

New Insights on Religious Fundamentalisms

Research Highlights

**Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms
AWID's Strategic Initiative**

September 30, 2009

awid women's
rights

At the 11th international AWID Forum in 2008, the Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms Initiative launched the results of a multi-year research program mapping the major trends, strategies and impacts of religious fundamentalist movements. The discussions that arose among women's rights activists shed light on the polarizing effect of the issue, and stressed the need for open dialogue among activists working from different perspectives and fields, and across religious and regional lines. They also underscored the global challenge that religious fundamentalisms pose to women's rights, and the growing urgency for human rights and development organizations to engage in the effort to counter fundamentalist movements.

Through the Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative, AWID seeks to strengthen the responses of women's rights activists to the rise of religious fundamentalisms across regions and religions. It aims to develop a deeper understanding among women's movements and their allies of the ways fundamentalist movements work, grow, and undermine women's rights. The initiative also seeks to build common platforms across regions and religions to foster global strategies of resistance to religious fundamentalist politics.

AWID's research examines how the global rise of religious fundamentalisms is understood and experienced by women's rights activists located within different regional and religious contexts. It draws on the results of a global survey of over 1,600 women's rights activists, in-depth interviews with over 50 key experts, as well as supplementary research and consultations. This brief report presents the highlights of the research to date, which point toward a critical finding: Religious fundamentalisms may vary according to the global context in which they operate, but this diversity is far outweighed by the core characteristics, strategies and impacts they share. Across regions and religions, women's rights activists experience the rising influence of these movements in very similar ways, and this shared understanding can be the starting point for effective transnational activism and resistance.

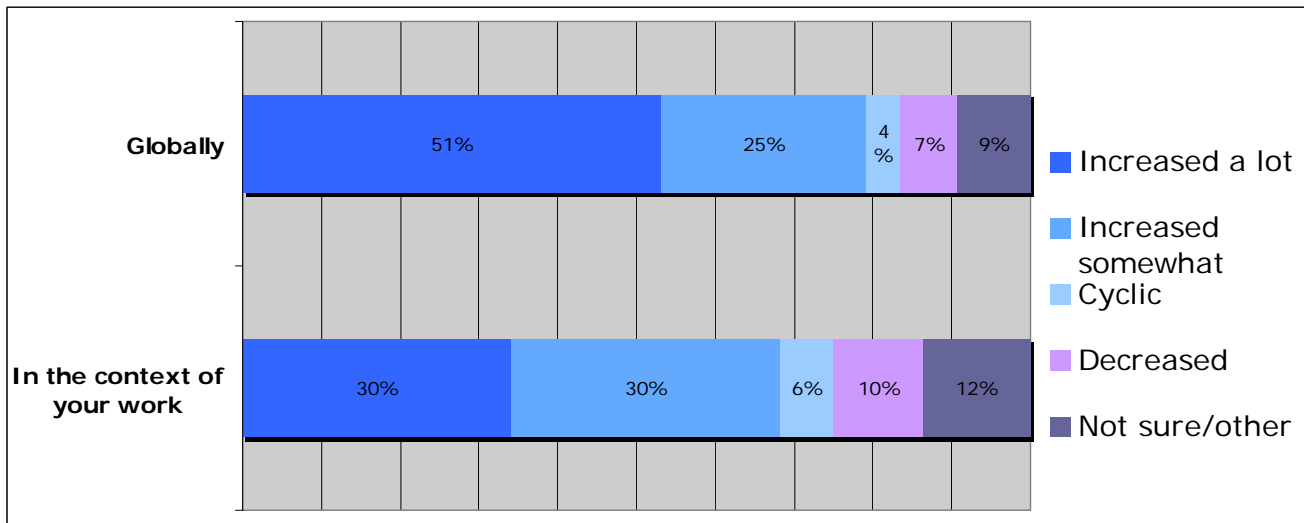
A global rise, across religions and regions

AWID's research shows that women's rights activists in every region are facing fundamentalist tendencies within the world's major and minor religions. Their work is negatively affected by fundamentalisms, whether the religious context is Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh. Localized religious traditions, such as the ethno-religious Kenyan Mungiki movement, Mexican indigenous Tepehuán, and Nepali shamanism, as well as new religions such as the Unification Church ("Moonies") also show fundamentalist tendencies.

