

Religious
Fundamentalisms
on the Rise:
A case for
action

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Religious fundamentalisms are gaining strength within the world's major and minor religions, and across all the world's regions. In the views of women's rights activists, these movements have intensified over the last ten years, and have grown more visible, strategic and aggressive. Religious fundamentalisms are a global phenomenon that responds to shifting global forces and developments. In the context of neoliberal globalization, the "War on Terror" and the rise of identity politics, these movements are gaining ground not only in "weak" or "non-secular" states, but also within ostensibly "secular" systems and democracies.

In the experience of women's rights activists, a significant factor in the current rise of religious fundamentalisms is the backlash against women's improved status or increased autonomy, and against the recognition of new frameworks for human rights. Religious fundamentalisms are active at grassroots, national and regional levels, and within international arenas, they are becoming increasingly influential – stalling efforts on rights treaties, diluting progressive discourse and creating alliances to immobilize the international human rights system. As these movements continue to evolve – forging international links, co-opting the language of rights and gender justice, employing sophisticated media and technology, and appealing to individuals in subjective and material ways – progressive movements must also continue to evolve effective strategies to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms, and to reclaim critical discourses, spaces and constituents.

This publication seeks to build a deeper and more shared understanding among women's rights activists and their allies of the way fundamentalist projects work to undermine 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 activists, the commonalities far outweigh the diversity. Religious fundamentalisms represent a global phenomenon that requires a concerted and consolidated global response. Just as the strategies of religious fundamentalists are positioned according to different geographies, constituencies and issues – but linked by a common thread – the resistance mounted by rights activists across all sectors can also be empowered by a diverse, transnational and coherent mobilization.

A range of voices

This publication draws on the survey responses of more than 1,600 women's rights activists¹ and interviews with 51 key experts. Together, these women's rights activists represent a broad range of experience: they vary in age from under 16 to over 65 years of age; focus on different regions and issues; and are affected by different religious fundamentalist movements. They work at local, national, regional or international levels, and within a wide range of organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), government, multilateral, and religious organizations, and academic institutions. Their shared experiences of religious fundamentalisms – common strategies, campaigns and impacts – are highlighted here.

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.

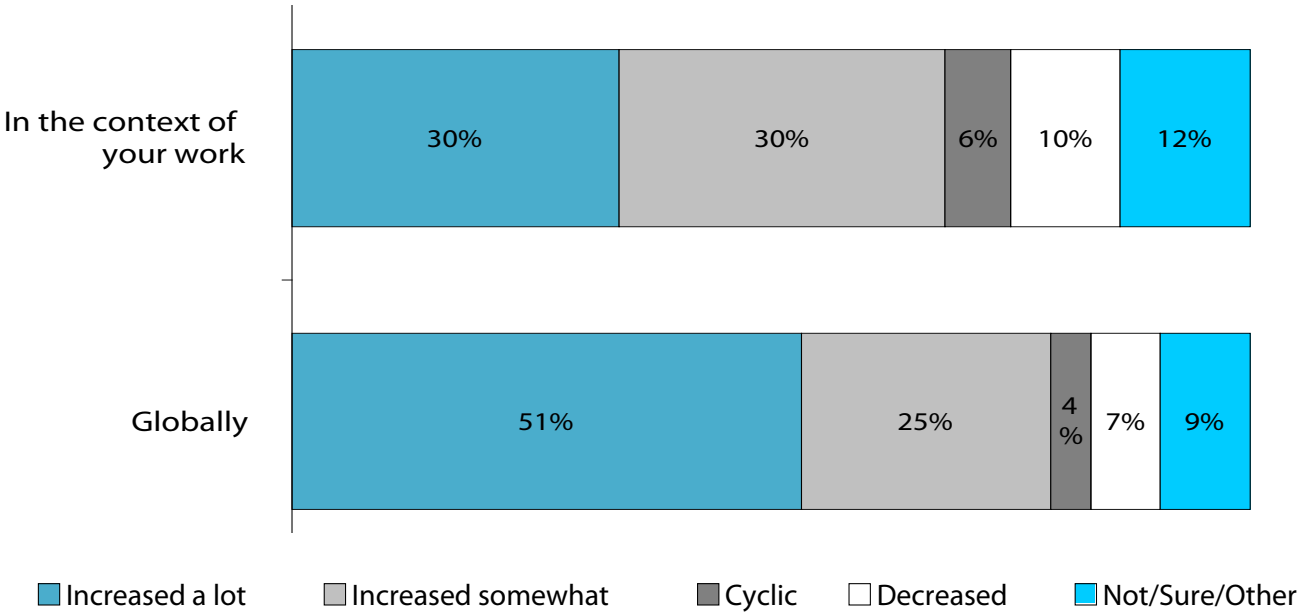
A global rise, across religions and regions

Religious fundamentalisms are a global phenomenon, and they are gaining ground. For 76% of women’s rights activists surveyed by AWID, the strength of religious fundamentalisms has increased globally in the past ten years. Religious fundamentalisms are gaining the power to shape social norms and architecture, influence international institutions and national policy-makers, and define laws and policies, especially in the areas of family and personal status laws and reproductive rights.

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 (including Evangelical forms such as Pentecostal or Charismatic churches), Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh. Localized religious traditions, for example, ethno-religious movements such as the Kenyan Mungiki, Congo’s Kimbaguists and Bundu dia Kongo, Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, Mexican indigenous Tepehuán, Nepali shamanism, and new religions such as 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 without fundamentalist actors.

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

In the context of rapid neoliberal globalization, a growing gap between rich and poor, and increasing uncertainty about the future, religious fundamentalists campaign under the banner of justice and a return to traditional values; they build their campaigns around issues that resonate in people's lives. As one women's rights activist notes, "[T]here is a very rapid change spreading all over the world: it is very destabilizing to cultures, and so there is a tendency within these cultures for people to want to hold on to what they see as less changing, perhaps imagined as timeless forces." (Mab Segrest, United States)

Fundamentalist movements often present a telling critique of late capitalist society, which they portray as being composed of alienated, selfish individuals, engaged in the obsessive pursuit of pleasure without heed for its consequences for others. As a solution to alienation and dislocation, fundamentalism prescribes a commitment to gender role, family and community. The fundamentalist ideology everywhere appears as collectivist and communalist. (survey respondent, Uganda)

Religious fundamentalisms exploit the importance of religion in people's lives, calling up religiously defined concepts of "good" and "evil", and offering certainty, hope and quick solutions to the most complex or subjective problems. They foster a sense of identity, belonging and meaning among their followers, and create emotional communities that fill the social and existential needs of the moment. Discussing the critical appeal of Evangelical churches in Africa, one women's rights activist notes "the cathartic and emotional experience that women have in lives that are otherwise difficult" (Ayesha Imam, Nigeria). More than ethno-nationalist and cultural fundamentalisms and other manifestations of identity politics, religious fundamentalisms address metaphysical questions, and this makes them particularly hard to resist.

[The religious fundamentalist] message becomes appealing to different constituencies. Many of our societies are going through massive change and with change comes uncertainty. The fundamentalists offer a clear message in black and white. This becomes very appealing, as opposed to the many options that liberals and democrats offer. When someone comes along in religious garb and gives you this "one, true message", you don't have to think any more. It makes life easier for those who yearn for certainty in life. (Zainah Anwar, Malaysia)

They have moved away from glorifying poverty to the kind of motivational speaking that promises riches and wealth, that gives hope. In so doing, they have become more authoritative in each country. Government ministers, business people, young people... are being enticed to join. (Hope Chigudu, Uganda/Zimbabwe)

Conservative versus fundamentalist?

Debates over the distinction between religious conservatism and religious fundamentalism often arise in work on this issue. In some contexts, the terms seem to be used interchangeably, while in others, the dividing line is clearer. A commonly noted distinction is that while conservatives tend to think for themselves, fundamentalists think for others. As one women's rights activist observes, "to some extent, these are matters of degree, and it's the degree to which one believes in the inerrancy and applicability of one's ideas to everyone in every circumstance... The conservative does not necessarily take those beliefs from a sacred text or appeal to an authority higher than reason" (Frances Kissling, United States). For many observers, the absolutist and intolerant nature of religious fundamentalisms sets them apart from other conservative forces.

Shared experiences of religious fundamentalisms

Despite the range of their experiences of religious fundamentalisms, women's rights activists have a shared understanding of the phenomenon that rises above contextual diversities. In AWID's study, a number of key defining characteristics appear to resonate across regions and religions. The most frequently mentioned defining characteristic of religious fundamentalisms is "absolutist and intolerant", followed by their "anti-women and patriarchal" position. Throughout the world, these movements are also experienced as "about politics and power", "anti-human rights and freedoms", and being "violent".

