles would regard as central to social justice (poverty reduction, corruption, democracy, political pluralism, freedom of speech), there is a distinct gap between the relatively large proportion of women's rights activists who feel that fundamentalist campaigning on these issues is "pro-people", and the small number of concrete examples of such campaigning that they can pinpoint. In contrast, across the research, women's rights activists provided numerous and detailed examples of concrete fundamentalist campaigning that seeks to restrict human rights, and cited over 600 examples of the negative impact of religious fundamentalisms.



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE ANTI-WOMEN!

Women are one of the marginalized groups that religious fundamentalisms most frequently target – in their rhetoric, campaigning, as well as verbal and physical attacks on the ground. For women's rights activists, being "patriarchal and anti-women" is the second most common characteristic of religious fundamentalisms after "absolutist and intolerant". As one women's rights activist puts it, "[f]or [the] Buddhist practitioner enlightenment is the highest... So when someone [tells] you 'You cannot reach this because you are a woman and are in the wrong body' that to me is the most harmful to a human being". (Ouyporn Khuankaew, Thailand)

The targeting of women by religious fundamentalists is widespread, and there are no significant differences according to region or religion. Seventy-seven percent of women's rights activists say women are frequently or sometimes targeted for verbal or physical attack; that is, women are exposed to fundamentalist violence simply because they are women. As an extreme example of the violence, Hindu fundamentalists in India have encouraged the revitalization of the practice of *sati* (act of self-immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres).

Fundamentalist groups and institutions exhibit a clear double standard in their expectations of men and women. Under the influence of the Orthodox Church in Georgia, women who have premarital sex, take birth control pills, use condoms or undergo abortions are condemned and often rejected by their families and communities, while there is virtual silence with regard to the men involved.

Religious fundamentalisms are obsessed with sexual and reproductive rights, women's dress and mobility, women's "morality" and freedom of sexual expression – although in different regions and religions they may emphasize one or other issue more strongly.

In Pakistan, religious fundamentalists led a vigorous campaign inside and outside Parliament to prevent the repeal of the highly discriminatory Hudood Ordinances governing rape, adultery and various other sexual crimes, while in Malaysia, they led a campaign to introduce such laws. One women's rights activist describes how the Catholic fundamentalist former Mayor of Manila, Philippines promised to make the city the "first pro-God city in Asia", at the cost of women's rights: he did away with family planning services and harassed NGOs that dared to provide services clandestinely.

Young women's bodies are particularly targeted. In Nigeria, virginity testing has been introduced as a precondition to academic scholarships or graduation by some Christian colleges, while in Nicaragua, one women's rights activist reports that due to campaigns against condom use and lack of information about sexuality, "AIDS among adolescent women has increased 175% over the last four years". (Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua)

Muslim fundamentalists have focused on dress codes. For example, when district-level autonomy in 2004 enabled religious fundamentalists to dominate local laws in Indonesia:

The broader impact on health and development

AWID's research reveals the broader negative impact of religious fundamentalisms on community health and development. More than a third of women's rights activists regard religious fundamentalisms as actually obstructing work on HIV and AIDS, and the figure is much higher when focused on Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity.

The current First Lady of [a Sub-Saharan African country] is a Born Again Christian...[She] is using her position to organize virginity parades, preach abstinence, discredit condoms and warn men not to marry women who have HIV. (Anonymous)

Muslim fundamentalists in Nigeria and India, for example, have opposed polio vaccinations as a "plot" to introduce AIDS or to sterilize Muslims. In Pakistan, a fundamentalist campaign against polio vaccinations resulted in the murder of five health workers in less than two years, with polio levels subsequently rising in the Northern Areas.