Fundamentalism is therefore not the monopoly of any one religion, nor is any religion covered by AWID's research without fundamentalist actors.

For 76% of women's rights activists surveyed by AWID, the strength of religious fundamentalisms has increased globally in the past ten years. Fundamentalist movements are gaining the power to shape social norms, influence international institutions and national decision makers, and define laws and policies, especially in the areas of "morality" and bodily autonomy.

Figure 1: Over the last ten years, how has the strength of religious fundamentalisms changed in each of the following contexts?



Base: 1,602 survey respondents

No matter how strictly religious fundamentalist movements refer to a “pure tradition” or “glorious past”, they are very much part of today’s globalized world, shaping it and also being shaped by it. Religious fundamentalisms are a global phenomenon and respond to global forces and developments. They operate transnationally, support or exploit neoliberal politics and discourse, and use modern technologies (e.g., Internet, cable TV, satellite technology) to spread their influence.

While religious fundamentalisms are a social and political phenomenon, the importance of religious symbolism and texts as a source of legitimacy and power for fundamentalist initiatives cannot be overlooked. Religion is also at the core of fundamentalist recruitment, funding and campaigning.

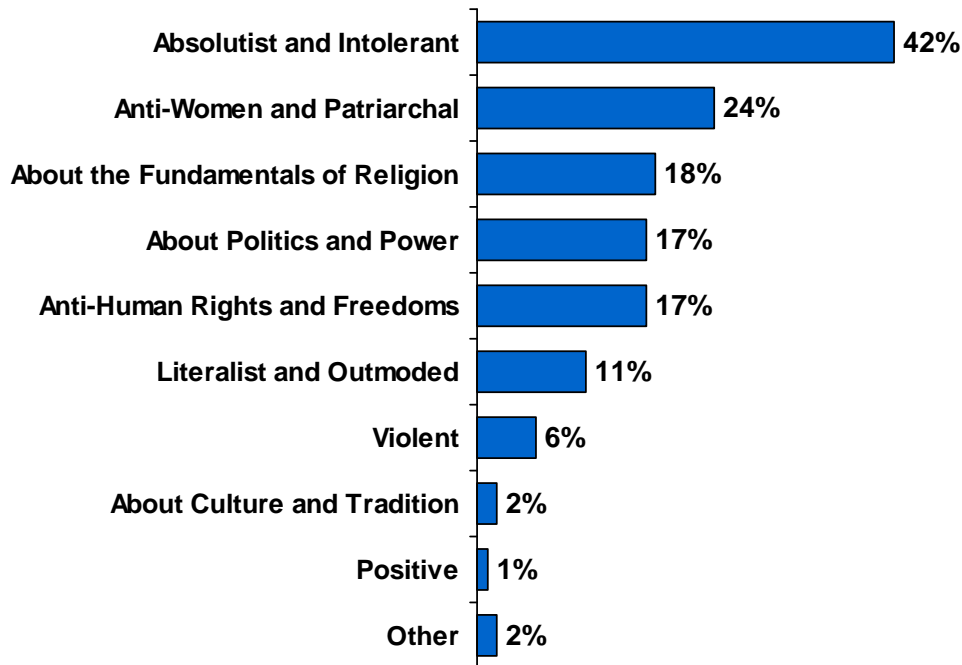
How do women’s rights activists define religious fundamentalisms?

The term “fundamentalism” originated at the turn of the 20th century, when a group of militant North American Christian Evangelicals positioned themselves as fighting for the “fundamentals of faith” in the context of modernization. Since then, the term has evolved from its original context and meaning, and is used to describe a much wider phenomenon. It now refers to a variety of groups and actors across religious traditions and regions, and is sometimes applied to other ideologies that may have nothing to do with religion. Women’s rights activists increasingly understand the phenomenon of religious fundamentalisms as a modern one, and emphasize the motivations and agendas of various fundamentalist actors over the particular historicity of the term.