According to women's rights activists, the main actors in fundamentalist movements are found across local and global levels, within religious and secular institutions, and among followers and the elite. They may be active as political or religious leaders, charities and NGOs, religious organizations, missionaries, and ordinary members of communities and families.

The key features of religious fundamentalisms are explored in further detail in AWID's publication entitled "Shared Insights: Women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms" (2008).

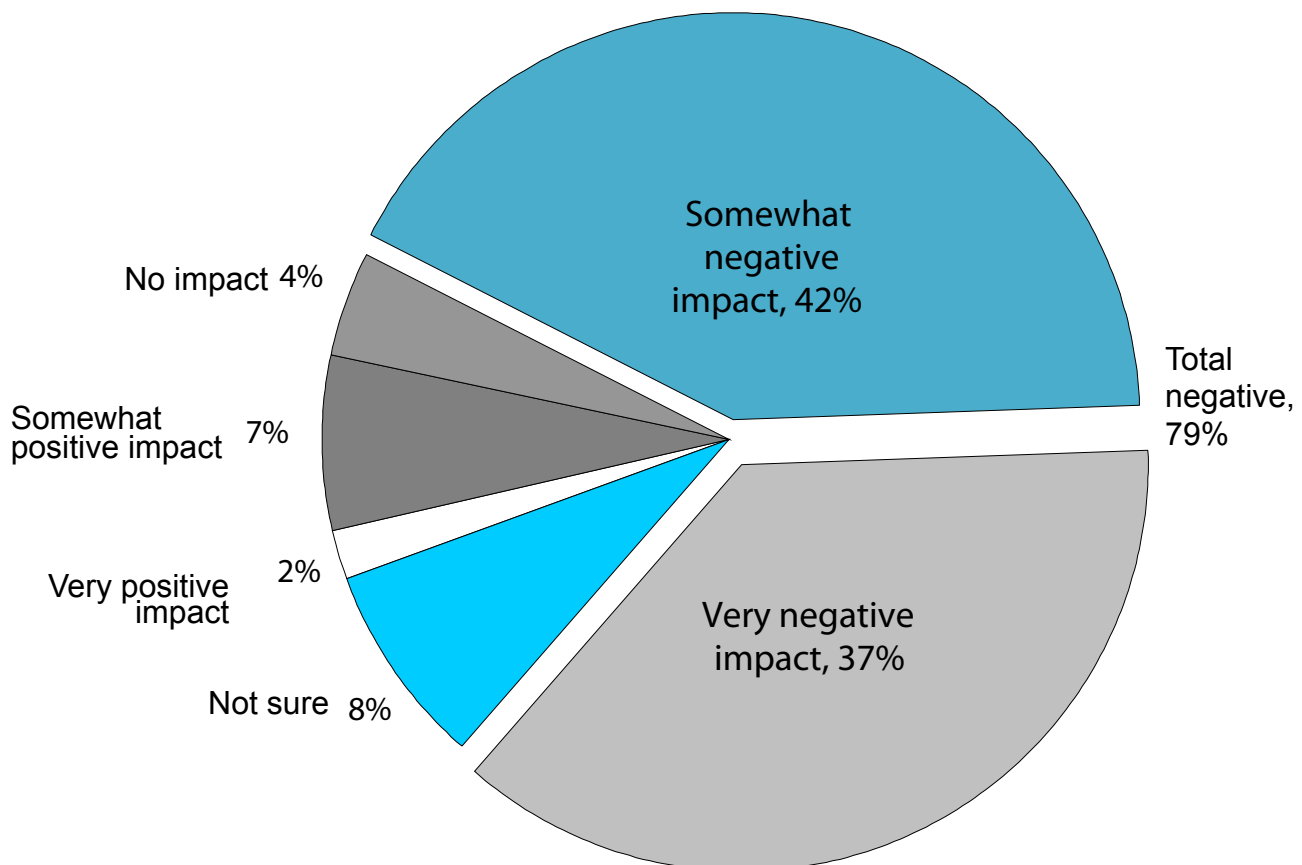
Although fundamentalist movements may vary within a country and even within a religion, this diversity is generally limited to a question of priorities. Indeed, there are often similarities in areas where religious fundamentalisms are presumed to operate very differently. For example, campaigning against sexual and reproductive rights appears to be a central concern of Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Pentecostal fundamentalisms, while Muslim fundamentalisms are seen to concentrate more on dress codes. However, Pentecostal fundamentalisms also impose dress codes, and Muslim fundamentalisms are also anti-abortion – they simply vary with regard to their emphases. As one women's rights activist from Kenya observes, a common agenda can even inspire movements that, on the surface, seem fundamentally opposed: "A couple of years ago, the Catholic Church in Kenya combined forces with Islamic organizations and burnt thousands of condoms in a public park in Nairobi. This was the first time that two opposing religious groups had a common agenda against condoms". Indeed, among the "three fundamentalist expressions that dominate the international debates: Islamists, Roman Catholics and Evangelical Christians... the only issues on which they agree are those related to restricting the exercise of sexual rights on the part of women, but also of others with non-conventional identities and practices." (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)

Although religious fundamentalisms are complex and multi-dimensional, what emerges most clearly from the research is the common ground in the ways that women's rights activists within different religions and regions both understand and experience the phenomenon. In the effort to develop transnational alliances and strategies for confronting the global rise of religious fundamentalisms, this common ground is where we begin.

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. In AWID's survey, women's rights activists cite over 600 examples of the negative impact of religious fundamentalisms: these are physical and psychological, and are manifested in the control over women's bodies, sexuality, autonomy, freedom of movement and participation in public life. According to women's rights activists, the negative impacts of fundamentalist campaigns are often interconnected, multifaceted and long-lasting. For the very small percentage who do perceive a positive impact, the reasons are often paradoxical, for example, that shared opposition to religious fundamentalisms is creating solidarity among local women's groups, or driving people to abandon religion altogether.

Figure 2: 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?

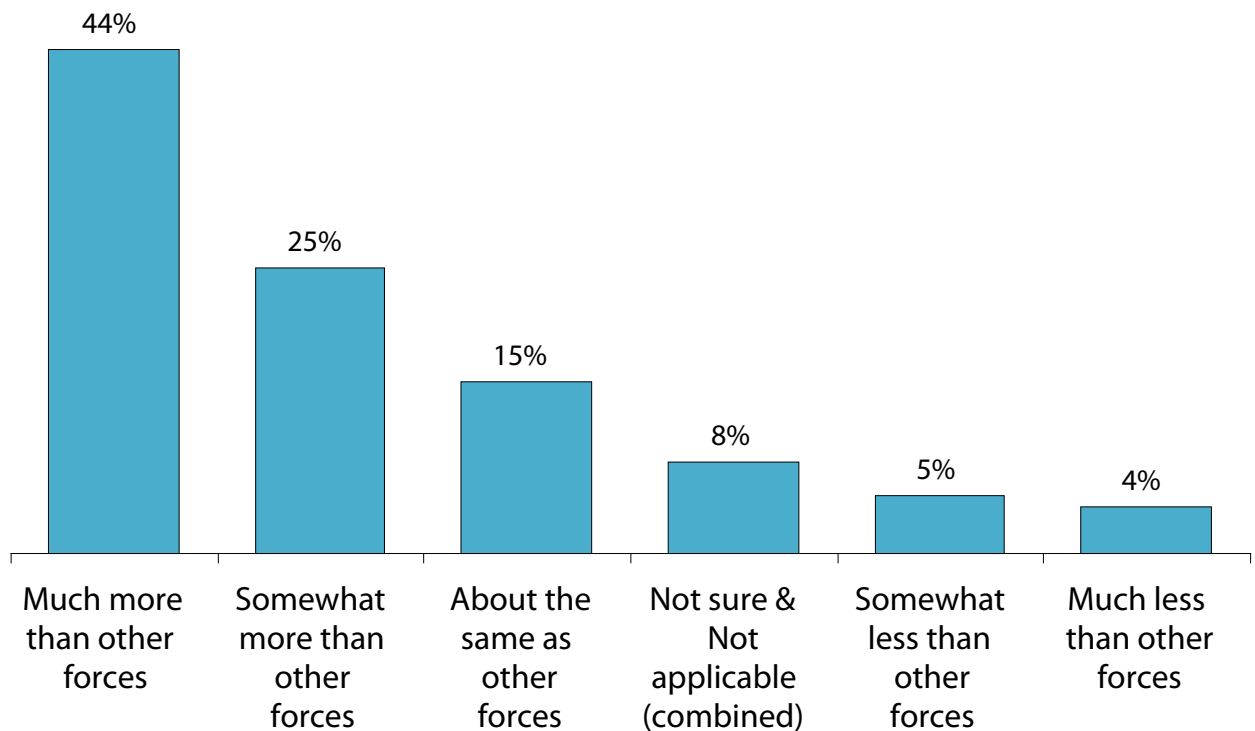


Base: 789 survey respondents

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 are the main political challenge in the fight for women’s rights. 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.