In June 1995, Cardinal Obando was able to stop tetanus vaccinations, using the same argument that the Vatican had used in the Philippines, Bolivia and Mexico, that the vaccination contained a sterilizing agent. Where did the idea come from? From the advisor to the Minister for Life, Dr. Rafael Cabrera, the President of ANPROVIDA, Asociación Nicaragüense Provida (Nicaraguan Pro-Life Association). When it was shown to be untrue and they began vaccinating again, five weeks had passed and vaccination refusal rates, which had been zero, had risen to 33%. Girls were left without the vaccine because the Catholic radios that reach the far corners of the country were saying that you didn't have to vaccinate them. And that's how we ended up with 400,000 unvaccinated women. (Ana María Pizarro, Nicaragua)

The first thing to be regulated was women. The *Wilayat ul-Hisbah* [morality police] are not challenging the market economy or poverty but ‘morality’: Women feel they are disproportionately targeted, with more operations against them for not wearing *jilbab* [headscarves] than against men for not attending Friday prayers. The Padang municipal administration issued a bylaw requiring all schoolgirls, regardless of their religion, to wear the *jilbab*. (Kamala Chandrakirana, Indonesia)

But the focus on dress codes is not limited to Muslim fundamentalisms. In Montreal, Canada, Hasidic communities campaigned for frosted glass to be put up in the YMCA windows across the street so that congregations would not have to see women exercising, while a regional-religious political party in power in South India insisted on college girls not wearing trousers and shirts, arguing that it distracts male lecturers.

The impact of religious fundamentalisms on women sometimes requires subtle contextual analysis and a holistic perspective. For example, in India, the Hindu fundamentalist-influenced Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) “proposed a domestic violence bill but it was very patriarchal. As a strategy, they were fighting against domestic violence but not [for] women’s empowerment as women’s rights advocates would understand it” (Anasuya Sengupta, India).

Do these projects respect women’s moral rights and foster women’s moral agency? Yes or no? Where they don’t do this, it must be said – no matter what else they do that is good. (Frances Kissling, United States)

Very often, religious fundamentalist movements give a sense of empowerment to women; not necessarily a sense of oppression. However, all this is within a framework within which all the overall decisions - the overall control - is determined by men. For me, more worrying than the dramatic things are these effects, which are more pervasive. (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom/Israel)

Myth #8: Religious fundamentalisms are family-friendly and pro-life

The myth and how it works

Religious fundamentalist movements claim to be pro-family and pro-life. This strengthens the fundamentalist claim that their vision is “natural” and morally sound – in apparent contrast to the vision of those who resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms.

Such campaigns and rhetoric also enable them to attract desperate followers in desperate times: in the United States, the Christian Right’s emphasis on the importance

of the “traditional” family (father-breadwinner/mother-homemaker) plays upon the genuine economic and social exhaustion people now face in raising a family as compared to the 1950s.



A NARROW VISION OF THE FAMILY!

Religious fundamentalisms promote a dominant, male-centered, patriarchal and heteronormative model of the family. According to a substantial majority of women’s rights activists (85%), presenting rigid gender roles within the family as “natural” is an important religious fundamentalist strategy, across regions and religions. In countries as diverse as Peru and Pakistan, this strategy is now being tactically modernized through the discourse of the “complimentarity” of gender, where religious fundamentalists seek to replace the language of equality with references to equity. For example, the REAL Women of Canada organization promotes a subservient domestic role for women as a means of ensuring happy families and peaceful communities.

In many cases, this strategy moves beyond discourse and into law, obstructing positive developments in women’s rights. In South Africa and Fiji, pressure from religious fundamentalists watered down the rights to be extended to women in drafted reforms of family laws. In Morocco, religious fundamentalists were determined to promote a family model that does not respond to people’s needs, but rather, reasserts control over women; one survey respondent cites the “spectacular campaigns using cassettes, intimidation, etc. against the National Plan for the Integration of Women in Development. Out of the Plan’s 214 points, the eight points dealing with the Family Code raised an unprecedented reaction from religious fundamentalists”.

This strategy preempts reforms to family laws that could introduce more equal spousal relationships and thereby happier – and less violent – families. In Egypt and Ireland, for example, religious fundamentalists stigmatize divorced women and resist any relaxation in divorce laws that would enable more women to escape abusive and unhappy marriages.