Many women’s rights activists understand religious fundamentalisms as a multidimensional phenomenon. In AWID’s study, a number of key defining characteristics appear to resonate across religions and regions. Among these, the most frequently mentioned is “absolutist and intolerant” –

religious fundamentalisms are described as taking positions that are not open to debate, imposing a dogmatic vision or world view, and opposing democratic values, pluralism and dissent.

Figure 2: How would you define “religious fundamentalisms”?



Note: Multiple responses accepted; percentages will not total 100%
Base: 1,483 survey responses

The defining characteristics of religious fundamentalisms put forth by women’s rights activists can, for analytical purposes, be grouped into two main types – **semantic** and **pragmatic** definitions.

•• **Semantic** describe **what religious fundamentalisms are**: They describe these movements as ideological projects that aim to control the individual and/or society as a whole, and to impose narrow, literal, extreme and dogmatic ways of interpreting truth, religious texts and the world.

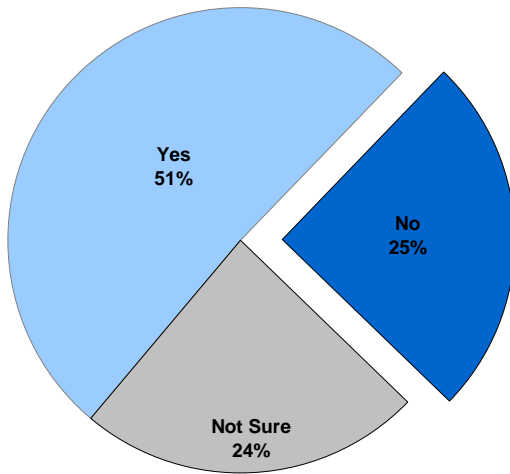
•• **Pragmatic** describe **what religious fundamentalisms do**: They highlight the negative effects of these movements on the individual and society – particularly with respect to equality, justice and freedom – and on political and legal systems, with respect to democratic and pluralist values, human rights, women’s rights, and sexual and reproductive rights.

How useful is the term “religious fundamentalisms”?

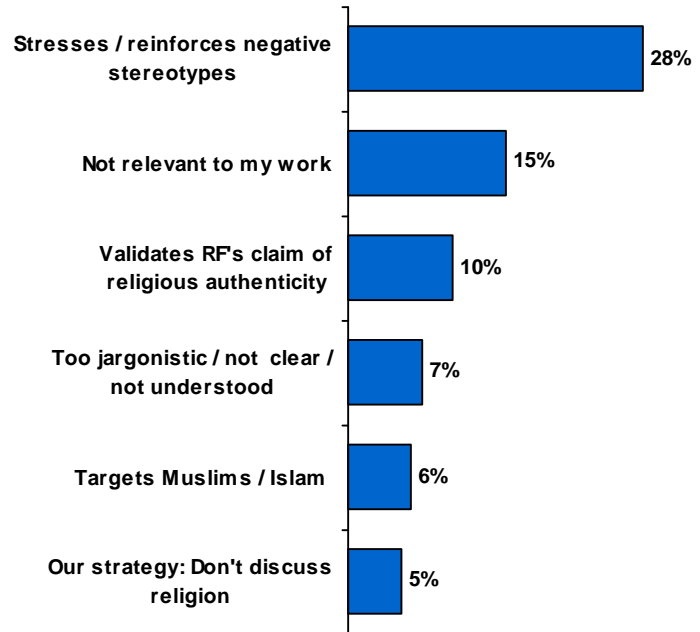
The survey responses reflect the complex relationship that women’s rights activists have with the term “religious fundamentalisms”. While half of the respondents (51%) affirm that the term is useful in their work, the other half express reservations – 25% consider it not useful, while the remaining express doubt. The reasons for which the term is deemed not useful are listed in Figure 3:

Figure 3:

Do you find the term “religious fundamentalisms’ useful in your work?



Why is it not useful?



Base: 1586 survey respondents

Despite the multiple limitations of the term, respondents and interviewees acknowledge that alternative terminology is often localized, not widely understood and frequently does not have traction. One way of addressing the paradox of an imperfect though unavoidable term is to remain mindful of its limitations or possible abuses; that is, to employ a critical use of the term. As part of this critical use, it is necessary to dissociate the term from any one particular religion, notably Islam – and to stress that fundamentalism exists within all religions without exception.