What is at stake at the international level is different from what is at stake at the local level. In many cases, States “give in” to progressive demands in terms of women’s rights at the national level due to the combined pressure from international donors and public opinion, but then continue to act internationally as the “champions of the faith” because at the international level, “religion and culture” are the preferred devices for masking power struggles. (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)

Figure 3: 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

The impact on women's rights at the international level

In the experience of women's rights activists, a key factor in the current rise of religious fundamentalisms is the backlash against global commitments toward women's improved status or increased autonomy. The involvement of religious fundamentalists at the international level can be traced to the early 1990s – the beginning of the cycle of five United Nations (UN) meetings dealing with political issues in a new human rights context (Rio de Janeiro, Cairo, Vienna, Beijing and Copenhagen). In each of those conferences, women's rights movements put forward new ways of looking at gender, sexuality and reproduction, and insisted that women's rights were human rights. Religious fundamentalisms reacted to the UN's modernity and tentative acceptance of women's rights as human rights, and they have been successful in dramatically slowing but not stopping the advance of women's rights. This trend is repeated at the regional level.

The best example has been the way in which the Christian fundamentalist, Evangelical churches, Catholic Church and, to a lesser extent, Islamic movements, have opposed the ratification of the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. They have been vocal and have invested huge amounts in publicity in order to cast the Protocol as a "pro-abortion" instrument. Their day-to-day access to large communities in which they can perpetuate these myths, and the funding that they receive, make the battle particularly difficult. (survey respondent, Kenya/United Kingdom)

From its founding, the UN and its agencies have sought out religious institutions as a source of credibility and as implementing arms for educational, health and humanitarian services, according them disproportionately more power in the international sphere than other civil society organizations. The special role of the Holy See as a non-member state in the UN and the special status of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has given religious fundamentalisms an inside track on influencing international policy. During the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994), the Holy See led efforts that tied up the proceedings in a debate about a single paragraph in the plan of action on abortion, thus stalling efforts to advance other reproductive rights such as adolescent access to sexuality education and greater provision of contraceptive supplies. Religious fundamentalist groups have affected how UN agencies talk about women's rights, especially reproductive rights. For example, attacks on UNICEF for its work on reproductive rights have resulted in rhetorical, if not practical, back-peddling. A far more ominous and successful force within the UN has been the Bush administration, which has allowed religious fundamentalisms, particularly those led by the Vatican, to be less visible, and has led the United States government to take positions that damage women's rights.²

I believe that there was more confrontation during and after the Cairo Plan of Action and in all the work to disseminate information

² AWID would like to acknowledge Francis Kissling's contributions to this section.

on the Cairo Plan of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action. That's when we noticed extremely strong obstacles to activism, and the participation of religious fundamentalist groups. Since then, we have seen a constant rise in fundamentalism, both nationally and internationally. (Susana Chiarotti, Argentina)

In 2000, the US religious Right led efforts to create an international, interfaith coalition of NGOs and government leaders to block growing international support for women's rights achieved through series of UN conferences. Religious Right NGOs lobbied conservative UN member states to form a voting bloc that jeopardized many of the gains from earlier UN conferences on women's rights and prevented women's rights NGOs from achieving additional government commitments. The coalition included the Holy See, conservative Islamic governments like Sudan, Iran, Libya, Pakistan, and conservative Catholic governments. When George W. Bush became president, the US joined that coalition. (Jennifer Butler, United States)

In assessing the impact of religious fundamentalisms on women's rights at the international level, it is important to note that, at the same time as their influence within UN processes is rising, the capacity of women's movements to influence this arena has been declining. In the place of women's movements, international human rights organizations and sexual rights activists have emerged at the forefront of women's rights advocacy in the UN. The cause of this diminished presence warrants further exploration, but its impact is evident in any catalogue of the issues given precedence in global fora. One women's rights activist observes this trend in the fate of two distinct but related human rights violations: the criminalization of same-sex consensual sexual behaviour and the criminalization of heterosexual consensual sexual behaviour outside marriage. "The former is one of the hottest topics in the UN, present in practically every meeting of every organ; has the staunch opposition of the European Union, many Latin American and some Asian states, and a network of civil society organizations – most of them with headquarters in the United States or Europe – with considerable funding to pursue this advocacy. The latter is seldom raised in the UN's elegant chambers. It does raise controversy, of course, but there are no activists, no funding, no states interested in pursuing it any further." (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)

Controlling sexuality, women's bodies and autonomy

Within fundamentalist discourse, women are conceptualized as the reproducers and symbols of a community's collective identity. This translates into a religious fundamentalist obsession with the control of women's bodies and autonomy, and the prescription of strictly defined gender roles. Women's rights activists describe 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 for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) persons and communities.

Reproductive rights

When asked about the negative impacts of religious fundamentalisms on women's rights, nearly half (46%) of women's rights activists mention an example directly related to health and reproductive rights. In India, for instance, Hindu fundamentalists promote the practice of 24-hour complete fasting by wives for the long life of their husbands in the *Teej* festival, without respite for pregnant and lactating women. In Liberia, fundamentalist ministers deter women from seeking medical care during childbirth, assuring them that "God will provide." As a result, many women die attempting to give birth in churches.

The refusal to recognize reproductive health as a human right leaves women without access to basic health services and the means to prevent unplanned pregnancies and protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. In the Philippines, one women's rights activist reports that, "the passage of a comprehensive bill on Women's Reproductive Health has been aborted" due to the opposition of the Catholic Church to contraception, and the political influence of Catholic prelates and clergy. The negative impacts detailed by women's rights activists are particularly concentrated in the area of access to contraception and abortion, and often have class- or context-specific dynamics. The recent United States Supreme Court ruling in *Gonzales v. Carhart* bans partial birth abortion, which is a procedure primarily used by low-income, minority women and women whose health or life may be jeopardized by the pregnancy. In Poland, the opposition to abortion is so strong that it inhibits the development of feminist discourse that would locate reproductive rights within the broader context of social and economic rights – where the right to abortion is inseparable from the right to have children and the right to the economic security to support them.

[In 2007] there was a campaign against sex education in secondary schools. The initiator of the campaign was the religious fundamentalist group, Union of Orthodox Parents. The main slogan for the campaign [was roughly] "You don't need sexual education in order to give birth to children!" (survey respondent, Georgia)

The broader impact on health and development

AWID's research reveals the broader negative impact of religious fundamentalisms on community health and development. While the Vatican has campaigned to halt tetanus immunization programmes in the Philippines, Bolivia and Mexico, claiming that the vaccination contains a sterilizing agent, Muslim fundamentalists in Nigeria and India 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.

A law for the Protection of Victims of Crimes against Sexual Autonomy was not approved due to the influence of fundamentalist groups. So there are no care services because of these groups. (survey respondent, Paraguay)

“Morality” and sexuality

Religious fundamentalisms exhibit a clear preoccupation with “morality” and sexuality, although the focus of campaigns tends to vary across regions and religions. In the experience of women’s rights activists, Catholic and Christian fundamentalisms appear to direct this campaigning towards abstinence and against pre-marital sex, specifically politicizing and moralizing the bodies of young people. In Nigeria, virginity testing has been introduced as a precondition to academic scholarships or graduation by some Christian colleges, while the Christian Right in the United States promotes virginity through “purity rings” and “purity balls”, where fathers pledge to protect their daughters’ purity, and daughters commit to remain virgins until marriage. Reduced scope for women and girls to make decisions about their own sexuality leads to powerless acceptance of the transmission of HIV and other STIs, and unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. In Sub-Saharan Africa, which has been hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS crisis, the religious fundamentalist focus on abstinence is particularly strong.

Talking about abstinence in a cultural context in which women have little say over their reproductive health is dangerous... Abstinence-only programmes preferred by the church completely ignore the realities on the ground and the socio-cultural and economic context in which women live. (survey respondent, Kenya)

In the Middle East and North Africa, and among Muslim fundamentalisms, the focus on “morality” and sexuality takes the form of campaigning on veiling, *Hudood* laws (which criminalize sex outside marriage), and restrictions on women’s movement. In many contexts, historical gains made in women’s overall visibility are now under attack. One women’s rights activist in India describes how the freedoms that women previously enjoyed are increasingly suppressed by fundamentalist influence: “Women were quite able to move freely in my childhood and youth. They would go to public parks on holidays and festivals, or to the two rivers to wash clothes. All that has disappeared because of the growing influence of the fundamental reading of the holy book.”