Restrictive and unfair divorce laws and welfare reforms are frequently proposed by the Christian fundamentalists – measures that would make it more difficult, if not impossible, for women to leave lethal relationships. (Hope Chigudu, Zimbabwe/Uganda)

It is a human tragedy when a woman whose marriage is no longer a reality is prevented from getting a divorce and continuing on with her life, especially if her marriage is abusive. (Debbie Weissman, Israel)

Women’s rights activists in Uzbekistan and Thailand report that Muslim fundamentalisms have brought about an increase in polygamy, which undermines the financial, emotional and sexual rights of married women. Current large-scale research in Malaysia is also uncovering long-lasting damage to children in polygamous marriages. In the Nigerian

National Assembly, Muslim fundamentalists campaigned against the passing of a law that would outlaw early marriage and polygamy, claiming that it offends their religion. This campaign received silent support from other fundamentalists in Nigeria: “Other men could predict that the Muslims would oppose it. Although Muslims are the majority who practice polygamy, it is also rampant among the Ibo in the south-east where people are 99% Christian/traditional religion.” (survey respondent, Nigeria)

Religious fundamentalist campaigning and mobilization to oppose same-sex marriage and adoption rights for LGBTQI people can also be seen as denying the right to family life. This high social cost is the price paid by a targeted community for cynical political mobilization by religious fundamentalists. One women’s rights activist from Fiji recalls “[t]he marches last year and the year before against gay marriage [occurred] after hearing of progressive changes overseas despite no real call yet in Fiji for gay marriage as most LGBTQI are just trying to retain basic human rights!” Similarly, in Nigeria, mass mobilization by church groups in 2006 supported an opportunistic bill presented by the President that included the prohibition of gay marriage in the country.



WHOSE LIFE IS WORTH PROTECTING?

The religious fundamentalist vision of being “pro-life” is highly selective. In this view, the lives of women that are endangered or lost to unsafe pregnancies do not matter. The organization Women on Waves estimates that every eight minutes, a woman dies from an unsafe abortion – this is often due to poverty and a lack of access to services, but also due to the success of religious fundamentalisms in criminalizing abortion.

In Africa, Christian Seventh Day Adventists promote early marriage to ensure virginity. An obstetric professional who responded to the AWID survey reports that to escape the devastating health impacts of early and frequent pregnancies, these young women are often compelled to resort to unsafe abortion procedures, and develop related health complications. “They are shunned by healthcare facilities affiliated with religious fundamentalists, and often (if they survive abortion-related infections) develop secondary infertility due to scarring of the Fallopian tubes and/or other reproductive organs, at which point they are abandoned by husbands and families.” In the United States, Australia and Canada, religious fundamentalists have committed murder or attempted murder of staff during attacks at clinics offering abortion services.

By replacing terms such as “women” with “mother” and “foetus” with “viable unborn baby”, they have made the rights of women and their offspring appear possible to separate and prioritize, one over the other. In Argentina, abortion is only possible through a court declaration, either if the mother’s life is deemed to be in danger or she is mentally incompetent. One women’s rights activist recalls a case where “[y]oung mentally disabled women and teens were raped, and because the doctors and lawyers were daily threatened, and the young women and their families harassed, it led to a delay of up to six months in their case. Some had spontaneous abortions and others had to bring the baby to term anyway”. (Angelica Peñas, Argentina)

As a subset of this strategy, religious fundamentalisms often selectively and emotively appear “pro-child”, but they do not recognize some children’s rights to their views and individuality:

There was a campaign against abortion consisting of distributing bottles or soothers to schoolchildren, and my daughter was very young at the time (12 years old). The teacher berated her in front of her school chums because she wouldn’t take the soother since she supported women having free choice. The teacher told her that if she was in favour of abortion, she’d be better off taking a gun and shooting at the little kindergarteners – it would be more humane because at least the little kids might have a fighting chance, whereas a foetus can’t run away. (survey respondent, Spain)

The fundamentalists teach things like eating with the left hand is the devil’s work. This gets integrated into regular school texts, making problems for left-handed children. When I questioned my children’s school, [the teacher] said, “Well what can we do about it, we have to”. (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan)

Myth #9: Religious fundamentalisms defend our traditional ways and authentic identities

The myth and how it works

Religious fundamentalisms spend a great deal of energy – and money – proclaiming and at times violently insisting that they are the “one true church”, or that theirs is “pure Islam”, or “correct Buddhist practice”. Although this may be contested from within the religion, this claimed authenticity can sometimes be hard for ordinary believers within the religion and outsiders to challenge. The emphasis on “true meaning” removes human experience and diversities of time and place from the equation.