Who is a religious fundamentalist?

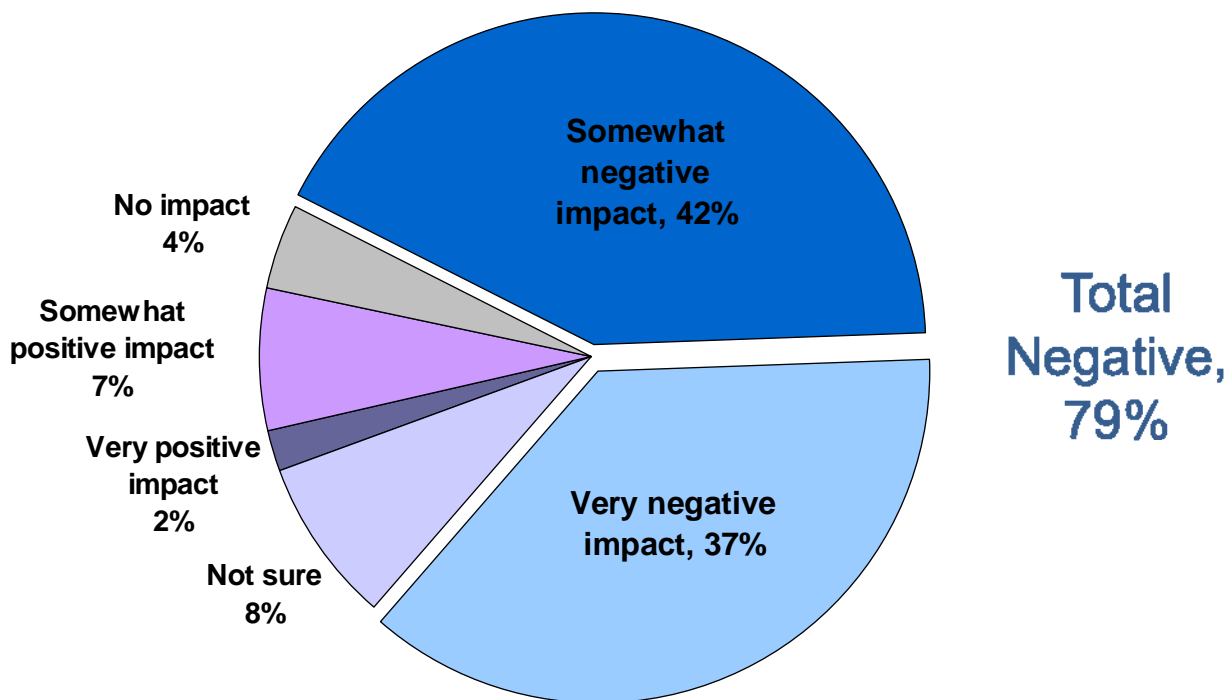
Women’s rights activists caution against presumptions about who is or is not likely to be a religious fundamentalist. When asked to identify the most influential fundamentalist actors in their contexts, they name a wide variety, and nearly every religion in every region has a similar cast: religious leaders; local/national and international religious institutions, organizations and groups; militant parties or groups with religious discourse; religious and secular political parties; and NGOs and charities with fundamentalist links. In some cases, the State itself is identified as a fundamentalist actor. When asked to indicate the levels of influence of a variety of fundamentalist actors, women’s rights activists rate religious leaders and local or national religious institutions to be the most influential of all.

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.

A negative impact on women’s rights

In the experience of 8 out of 10 women’s rights activists surveyed from over 160 countries, religious fundamentalisms have a negative impact on women’s rights.

Figure 4: In the last ten years, what would you say has been the overall impact of religious fundamentalisms on women’s rights in the context of your work?