There is a sense of insecurity: it’s dangerous to be out there, it’s not your place to be out in public... [The fundamentalists are saying] “You thought these much broader choices were open to you, well in fact they’re not. If you try to take those choices, then there are a whole lot of dangers you’re going to have to face and no one’s going to protect you.” The whole discourse of protection is replacing the discourse of rights. (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh)

Controlling sexuality and women's bodies and autonomy can either be a goal in itself of religious fundamentalisms or just the means to a wider goal, such as proving political or nationalist dominance. Women's rights activists focusing on Muslim fundamentalisms note that, in some cases, the veil is used politically to mark the limits of the community, and to distinguish insiders from outsiders – while in others, it is used as a marker of fundamentalist influence. Although Muslim fundamentalisms often claim to stand for the poor and downtrodden, the success of these movements is rarely measured against these goals. According to one women's rights activist, "It is much more difficult to eradicate poverty and corruption, but easy to target women who are disempowered and show success through women. *Hijab*, dress becomes an easy visible measure of success; getting women to stay at home and be obedient is much easier." (Zainah Anwar, Malaysia)

To prove that you have politically dominated other groups, you either raise your flag on top of your building or even better the flag is the black cloth that women are wearing and they are walking all over the streets of that city... If every single woman of that neighbourhood is totally veiled, you have both social and political flags and you have proven that you have dominated. (Yanar Mohammed, Iraq)

The politicization of women's bodies is common among fundamentalist movements. In Serbia, where religious fundamentalists hold women accountable for the "white plague" (low birth rate), the head of the Orthodox Church regularly warns women in his epistles that in seeking an abortion or choosing not to have children, they become "killers" or "sinners". In Ahmedabad, Hindu fundamentalists also condemn abortion as an act of "murder", in the context of a Hindu nationalist campaign to "encourage all Hindus to feel a sense of belonging to a 'dominant' community or risk becoming an oppressed minority" (survey respondent, India). The dual purpose of such campaigns is often apparent, as these anti-abortion demonstrations also condemn working women, demanding that they give up their jobs in favour of unemployed men.

Central to all religious fundamentalisms is a reordering of notions of masculinity and femininity, which also exerts pressure on men to control their women, to "push them back into the home, make them behave in ways that are acceptable – otherwise you're not a man." (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom/India)

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGTBQI) rights

All religious fundamentalisms stand firmly against sexual expression outside of heterosexual marriage, as part of a broader discourse on promoting rigidly defined gender norms. One women's rights activist explains the preoccupation of religious fundamentalisms with sexuality: "Fundamentalism attaches itself more to gender and sexuality and the family than it does to race. Backlashes against reproductive freedom, and against lesbian and gay rights... have been marshaled to assemble this reassertion of masculinity in the long term." (Mab Segrest, United States)

In the experience of the majority of women's rights activists, religious fundamentalisms campaign against LGBTQI rights - the categorical nature of the response on this issue indicates that religious fundamentalist approaches to sexual diversity transcend any regional and contextual complexities. Examples of religious fundamentalist campaigns include protests, radio broadcasts and sermons against LGBTQI persons by the Bahamas Christian Council; while in Mauritius, a Gay Pride March was countered by a fundamentalist protest that "treated the gay community as bestial". One women's rights activist notes that, across Central America, the issue of sexual diversity can barely be raised within legislative debates without confrontation from religious fundamentalists. "A religious pretext is always the excuse not to pass laws that benefit the LGBTQI community." (survey respondent, Venezuela)

Religious fundamentalisms tend to dictate unitary identities for women. The struggle to control women's bodies and sexuality is also about marking "in" groups and "out" groups. (Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, Philippines)

According to one women's rights activist, the Islamist bloc (the OIC and the UN regional African Group - led first by Algeria and later Egypt) currently presents the greatest threat to international progress on the de-criminalization of abortion as well as all forms of consensual sexual relationships outside marriage, whether heterosexual (criminalized as adultery) or same-sex (criminalized as sodomy, sex against the order of nature, etc.) She notes that Islamist states have been advocating at the UN level to include the "rights of the unborn" in Human Rights Council and General Assembly resolutions against extrajudicial executions and the death penalty. However, "such zeal for human life does not extend to those who are already born but happen to be homosexuals, as those same states have also managed to exclude any specific references to sexual orientation as a non-valid ground for executing humans and have even defended doing so as part of their 'cultural traditions'". (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)

Reduced rights for women in the public sphere

Religious fundamentalisms naturalize rigid gender roles and diminish women's participation in public life. For example, in the Russian Federation, the Orthodox Church has revived stereotypes regarding women's "natural role", pushing women back into the domestic sphere. In Southeast Asia, fundamentalist interpretations of Buddhism teach boys to be leaders and girls to be servants. From Southern Baptists in the United States to militant Muslim groups in Pakistan, and in Eritrea, France, Malaysia and Serbia, religious fundamentalists seek to limit young women's access to education.

This phenomenon has particularly affected women's political participation. In the Philippines, women's rights activists see the fundamentalist Iglesia ni Cristo's promotion of male superiority as the cause of a significant drop in the number of women leaders in local and national government. Ironically, in Bangladesh, the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami

became part of the government under a woman Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, but it still campaigns against women's leadership as being "un-Islamic". Fundamentalist Catholic and Evangelical Christian doctrines in Central America and Mexico strongly discourage the participation of citizens, particularly women, in rights advocacy, civic affairs or local governance. When it comes to countering progressive state policy, however, fundamentalist movements often *encourage* the participation of citizens.

Fundamentalist groups continue to exclude women not only from meaningful political participation, but also from assuming a public role in religion. For example, within the Church of God in Guatemala, women in rural areas are forced to sit outside if they bring their girls with them to church. In mosques across the world, religious justifications continue to be used to render women worshippers invisible.

Women's rights activists concede that certain religious fundamentalist groups do offer women limited opportunities for leadership, encouraging women to work in certain approved professions or even placing them in token policy-making positions. Yet, these movements simply co-opt the language of gender and rights in order to activate women for a particular fundamentalist project.

Religion has tended to be directed to the men with women just playing the role of the believer and the carrier of traditions. Religious fundamentalisms [have] changed that equation by offering a role to the women beyond that. In addition, the women are offered starring roles, where ostensibly their opinion matters and their voices are being heard. But in reality, what happens is the use of the women by the powers to control the others in ways that is reminiscent of a puppeteer and the puppets. (Pramada Menon, India)

Not all the impacts of religious fundamentalisms are necessarily tangible or measurable. For women's rights activists from contexts as diverse as Bangladesh, the United Kingdom and Nigeria, the creeping normalization of religious fundamentalist messages is of the greatest concern.

Psychological impact: narrowing the space for thought and action

From across the world, women's rights activists provide examples of the profound, long-lasting and negative psychological impact of religious fundamentalisms – a reality that often goes unacknowledged. 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. Challenging and resisting these messages can present grave psychological dilemmas. As one women's rights activist puts it, "religious fundamentalisms kill self-examination in women" (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria). They limit questioning and choice, erode people's sense of self and autonomy,

and increase feelings of fear and anger.

In the Soviet Union, the state provided the majority of the assistance for women to cope with two roles [domestic and economic provider]. After the collapse of the Union, all these institutions vanished and still the roles stayed the same, and then religion started to revive. From all sides, there was pressure on women... “This is what you should do because the religion says that it is your duty; you should stay one step lower than a male.” Where is the space for a woman as a personality? (Anonymous, Central Asia)

Majlis Mujahidin Indonesia has some Islamic boarding schools for young women and it has policies [to restrict] women’s expression, as it sees women’s expression will cause *fitnah* [social chaos]. Many students of these schools have grown up with passive characters. The female alumni tend not to speak out to their husbands. (survey respondent, Indonesia)

There is a measure of spiritual blackmail that makes members feel that if they don’t toe the line, they will die and go to hell. This shoots down all questioning. (Dorothy Aken’Ova, Nigeria)

Seeking to normalize inequality between women and men, religious fundamentalists replace the language of equality with “complimentarity”, in which women and men are accorded different but complementary roles. This model is accompanied by the imposition of rigid social roles and the segregation of women and men in both public and private spheres. In many cases, the imposition of fundamentalist values uproots and negates cultural norms and values that were previously in place. Discussing the growing prevalence of veiling in some contexts, one women’s rights activist observes the “deeper impact in how women see themselves and define themselves. Over time you start justifying it: ‘This is the right thing to be doing; women should behave like this’”. (Mona Mehta, India). For young women who internalize this sense of inequality, the psychological damage can be particularly severe.