At the same time, in many contexts, religious fundamentalisms also claim to be the authentic guardians of local culture, and adhering to their tenets supposedly serves to resist domination by “foreign”, “alien” or “westernized” forces. Thus, the website of the Bajrang Dal – the Hindu fundamentalist Vishva Hindu Parishad’s youth wing – says its “warrior” members “swear in the name of Lord Hanuman to always remain prepared to protect our country, religion and culture”. A substantial majority of women’s rights activists (79%) see an emphasis on religion as a feature of national identity as important to religious fundamentalist strategies. AWID found numerous examples from Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central, South and Southeast Asia, where ethno-nationalist-cultural supremacist ideologies are impossible to separate from religious fundamentalisms:

In Uzbekistan, there is a tendency of restoring national identities and national values, and that cannot be separated from re-Islamization. In Kazakhstan, there [are] similar and very strong tendencies of national identity that go hand in hand with reviving Islam and retrieving ancient traditions and customs. The majority of these customs are related to women's rights. (Eleonora Fayzullaeva, Uzbekistan)

It is contradictory to some extent that religious fundamentalisms are able both to claim a universally correct interpretation as well as a position as the guardians of local cultural authenticity and "tradition". But both myths operate together as two sides of the same coin with the combined result that diverse and progressive interpretations are delegitimized and made invisible, a monopoly of interpretation arises, and ultimately absolutist fundamentalist perspectives gain greater political and social influence.



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS REINVENT TRADITION!

Fundamentalist trends emerged in religions at a common historical moment: in the early 1900s, Christians who opposed theological liberalization in the United States started calling themselves "fundamentalists"; in 1912, in Poland, World Agudath Israel (World Jewish Union) was founded; in 1925, the Hindu fundamentalist Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh was founded; and in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt and Opus Dei was founded in Spain. In other words, the groups we most readily identify as religious fundamentalists today did not exist up until about 100 years ago. Whatever tradition they claim to protect has had to be isolated from a more pluralist historical tradition within the religion, rebuilt or in some cases invented from scratch.

From countries as diverse as Nigeria and Bangladesh, women's rights activists provide almost identical descriptions of a globally homogenized fundamentalist "uniform", claimed to be "authentic Islam" but at odds with the local environment and traditions:

I was told by colleagues who visited [the areas] in Greater Rajshahi, which were reportedly then dominated by the JMB (Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh), [that] not only was every single woman in a full, black *burqa*, but in the baking sun, they had gloves on and socks on. We're talking about poor, rural women. (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh)

In Yola, where it's really hot, you started having total cover-up: with socks on and gloves, and only their eyes not covered. When I was growing up, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a Muslim woman/child and [anyone else]. (Asma'u Joda, Nigeria)

Where cultures have traditionally been plural, religious fundamentalisms have introduced new, monolithic visions of the religion. Darfuri imams and religious authorities were given

training by the Sudanese ruling National Islamic Front, which led to a shift away from previously relatively relaxed attitudes towards pre-marital relationships and women's bodies:

When I was a schoolgirl, we'd go and swim and wash ourselves in the valley, wash [our] clothes, spread them on the grass. If any boy or man came and looked, they never looked at you as some sexual subject: it was just normal. Nowadays everyone has a shower very far from the open air. We are not feeling comfortable, it's not us, not real. (Eiman Abulgasim Seifeldin, Darfur/Sudan)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE TRANSNATIONAL, NOT LOCAL!

While religious fundamentalists may claim to represent local cultural authenticity, they have introduced a homogenized culture that reflects true cultural globalization. Catholic Church announcements against abortion and their promotion of large families on the radio in Puerto Rico are broadcast in non-Puerto Rican accents, indicating that they are developed and broadcast all over Latin America. The promotion of "the Argentine family" by religious fundamentalists in Argentina is questionably "local", since the materials are provided by the Vatican in Rome. Meanwhile, women's rights activists in North Africa are highly critical of the culturally and religiously monolithic vision promoted by Al-Jazeera's Arabic language television broadcasts across the region and beyond.