Base: 789 survey respondents

In response to AWID’s survey, women’s rights activists cite over 600 examples of these negative impacts, and these are often interconnected, multifaceted and long-lasting – with class and context-specific dynamics. The five most frequently mentioned impacts are:

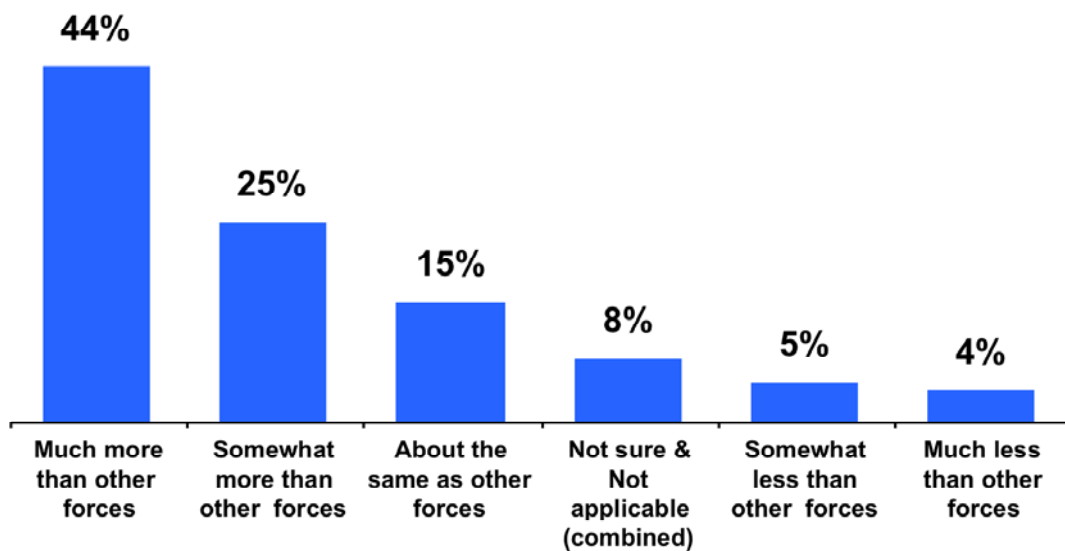
1. Reduced health and reproductive rights
2. Reduced general autonomy for women
3. Increased violence against women
4. Reduced sexual rights and freedoms
5. Reduced rights for women in the public sphere

Within fundamentalist discourse, women are conceptualized as the reproducers and symbols of a community’s collective identity, and are thus seen as reflective of a movement’s social influence and political power. This translates into an obsession with the control of women’s bodies and autonomy, and the prescription of strictly defined gender roles. Women’s rights activists describe religious fundamentalist campaigns to restrict reproductive rights, monitor “morality” and impose rigid norms of sexual identity. Although fundamentalist movements in different regions and religions may emphasize one or another issue more strongly, in all contexts, these campaigns have serious implications for women’s bodies and autonomy, and especially for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTBQI) persons and communities.

Because their messages become strongly internalized as part of people’s identities, religious fundamentalisms are able to restrict the space for dissent much more than other patriarchal systems. They limit questioning and freedom of choice, erode people’s sense of self and autonomy, and attack tolerance and pluralism. Effectively influencing society without having to capture state power, fundamentalist movements in all regions and religions specifically target youth – appealing to their needs and subjectivities, and penetrating the education system to mold future generations. Not all the impacts of religious fundamentalisms are necessarily tangible or measurable. Their profound, long-lasting and negative psychological impact is a reality that often goes unacknowledged, and for women’s rights activists from diverse contexts, the creeping normalization of religious fundamentalist messages is of the greatest concern.

Over two-thirds of women’s rights activists regard religious fundamentalisms as obstructing women’s rights more than other political forces. In this light, religious fundamentalisms emerge as the main political challenge in the fight for women’s rights.

Figure 5: Compared to other political forces in the context of your work, how much do religious fundamentalisms obstruct women’s rights?



Base: 1,594 survey respondents

Overall, women's rights activists working at the international level have a more negative perception of the impact of religious fundamentalisms than those working at local and national levels. The reason may be that women's rights activists working at the local level witness greater resistance to religious fundamentalisms and are closer to the factors that undermine their influence. But this difference may also reflect the emphasis that religious fundamentalisms place on penetrating and influencing the international sphere.