I believe that the most serious impact is that many women believe and feel that they don’t have the right to have rights. That decisions about themselves, their minds and bodies, are influenced by and can be made by others. This means accepting that they are second-class citizens. (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay)

In this context, one women’s rights activist discusses the high suicide rate for women in Iran – four and a half times that of men – and more frequent among young women than older women. “Many suicides are public, they go to the roof, in the courtyard, in the park, in the middle of the street and they burn themselves; sometimes by throwing themselves in front of cars and trains. To me, these are signs of crisis and signs of resistance.” (Homa Hoodfar, Canada/Iran)

Many believers express anger and frustration as their religion is usurped and politicized by religious fundamentalists. There is a pressure to constantly prove loyalty to the religion or risk exclusion from the community. Nearly one in ten women's rights activists has been, or knows someone who has been, cast out from the community, the ultimate form of psychological violence (often accompanied by the physical violence of exile). In Cameroon, for instance, a young woman was excluded from her local mosque for wearing trousers while travelling on a long bus journey. In Mexico, the Catholic Church threatened to excommunicate congressional representatives who voted for the legalization of abortion. In countries where there are minority-majority tensions, there is often the added pressure of having to prove loyalty either to the country or to the communal identity, as defined by the majority or by community leaders, respectively. The long-lasting, psychological impact can be particularly harmful for marginalized groups in society.

Several times, there have been calls by Church leaders, including twice by the President, for gays to be put to death, stoned, [or] imprisoned. This directly impacts on lesbian, bisexual and transgender women in all sorts of ways... because many women will never come out of the closet initially even to themselves, even in positions of influence, even as activists, because of the inevitable exclusion from strong extended family and tight kinship networks, shaming, condemnation and for many, violence from male (and female) family and community members. (survey respondent, Fiji)

Violence against women

Women's rights activists frequently mention an increase in violence against women as a negative impact of religious fundamentalisms, especially as a consequence of their obstruction of women's rights within the family, and restrictions on women's general conduct.

Under the umbrella of Islamic fundamentalism, there is now the view in Algerian and certain segments of French society that women who do not follow a strict code of conduct are asking for rape, physical attack, harassment, loss of extra-domestic privileges or other forms of physical/psychological abuse. Transgressions include being outside of the home at dusk/after nightfall and attending sporting events. (survey respondent, United States)

Many recount the legal or structural inequalities that compromise women's choices as well as their safety. Christian fundamentalists in Zimbabwe, for example, are frequently at the root of restrictive divorce laws and welfare reforms that make it nearly impossible for women to leave abusive relationships. According to women's rights activists, religious fundamentalists often regard formal protections for women as a threat to the status of men. For example, when a Zimbabwean member of parliament opposed legislation that sought to criminalize domestic violence, he argued: "I stand here representing God the Almighty. Women are not equal to men. This is a dangerous bill, and let it be known in Zimbabwe that the rights, privileges, and status of men are gone." (survey respondent, Uganda/Zimbabwe)

I teach and advocate on intimate partner violence. Religious fundamentalisms teach that a woman belongs in the home and that she must submit to her husband's authority. As a result, fundamentalist Christian women are very reluctant to leave violent partners. Many believe that they must choose between their faith and their safety. (survey respondent, United States)

In Punjab Province, Pakistan, a female government minister was shot and killed by a man who justified his actions by stating it was “against the natural order” for a woman to have authority over men. (survey respondent, Canada)

In other contexts, religious fundamentalists campaign against provisions that might reduce violence against women. For example, in 1995, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress successfully campaigned against the application of a minimum age of marriage to the Muslim community. One of the first acts of the post-Revolution regime in Iran was to reverse gains for women's rights in family laws. In Pakistan, religious fundamentalists have repeatedly tried to overturn women's legal right to choose a spouse, which has encouraged forced marriages and so-called honour-killings. In contexts as diverse as Bahrain, Mali and South Africa, pressure from religious fundamentalists is delaying progress in family laws, while in both Uzbekistan and Thailand, women's rights activists report that Muslim fundamentalisms have led to an increase in polygamy. Religious fundamentalisms frequently promote early marriage, with or without the consent of young women, and with little regard for the law.

They manage to convince the parents, the girls and even the boys to accept marriage before the legal age. They use funds donated by big organizations [to] convince people. They also use places of worship to convince parents to educate their daughters to be submissive to men, asserting that this is what God says. (survey respondent, Guinea)

One women's rights activist notes that, “as states reverse the advances made at a national and international level by codifying into the formal legal system fundamentalist values that condone and perpetuate violence against women, they diminish the opportunity for women to access justice, and to enforce women's human rights” (survey respondent, Thailand). On a global level, economic globalization, militarisms and fundamentalisms intersect to reinforce discriminatory structures. Women are targeted in situations of communal violence or civil strife, often without legal consequence. In Colombia, for example, members of the army, the paramilitary and the guerrilla movement increasingly employ sexual violence against women as a strategy of war – without criticism by churches or the government.

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 the rise of 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 are able to establish legitimacy through service delivery and charity, in some cases co-opting the language of human rights and even gender. In this way, they gain the support of governments and aid agencies, and forge partnerships with development organizations and even some women's rights groups.

There is little evidence, however, to support the fundamentalist claim to upholding justice. AWID's survey results reveal a glaring gap between the relatively large proportion of women's rights activists who feel that fundamentalists campaign on issues central to development and social justice, such as poverty, corruption, democracy, political pluralism and freedom of speech, and the small number of concrete campaign examples that they actually cite. 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. This relationship is clearly visible in the case of the Christian Right in the United States and Catholicism in Latin America. Women's rights activists focusing on Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand are the most likely to conclude that religious fundamentalists campaign in favour of capitalism and neoliberalism (38% compared to the average of 20%).

While women's rights activists focusing on the Middle East and North Africa are more likely than others to report that religious fundamentalists campaign against capitalism and neoliberalism (35% compared to the average of 18%), this is far overshadowed by reported campaigning against other issues, such as abortion and reproductive rights, which are not stereotypically viewed as significant for Muslim fundamentalists. Moreover, just as many women's rights activists affected by Muslim fundamentalisms report that they do not campaign at all against capitalism and neoliberalism.

In practice, religious 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. Women's rights activists in Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan list numerous examples of religious fundamentalisms providing basic services where the state has failed to do so or where social divisions breed structural poverty. Many note, however, that such remedies are temporary and superficial, do not address the root causes of inequality and create dependency among those served by humanitarian or charity drives. Although service provision appears to be a relatively more popular recruitment strategy in the Middle East and North Africa region, it is also a feature of Catholic and Christian fundamentalisms. Evangelical Christian sects active in communities in Latin America, Asia and the former Soviet Union provide food as well as employment and educational opportunities to disaffected groups.

The first generation of Christian converts in India, particularly through the Catholic Church, were known as "rice Christians". The Catholic missionaries (and to some extent the Hindu groups) would go into an economically backward area and help the people, provide economic support and food. That stopped around the 1960s. They didn't expect

[the first generation] to be completely converted to Catholicism. [They saw them as] people who have been attracted to the Church because of economic benefits, and who would then adopt some of the practices, although largely retain values from somewhere else. But the next generation would grow up accepting themselves as Catholics, [and would be] much less into the other values and social rituals. (Mona Mehta, India)

Observing the way that religious fundamentalisms distract people from engaging with critical issues, one women's rights activist remarks, "They are not challenging the market economy or poverty but 'morality'" (Kamala Chandrakirana, Indonesia). 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". Rather than challenge the structural injustices at the root of poverty, religious fundamentalisms often bolster the system of globalization from which poverty and insecurity arise.

In many regions, religious fundamentalisms impact on the intersections of gender and class, deepen the economic exploitation of marginalized women and systematically attack women's economic autonomy. One women's rights activist reports that in Bangladesh, "during the rule of the last government (which came to power through a coalition with Islamist parties), the main policy document on women's development was surreptitiously revised to reflect a more 'Islamic' understanding of social norms. Clauses on inheritance, employment, access and control of resources and women's political representation were revised" (survey respondent, Bangladesh/United States). Women's rights activists report that in many contexts, religious arguments are used to strip women of their economic autonomy. In Northern Ghana, for example, where women are often not paid for their labour on farms because they do not own the land, arguments against the system are refuted by the claim that religion does not permit women to own property.