Although the Saudi and US governments and Opus Dei are among the most frequently mentioned international linkages, the scope of transnational religious fundamentalist ties is far broader and is governmental as well as non-governmental. It includes the presence of US Mormons and Adventists in the Philippines; state-sponsored Libyan funding for Muslim organizations in Benin and Chad; the affiliation of Focus on the Family in Canada with its counterpart in the United States; and the Rashtriya Savayamsevak Sangh's ties with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh in Holland. Human Life International (HLI) is a coalition of pro-life groups in many countries that is strongly backed by conservative groups in the United States and supported by some parts of the Catholic leadership, through organizations such as the Pontifical Council for the Family. International links often have a direct impact on local policy:

The final version [of the national human rights plan in Peru] was approved on 30th November 2005. The plan, which had been agreed to by a wide group of organizations (civil society and governmental), was arbitrarily cut, leaving only four of the 16 affirmative actions that had been agreed on... Afterwards, we found out from people inside that Republican Senators in the United States had exerted a lot of pressure – politicians that belonged to fundamentalist groups like Opus Dei or the Society of Apostolic Life. (Roxana Vásquez Sotelo, Peru)

Religious fundamentalisms operate not only transnationally, but also at the level of international fora. They promote a globalized and homogenous “religious” view that rolls back the normalization in international standards of women’s bodily autonomy, and freedom of sexuality and belief. As one women’s rights activist remarks:

[t]here are some strategies that are very evident to those of us doing advocacy work internationally and it is clear in the last decade, this is related to transnationalization of religious fundamentalisms and creation of religious institutions that didn’t exist before. The New York-based Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-Fam) is specifically focused on blocking anything to do with women’s rights at the UN. These institutions appeared in the last ten years and are a clear strategy for advocacy in spaces related to public policy in the international realm. (Lydia Alpizar, Costa Rica)

“Authenticity” and the “local” are also highly selective concepts that often distort history. One women’s rights activist points out that “[t]he Northern missionary origins of Christianity in Africa are often forgotten in favour of a characterization of ‘African’ morals and traditions as Christian morals and traditions”. This raises the question of who has the power to define what is “authentic”, and for what purposes.

In the Middle East and South Asia, religious fundamentalists frequently denounce women’s and human rights activists for being “Western”, and yet they receive funding from overseas development aid for disaster relief. There is similar hypocrisy in Latin America:

In Brazil, a journalist tried to find out about [pro-life groups] money and was threatened. This gives us an idea of the importance to them of maintaining the secrecy of their financial business. One of the arguments used against us feminists is that they say the funding is from the first world, from the United States, that it is imperialism. But they need to keep their secrets because their money comes from there too. (Maria José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil)

Myth #10: Religious fundamentalisms are invincible

The myth and how it works

In many contexts, religious fundamentalist movements have been able to command attention from national and foreign governments as well as other political actors on the basis of a claim that they are a significant social and political force. This can lead to a presumption that religious fundamentalists are legitimate commentators or political allies on matters of public policy, and can also lead to greater funding opportunities for fundamentalist groups.

While the influence of religious fundamentalists cannot be dismissed, some women's rights activists, including those who have lived under religious fundamentalist regimes or who have spent their activist lives focusing on the phenomenon, warn against overstating the impact. They point out that exaggerating the impact can give religious fundamentalisms greater credit, legitimacy or power than they deserve. A balanced assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of religious fundamentalisms and recognition of the broader context in which social and political forces operate will also facilitate more effective strategies to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms.



ARE RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS REALLY SO SUCCESSFUL?

Religious fundamentalist projects are not, in fact, as successful as they would like us to believe.

We must not look at fundamentalism as a very successful movement. The reformists in Iran have lost the political battle – they're not in government. But they had one much more important lasting success, which is that they took away this aura of religiosity from politics. Using the language of Sharia no longer works in Iran. The [reformists] have managed to separate understandings of Islam from absolutism and patriarchy. These changes eventually will reflect themselves in the institutions of power. (Ziba Mir-Hosseini, United Kingdom/Iran)

Another angle takes the vehemence of religious fundamentalisms as a sign of the failure of their ideology. In one opinion, “[w]hen they see in the United Nations the representatives of 192 states sitting around a table talking about sexual orientation, it's absolutely mind-boggling to them.” She argues that because the goals of women's rights activists are far higher than what has been achieved thus far, we may not realize how radical these social and political developments appear to fundamentalists. “With a variety of dominant countries starting to permit gay marriage, having legalized abortion, talking about women as equal to men, it appears that all that they believe in has been rejected. So I think in the macro sense and in the battle for hearts and minds, they have largely lost – it is over.” (Frances Kissling, United States)

The experiences of women's rights activists on the ground also indicate that religious fundamentalisms in various contexts have not always been successful, partly because social issues and developments are not necessarily in their control, and partly because of the strength and resolve of their opposition. In Kano, Nigeria, a Sharia state, a woman who stood for political office in 2007 was beaten up, but then went to court to seek redress. “Nothing is going to stop them,” remarks one women's rights activist, “even when they are beaten up. Religion isn't stopping them from speaking out about discrimination within the political party.”