A negative impact on development

The rise of religious fundamentalism has implications for international and community development, and wider movements for social justice and human rights. In the social and political vacuum caused by neoliberal globalization, the failure of state institutions to provide for communities, and the growing gap between rich and poor, religious fundamentalisms often position themselves as the defenders of the poor and downtrodden. Many fundamentalist movements establish legitimacy through service delivery and charity, in some cases co-opting the language of human rights and even gender.

There is little evidence, however, to support the fundamentalist claim to upholding justice. Many women's rights activists note that service provision is a superficial remedy that creates dependency. In practice, fundamentalist movements are parasitic upon on the economic and social stresses of communities, and thrive on the lack of economic opportunities for youth, especially young men. Rather than challenge the structural injustices at the root of poverty, religious fundamentalisms often bolster the systems of neoliberal globalization, corruption and inequality from which poverty and insecurity arise.

Women's rights activists highlight the difficulties of mobilizing communities for their rights in a context where individuals are encouraged to turn inward for salvation and where suffering is blamed on a failure to appease 'God's anger' or lead a 'moral' life. While the survey data yields no examples of campaigning against capitalism and neoliberal globalization, it does reveal numerous examples of the links between religious fundamentalists and global and local business.

A negative impact on civil society development

Religious fundamentalisms undermine collective organizing for economic justice, human rights and women's rights. They attack women's organizing as well as progressive religious organizing, both of which they regard as a political threat. Nearly 10% of women's rights activists have experienced destruction of the workplace or theft of equipment at the hands of religious fundamentalists.

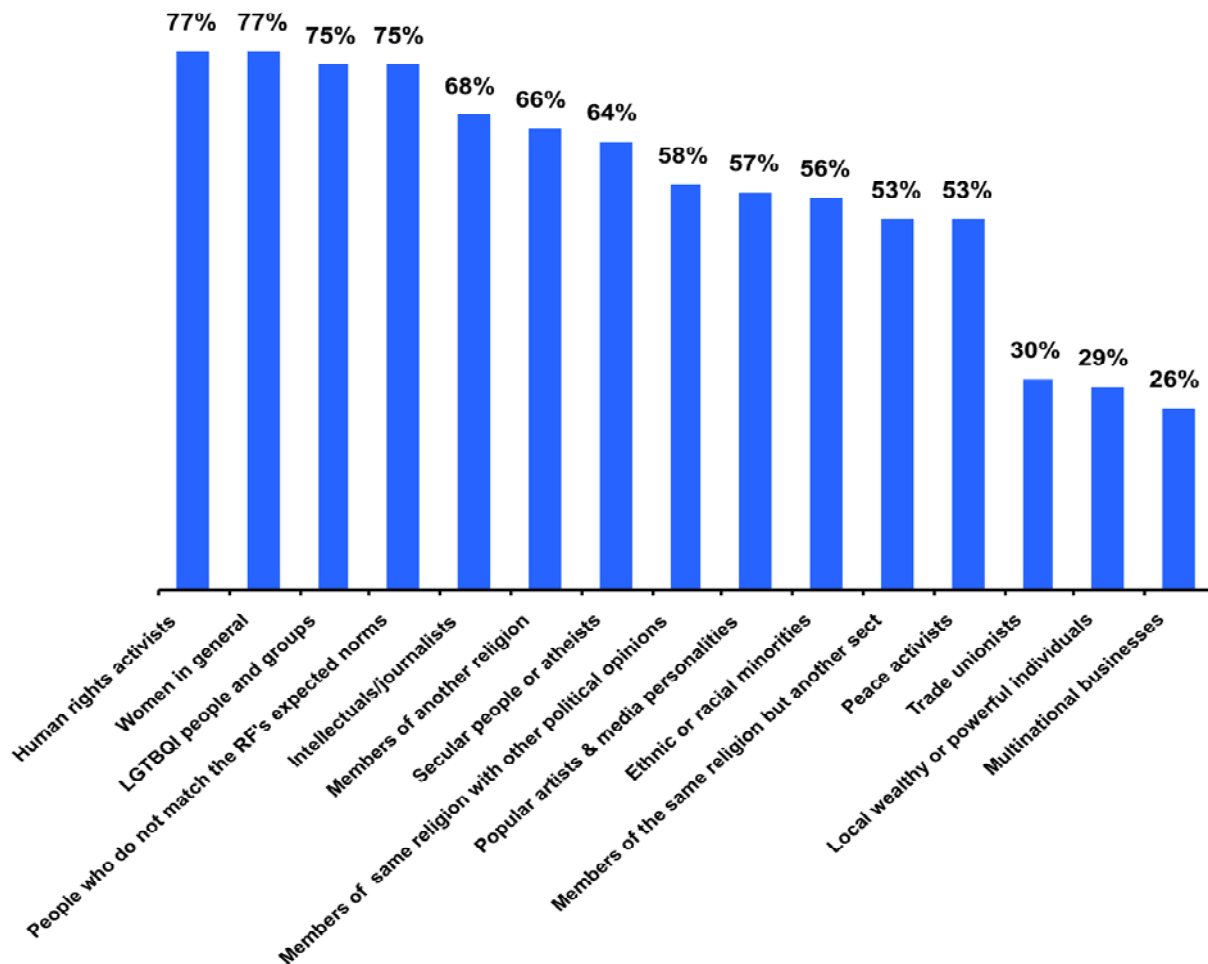
At the same time, religious fundamentalists are conscious not only of the threat, but also the opportunity presented by civil society. Aware of the prominence of human rights standards in many social and political debates, these movements seek to co-opt this discourse and to exploit the increasing strength and global funding of this arena. By presenting themselves as legitimate community leaders, and engaging in service delivery and charity, religious fundamentalisms are able to gain the support of governments and aid agencies, and forge partnerships with development organizations and even some women's rights groups. When asked to rate the influence of a range of