In several instances, religious fundamentalisms are seen to undermine the economic security of communities by demanding contributions from congregations. Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Uganda offer their impoverished congregations the hope of wealth (provided they pay their tithes to the pastor), while Buddhist monks in Thailand offer sex workers the promise of better *karma* in their future incarnation (provided they donate to the temple). As they profit by exploiting the human need for hope, religious fundamentalisms appear to disprove their own claims to campaign against poverty.

Of late, there is a lot of preaching on prosperity... Poor people take out the last that they have with the hope that it will multiply, since they are ploughing. The more you plough, the more you reap. (survey respondent, Swaziland)

When people are so poor that they constantly worry about the next meal, and there is a generally low level of hope, they can easily be

mobilized by anyone promising “hope”, [and] such people are using religion to milk the very poor of their last dime. (survey respondent, Kenya)

Undermining civil society development

Many women’s rights activists have a negative view of religious fundamentalisms because they undermine collective organizing for economic justice and human rights, and divert energy attention away from important aspects of women’s rights work.

At a broad level, religious fundamentalists attack women’s collective organizing as well as progressive religious organizing, both of which they regard as a political threat. In the early 1980s, when the women’s movement emerged in Morocco with the aim of establishing a democratic, tolerant and diverse society, fundamentalists recognized it as a significant threat to their project. They also understood that women, who stood to lose the most as a result of this project, would be the first to protest against it. Fundamentalist groups started to target women activists, and thus to attack and dismantle the women’s movement. Similarly, the progressive church in the United States was strategically decimated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and presents a far weaker counterforce to Evangelical groups today. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the rise of Catholic fundamentalisms was to a great extent a reaction to the influence of liberation theology in the 1970s and 1980s, not only within the Catholic Church, but also at political and grassroots levels.

Last year I worked [with a humanitarian organization] in NWFP [North West Frontier Province] of Pakistan and the clerics would announce over the loud speakers of the mosques and post bulletins on our doors threatening the local women who worked for our organization that they must stop or else [face] dire consequences. They also threatened women who attended our training classes. (survey respondent, United States)

In many contexts, religious fundamentalisms strategize to capture political spaces by defunding other political forces, notably women’s and human rights organizations. In India and Brazil, initiatives working on HIV and AIDS prevention among sex workers have been hit by United States government funding conditionalities inspired by the Christian Right. In Bangladesh, Canada and Mexico, religious fundamentalists have become part of the ruling party or coalition and have used this power to restrict, for example, the operation and funding of secular NGOs, women’s organizations or those working with LGBTQI people.

Religious fundamentalisms 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, fundamentalist movements seek to co-opt and exploit this discourse. This appears to be an important strategy at international and regional levels, and is reported as particularly popular in Latin America and the Caribbean. Women’s rights activists focusing on Western Europe, North America, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia highlight its importance in these regions as well.

There was a [religious fundamentalist] publicity campaign using the motto “Don’t be quiet, raise your voice.” The same motto is used from a vision of rights and citizenship to denounce religious fundamentalisms in civil servants. (survey respondent, Mexico)

[An important change] is the decision to “take to the streets” and demonstrate every time there is a controversy over sexual rights. This has been happening with increased intensity since 2000 and in bigger numbers. I think it has to do with the formal democratization processes in the region and the methods for expressing social demands, which the religious fundamentalists have also joined (and why shouldn’t they?). [This is] an adversary that no longer operates as the “power behind the throne”, but defines itself as a social movement and questions meanings and spaces as such. (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)

In India, Hindu fundamentalisms use the language of access and power to recruit young women university students who were originally sensitized to these concepts by women’s rights organizations. In Pakistan, when students at the girls’ *Jamia Hafza madrasah* – connected with the infamous *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) – violently attacked a local woman for allegedly running a brothel, Muslim fundamentalists supporting the attack claimed they were “strongly in favour of women rights, that women should have protection from prostitution.” (survey respondent, Pakistan)

The overall effect is negative, even though there is a language of rights and empowerment that is brought to play in the Islamist discourse. (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh)

The increasing strength, global funding and respectability of civil society have made this arena highly attractive for religious fundamentalisms. When asked to rate the relative influence of a range of fundamentalist actors in their work, 62% of women’s rights activists named NGOs/charities with fundamentalist tendencies or links. A crucial fundamentalist tactic in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, is the establishment of ‘pro-life’ NGOs. Meanwhile, according to women’s rights activists affected by Muslim fundamentalisms, the establishment of “front” organizations is an important fundamentalist strategy.

They seem to me to be gaining in skill and are now using words that were bad in the 1990s, for example, “gender”, they use [that term] now, in many subtle ways, especially after [the] Beijing [Conference]. They are also more aggressive, and are supported by huge financial agencies and powerful governments like the United States. (Susana Chiarotti, Argentina)

The control of public policy

The relationship between religious fundamentalisms and the state, and thereby the impact of religious fundamentalisms on public policy, is complex and two-way. This nexus, which one women's rights activist calls the "resacralization of politics and the politicization of religion", often serves to undermine state law. For example, in Bangladesh, religious fundamentalisms have promoted *fatwas* in violation of rights and protections provided under state law. Similarly, women's rights activists report that in Sudanese refugee camps in Egypt, the Catholic Church is supporting the import of informal justice mechanisms that violate guarantees under international refugee and women's human rights law.

Under the influence of religious fundamentalisms, the state may use its secular powers to undermine or change public policy in ways that are profoundly discriminatory, both to women and other marginalized groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities. Lito Atienza, until 2007 the Catholic fundamentalist mayor of Manila, removed all family planning services from the city, going as far as conducting raids and harassing NGOs that dared to provide services clandestinely. Working class women were then forced to either not use any contraception or seek services from other cities. Better known examples include: Indonesia's recent "porno-action Bill", which restricts women's movements after 7 pm; Pakistan's (now partially repealed) extreme penalties for sex outside a valid marriage under the *Hudood Ordinances*; and Sharia-influenced penal provisions in northern Nigeria. In the United States, where the struggle over reproductive rights for women is ongoing, religious fundamentalists have been able to influence the lifetime appointments of federal judges, including recent appointees to the Supreme Court, who were noted for their Christian fundamentalist stance in opposition to safe abortion and even contraception.

In Uruguay, the Left has won the government for the first time. The Frente Amplio (the party in office) favours the legalization of abortion. However, soon after his election, the President (a socialist doctor) had lunch with the bishops. A few days later, he threatened that if the parliament approved the sexual and reproductive health law that would allow termination of pregnancy at the request of the woman, he would veto it. (Lucy Garrido, Uruguay)

Whereas before it used to be "Hands off private matters in the community", the demand now is that religion must be given a public presence, which means it isn't any longer necessarily about wanting to create parallel legal systems or separate religious schools, for example, but it's about influencing what exists in the mainstream using religious identity. The faith agenda now dominates how the state deals with minority communities. (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom)

Religious fundamentalists obstruct positive developments and use their influence to reverse previously positive laws, policies or practices, for instance, reducing the legal minimum age of marriage from 18 to 17 years in Uzbekistan following independence in the 1990s, a move that undermined an international norm that was previously accepted in Uzbekistan's

laws. Even if a campaign to introduce legal change is unsuccessful, it may be successful at the level of attitudes and practice. For example, in 2007, an extreme rightwing party, the League of Polish Families, with the support of the leading conservative party, launched a campaign to amend the Constitution to include a “right to life from the moment of conception”, which would effectively ban abortion under any circumstances, even when the life of the mother is at risk. Although the campaign was unsuccessful at the legal level, fundamentalist propaganda made women’s access to legal abortion almost impossible, with a growing number of doctors in public hospitals refusing to perform the procedure on moral grounds.

Pluralism and tolerance under attack

Women’s rights activists from a variety of contexts note the divisive impact of religious fundamentalisms. In Azerbaijan, this is experienced as a social polarization between the religious and the non-religious; in India, as heightened communal tensions between Hindus, Muslims and Christians; and in Pakistan, as a rift between sects. Two out of three women’s rights activists report that fundamentalists target members of other religions, with the reported level of attacks common across regions. Although some religious fundamentalists claim to campaign for pluralism, the evidence confirms their definition as “absolutist and intolerant”.