Other women's rights activists note the importance of looking beyond rhetorical victories to see what is happening in reality. US funding for HIV/AIDS work is tied to conditionalities around sex work, abortion and abstinence, but some governments (such as Brazil) have simply refused to accept such funds. Many organizations, on the other hand, have signed the commitment – without having any intention of respecting it and intend to carry on providing the services they had agreed to stop. Since fundamentalist projects overlook social realities, their campaigns often fail to impact. A campaign by the Indonesian PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera/Prosperous Justice Party), a fundamentalist Muslim political party, emphasized the importance of women being housewives and staying at home to raise their children, but it was doomed to failure because it ignored the fact that a large number of poor Indonesian women are overseas migrant labourers.

The promise that followers will attain wealth, prosperity and happiness has contributed to the apparent popularity of the new wave of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian fundamentalisms in Africa. But women's rights activists from the region note this means that new recruits, less interested in doctrine, can turn away from fundamentalist groups as quickly as they joined, if religious fundamentalists fail to deliver what was promised. As Dora King of Sierra Leone observes, “[the new wave of] Pentecostalism is vulnerable if the broader economic conditions are not conducive to people making the money they want to make”. From her experience of counselling survivors of domestic violence in Swaziland, Nonhlanhla Dlamini comments that “we have some women that have actually stopped going to church because they have been praying for over 20 years and nothing is happening. They think to themselves, ‘well I have been praying for so long and nothing is happening so maybe God does not have ears for me.’”

Although women's rights activists note the global rise of religious fundamentalisms, one questions how far this rise is a matter of reality or changes in perceptions:

I think that religious fundamentalisms have always been effective (take for example, the brutal religious wars in Europe or the genocide of indigenous people on our continent, or the Inquisition), precisely because they operate at this basic level of human subjectivity. What has happened in the last few years is that (i) this is our time and therefore, again due to human vanity, what happens now seems to us unique, original, unrepeatable, etc.; and (ii) due to the global market, we now have the ability to learn about what is happening almost anywhere (although, not quite everywhere) at the same time. (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS HAVE UNINTENDED OUTCOMES AND ARE SOWING THE SEEDS OF THEIR OWN DESTRUCTION

The very few women's rights activists (9%) who regard religious fundamentalisms as having a positive impact on women's rights give responses regarding unintended outcomes that have ultimately been beneficial to women and collective organizing for

their rights. These outcomes of religious fundamentalisms include spurring women's rights activists in both secular and religious movements into action towards a common goal, and bringing issues of women's rights into the spotlight. One women's rights activist comments: "The fundamentalist gender policies create a solidarity and network among Sudanese women's organizations and academics to counteract the biased policies and lead awareness campaigns among women to introduce them to their political, social and economic rights that are enshrined in both the Sudanese Constitution and international treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). On the other hand, the Islamist women start to develop new insights and readings in the Islamic texts to face the fundamentalist understanding for women's rights."

Religious fundamentalism has highlighted the issue of women's full participation in society. This includes the work of women outside of the home, for instance, their participation and success in the legal profession. Religious fundamentalism may not agree with this trend, but it is this disagreement which has put the issue of religion and female economic autonomy on the discussion table. (survey respondent, Canada)

Some responses point to a different type of positive impact. For example, the radicalization generated by religious fundamentalisms can drive people away from religious traditions with authoritarian characteristics.