fundamentalist actors in their work, 62% of women’s rights activists name NGOs/charities with fundamentalist tendencies or links.

Creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation

According to women’s rights activists, religious fundamentalist violence is above all designed to create fear and isolation in order to keep society fragmented, discourage those who challenge or resist the fundamentalist agenda, and intimidate their potential allies. According to 50% of women’s rights activists, using violence to intimidate opponents is a common fundamentalist strategy. Verbal attacks and insults by religious fundamentalists are a common experience; almost 50% of women’s rights activists know of colleagues who have been targeted or have been targeted themselves. Labeling is a strategy of verbal violence shared across regions, and 45% of women’s rights activists have experienced it in some form.

Figure 6: 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 respondents replying “sometimes” or “frequently” to each type of target.

Base: 1,380 survey respondents

While fundamentalist projects have particularly negative implications for women, their broader impact on development and human rights should not be underestimated. Religious fundamentalisms present a threat to democracy and pluralism, and to poor and marginalized groups. They attack human rights defenders most frequently, specifically target the LGBTQI community, and narrow the space for diversity and for progressive thought and action. Religious fundamentalisms thus represent not only a major obstacle for women's rights, but also a growing global political force that demands a concerted cross-sectoral response.

Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms

Some women's rights activists warn against overstating the impact of religious fundamentalisms. Indeed, interviewees who have lived under fundamentalist regimes are in many ways more optimistic about the future than those located in contexts where these movements have never come to political power. As the narrow worldviews and social prescriptions of religious fundamentalists cannot and are not intended to address the real needs of individuals and communities, these groups inevitably fail to deliver on their promises, and may contain the seeds of their own destruction.

Fundamentalist agendas and strategies are to a degree formulated in reaction to global commitments to women's rights, human rights and equality, and this may be a sign of vehemence on their part, but it is also a statement of weakness. There is no shortage of examples of rights advances in the face of intransigent movements, and in AWID's survey, the very few respondents (9%) who regard religious fundamentalisms as having a positive impact on women's rights largely refer to unintended outcomes that have ultimately been beneficial to women and collective organizing for rights. These outcomes include bringing women's rights issues into the spotlight, and spurring activists in both secular and religious movements into action towards a common goal. Women's organizations and movements in many religious and regional contexts are charting the course of transnational networking and strategizing, with an emphasis on shared experiences, a shared responsibility to address the issue, and the imperative of building wider movements to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms.

Share your thoughts and feedback the research. Please write to us at cfpublications@awid.org.

Learn more about AWID's [Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms Initiative](#).

www.awid.org