In Sudan, there is an imposition of a foreign religious fundamentalism, whether it is Islamic (Wahabi, Arabist, etc.) or Christian (Evangelical, pro-Zionism). It creates, nurtures, inflames, (and) reinforces negative divisions, restrictions on women, and creates a formal obstacle for intra-national, inter-religious, inter-cultural partnership that had often been something common and dependable. (survey respondent, Sudan)

They teach you that all Jews are bad, Christians are bad and all *kafirs* of course. There has been a splitting in society at certain level. [Previously] nobody questioned whether you were Parsi or Christian. Nobody asked if you were Shia or a Sunni, or anything. That integration of society has disintegrated. Vast numbers of an already small minority have migrated. Those who are left do not dare speak out and their being Pakistani is questioned all the time. (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan)

Women’s rights activists across the world note the shrinking of secular spaces, notably through attacks on the public education system, which is a foundation of social unity and pluralism. In Nigeria, for example, religious fundamentalists have tried to undermine the federal government “unity schools”, which as part of an effort to counteract ethno-religious polarization have quotas to ensure the attendance of students from every state.

In one of the schools, the prayer room was being used by a particular group of girls during Ramadan to try and put pressure on other Muslim girls. They were saying, “You are bad Muslim girls.” (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom)

Religious fundamentalisms penetrate the education system both as a recruitment strategy and as an attempt to undermine plurality and critical thought. One young women’s rights activist describes the fundamentalist mistrust of schools as a place of emancipation, where young women can development autonomy. “This fear has led Salafist preachers to veil their girls in order to, on the one hand, close them into traditional assigned roles, and on the other, present them as victims of secular educators who want to teach their students to think” (survey respondent, Morocco). For many young people, the fundamentalist interpretation of religion is the only one they know, having had no alternative exposure or comparative experience of their communities before the rise of fundamentalist influence. In this context, one women’s rights activist argues that universal education, where students from various religions and backgrounds attend the same school, is an effective force against absolutism.

Younger women grow up much more ghettoized than my generation. We grew up with the idea of a Black struggle, we had Caribbean friends... Now people don’t have friends even within the Asian community across religious lines, let alone beyond. The impact is a much narrower mind-set, a very limited worldview, a very victimised worldview. (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom/India)

Creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation

Fundamentalist groups seek to fulfil what one women’s rights activist called a “need for power and strength in numbers that has created fear and intimidation”. Their violence is transnational and highly mobile within countries, such as in post-Suharto Indonesia, where both Christian and Muslim fundamentalists recruited militia to be exported to the country’s conflict areas. In the former Yugoslavia, India, the United States, Palestine and Israel, the language and imagery used by religious fundamentalists is often emotive and bloodthirsty, inciting outrage and vengeance.

In 2001, the [Hindu fundamentalist] Sangh Parivar unleashed a signature campaign of blood in Delhi. A Delhi MP, Madan Lal Khurana, a prominent member of the BJP and also the RSS, set about collecting signatures in blood on huge banners proclaiming the “death of terrorism”. The entire campaign and the speeches made were designed to invoke violence and to identify patriotism with revenge. Terrorism was made to assume an Islamic face through repeated references to the religious identity of the terrorists. (survey respondent, India)

Religious fundamentalist violence serves the goals of overturning states and undermining

foreign and local governments. Yet according to women's rights activists, it is above all designed to create fear and isolation in order to keep society fragmented, discourage those who challenge or resist the fundamentalist project, and intimidate their potential allies. According to 50% of women's rights activists, using violence to intimidate opponents is a common fundamentalist strategy. Across regions, women's rights activists see religious fundamentalisms as more likely to target members of the same religion who oppose them politically than those who differ theologically (from the same religion but another sect). In other words, religious fundamentalists are more concerned about quashing political opposition than countering theological diversity.

Violence as a religious fundamentalist strategy

Nearly 10% of women's rights activists have experienced destruction of the work place or theft of equipment at the hands of religious fundamentalists – a tactic that appears most common in Latin America and the Caribbean – while high rates of actual physical violence against women's rights activists due to their rights work (close to 1 in 5) are reported in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. From arson attacks on health clinics offering abortion services in the United States to the stoning of vehicles owned by girl-child projects in Pakistan, the livelihoods of women's rights activists and the effectiveness of their initiatives are obstructed by religious fundamentalist violence and intimidation.

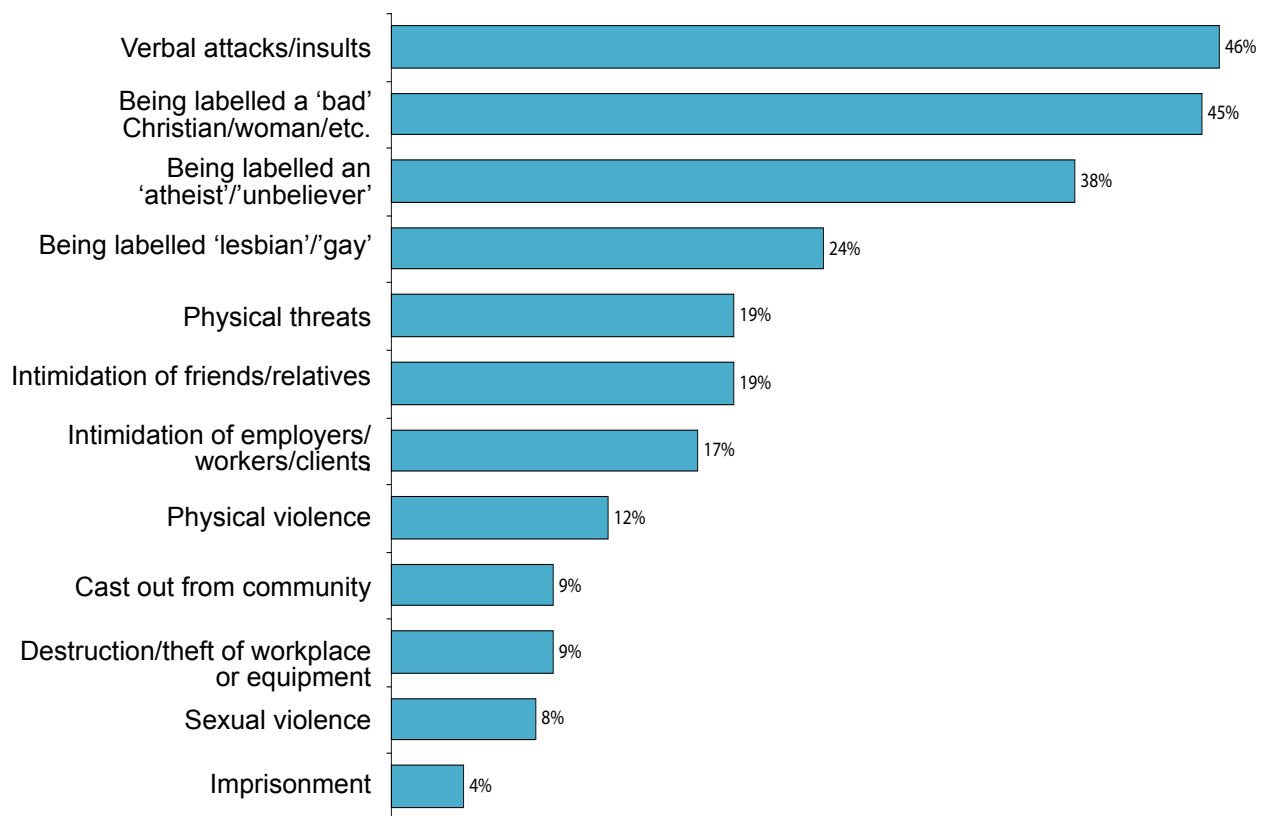
One women's rights activist describes how the work of Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM), an NGO working primarily with women in sex work in Sangli, Maharashtra, India, was impeded by a series of violent police raids on brothels conducted due to the influence of Restore International, an Evangelical Christian organization: "The raids, which were conducted with missionary zeal and thug-like brutality, spared no one: two school girls visiting their families were picked up among the 35 women and girls who were arrested." SANGRAM intervened to secure the release of adult women and the two school children, as only minors in prostitution may legally be rescued. It was later rumoured, however, that USAID had cut the NGO's funding for impeding the rescue of minors – a claim refuted both by the US embassy in Delhi and the NGO SANGRAM. Although SANGRAM considers child prostitution a criminal offence and a form of child sexual abuse, it finds raids to be an inadequate response to the problem because they lead to indiscriminate arrests and physical violence. "Raids only drive marginalized communities further underground; long-term community work is what is needed... The truth is that Restore International and its allies thwart organizations like SANGRAM who have painstakingly created spaces in which stigmatized women in prostitution are able to collectively find their own solutions to their own problems" (Meena Seshu, India).