[Religious fundamentalisms have had] a positive impact because in the face of the authoritarian excessiveness of the Catholic Church on issues of abortion or sexual orientation (lesbianism), the community of women with whom I generally work has tended to move away from institutions in general and religious clerics who subscribe to a discourse of zero tolerance with respect to sexual diversity and the struggle for women's right to abortion. (survey respondent, Argentina)

Most importantly, religious fundamentalisms may contain within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. The interviewees who had lived under religious fundamentalist regimes were in many ways more optimistic about the future than those located in contexts where fundamentalist movements have never come to political power. The first aspect relates to the fundamentalist use of women cadres. Often these are conservative women who previously would not have engaged religiously and politically. Given the confidence to engage, some are now going beyond established fundamentalist texts and approaches and finding their own paths.

The second aspect relates to the inability of religious fundamentalisms to deliver and the exposure of their hypocrisy once in power. One women's rights activist from Sudan relates how "women are fed up. They see those people do everything out of Islam, such as using Islam to sabotage the country; a lot of things that are not [in] Islam are allowed

to flourish, like this *urfi zawaj* [customary unregistered marriage which denies wives rights under the law].” (Manal Abdel Halim, Sudan) She adds that people are not following the fundamentalist government’s directives “because they know this is not something genuine”.

The excursion into Sharia has sort of diluted the Muslim fundamentalists because they haven’t overcome corruption, and it became obvious that they’re there for their own political gains, which equated to making money. A few Christian states have reverends as their governors and they really haven’t performed at all. (Asma’u Joda, Nigeria)

Once they gain power, the very slogan of the Sharia becomes their Achilles heel [vulnerability] because they cannot deliver. That starts the process from within the Islamic movement for challenging their claim. When they are not in power, they can afford to use very vague language; you can never pin them down to have a conversation with them. But when they gain power, they have to become specific, and it is then that the contradictions start showing themselves. (Ziba Mir-Hosseini, United Kingdom/Iran)

Looking ahead

The very broad geographical scope of the examples shared in this publication confirms that while women’s rights activists have diverse experiences of religious fundamentalisms, there are many commonalities in the myths we hold about religious fundamentalisms and the myths they would like us to believe. At the same time, the myths are also exposed in very similar ways across regions and religions.

We hope this publication has underlined the need for detailed empirical research and qualitative analysis on the impacts of religious fundamentalist campaigns on the ground and the real-life effects of their discourses on people’s human rights. Like any other political force, and perhaps even more so given their lofty moral claims to protect society, religious fundamentalists must be held accountable for their deeds and words. This cannot be the work of women’s rights activists alone, and needs the involvement of all those who stand for the promotion and protection of human rights.

One of the strengths of feminisms has been the ability to challenge dominant stereotypes and question presumptions, in order to bring about positive change in women’s lives and in society as a whole. As part of this process, efforts to examine in detail the myths surrounding religious fundamentalisms will also enable women’s rights activists to learn more – from the successes of religious fundamentalisms and from their failures. Ultimately, we hope this will contribute to strengthened strategies of resistance and challenge to religious fundamentalisms.

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About the Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative

AWID's Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative is an advocacy research project that seeks to strengthen the responses to religious fundamentalisms across regions and religions.

What we hope to achieve:

- Create strategic venues for dialogue and facilitate shared understanding among women's rights movements and organizations about how fundamentalisms work, grow and undermine women's rights;
- Develop joint strategies and advocacy efforts across regions and religions to confront religious fundamentalisms; and
- Strengthen the capacity of women's rights activists, advocates, organizations and movements to challenge religious fundamentalist politics.

For more detailed information about the initiative, please visit the AWID website: www.awid.org

Other AWID publications in this series are:

Religious Fundamentalisms on the Rise: A case for action

What are the negative implications of the global rise of religious fundamentalisms for women's rights, human rights and development? Although the impacts of religious fundamentalisms may be localized and context-specific, in the experience of women's rights advocates, the commonalities far outweigh the diversity. This publication argues that religious fundamentalisms represent a global phenomenon that requires a concerted, consolidated and transnational response by rights activists across all sectors.

Shared Insights: Women's rights advocates define religious fundamentalisms

What do we mean when we speak of 'religious fundamentalisms'? Is the term 'religious fundamentalisms' a useful one for women's rights activists? Who are the main fundamentalist actors in the contemporary world? This publication grapples with these questions and explores how women's rights activists in different contexts understand and experience this phenomenon. While religious fundamentalisms are not easily defined, the research does point to a set of shared characteristics and elements that hold true despite differences across religions and regions.

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