As women in Guatemala take up more public space, a religious fundamentalist backlash has resulted in increased violence against women both at home and in public. The use of machismo to assert male dominance is a constant force repressing women, and is sanctioned within the churches. (survey respondent, Guatemala)

Women working on women’s rights issues are often threatened and treated in a very offensive ways in public places, and the reasons are often very fundamentalist religious ideas about the “right” or “normal” or “natural” way to be a man or a woman. And that is religious fundamentalism at work in daily life. (survey respondent, Sweden)

Verbal attacks and insults by religious fundamentalists are a common part of the experience of almost 50% of women’s rights activists – who have been targeted or know of a colleague who has. For example, in 1993, when a group of women led a demand for reform of the family code in Morocco, religious fundamentalists who strongly opposed the expansion of women’s rights in the family published lists with the names of the campaigners, stating that “all genuine Muslim believers were obliged to enforce the fatwa” against them. Friday sermons at fundamentalist mosques declared that these “debauched women” were leading a plot against Morocco’s Islamic identity, and society had to be “purged of such enemies.” (survey respondent, Morocco)

Figure 4: Within the past ten years, have you personally or a colleague you work with experienced any of the following reactions from religious fundamentalists because of your work on women’s human rights issues?



Base: 1,490 survey respondents

Note: These are the combined percentages of respondents replying “sometimes” or “frequently” to each type of attack.

Labelling is a strategy of verbal violence shared across regions, and 45% of women's rights activists have experienced it in some form. The most popular terms vary from region to region. Being labelled an "atheist" or "unbeliever" is particularly common in the experience of women's rights activists in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Those challenging Catholic fundamentalisms report it most frequently. Being labelled a "bad" Christian/Hindu/Muslim, etc., or a "bad" woman/wife/daughter is most commonly experienced by women's rights activists focusing on Southeast Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific. Religious fundamentalisms in Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia often label activists as "lesbian" or "gay" in a homophobic attempt to discredit or intimidate them, while in Muslim contexts, "western" or "secular" appears to be the most popular label.

Women's rights activists between 30 and 44 years of age generally experience more of each type of religious fundamentalist violence than those who are under 30 or over 45 years old. This is likely a reflection of women's rights activists at the peak of their engagement in rights work, who are therefore more likely to face a violent response from religious fundamentalisms.

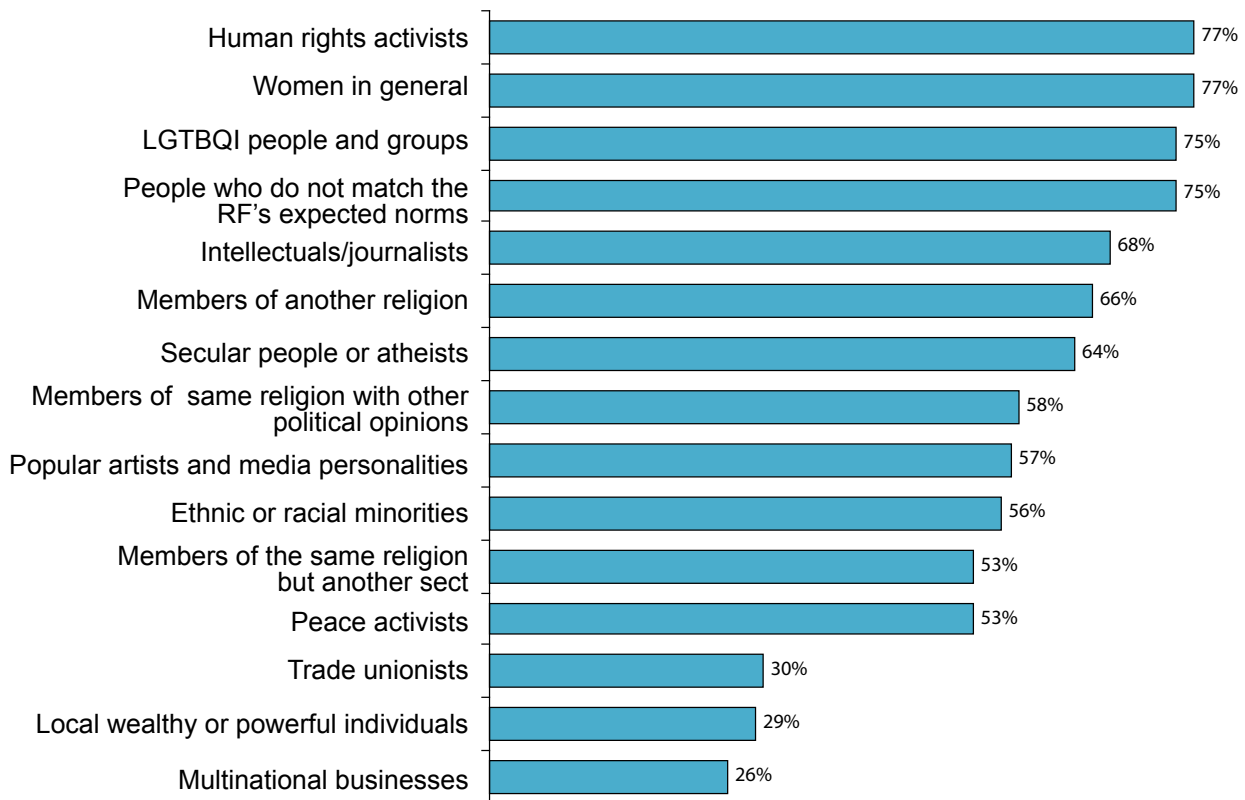
The targets of religious fundamentalist violence

The targeting of women is widespread and common to all religious fundamentalisms – the research revealed no significant differences according to region or religion. Seventy-seven percent of women's rights activists say women in general are frequently or sometimes targeted for verbal and physical attack. In short, women are subject to fundamentalist violence simply because they are women.

The horrific communal genocide of 2002 in Gujarat, India – fundamentalist Hindutva forces in tandem with the ruling State Government – saw the worst attack on Muslim women and girls in the form of rape, burning and abuse. This has led to overall reduced mobility and increase in patriarchal controls from within the affected community for security and preservation of "honour". (survey respondent, India)

Yet, women are not the only ones targeted for physical or verbal attack. The research shows that human rights activists are equally targeted by religious fundamentalisms. Seventy-seven percent of women's rights activists say that fundamentalist violence targets human rights activists, while just over half say that peace activists are targeted.

Figure 5: 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?



Base: Survey question 32; 1,380 survey respondents

Note: There are the combined percentages of respondents replying “sometimes” or “frequently” to each type of target.

In addition to the grinding violence to which whole communities are subjected on a daily basis, some of the most extreme religious fundamentalist violence targets those who air opposing views. One-third of women’s rights activists report that intellectuals, journalists and secularists or atheists are “frequently targeted”. Examples include the 2004 murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who made a film on domestic violence in a Moroccan immigrant family, and the murder of a Pakistani judge who dismissed a high-profile case of blasphemy. The very public and high profile nature of such attacks is designed to “make an example” out of the victim. In the Algerian conflict in the 1990s, religious fundamentalists systematically murdered intellectuals, journalists and popular artists as a means of silencing outspoken opposition and creating an overall atmosphere of fear and despondency.

The Hindu organization Bajrang Dal punishes those who express their thoughts. Today, I noticed a news [item about] a professor in Uttar Pradesh who [read out] his poem in a college function. Suddenly Bajrang members came and painted the professor with black colour[ant]. They punished him in very bad manner. (survey respondent, India)

According to 59% of women's rights activists, LGBTQI people and groups are frequently targeted, sometimes as political opponents, but more often as a form of scapegoating, which reflects the fundamentalist obsession with heterosexuality and the heteronormative family model. In the experience of nearly half (46%) of women's rights activists, people who generally do not conform to religious fundamentalist norms of behaviour are frequently targeted for verbal and physical attack. Examples largely relate to the imposition of fundamentalist social roles, particularly gender roles, so targets may be women who head households, fail to follow a required dress or moral code, or participate in public life; or they may even be fathers who encourage their daughters to pursue education or a career.

Building wider movements to resist and challenge religious fundamentalisms

Religious fundamentalisms may vary according to the global context in which they emerge, but this diversity is far outweighed by the core characteristics, strategies and impacts that they share. Across regions and religions, women's rights activists experience the rising influence of these movements in very similar ways.

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 necessitates a concerted, consolidated and cross-sectoral response.

In AWID's research, the most commonly identified need in challenging religious fundamentalisms is a greater global effort to find effective solutions to the causes. Such an effort would require the engagement of women's rights activists from diverse contexts, as well as the broad spectrum of human rights and development actors. As one activist notes, "We can't have a sustainable democracy if people aren't allowed to think, because then we don't have identities; we don't belong, we can't make choices, we are not autonomous, [and] so we don't count". (survey respondent, Nigeria)

Fundamentalist agendas and strategies are to a degree built in reaction to global commitments to women's rights, human rights and equality, but while this may be a sign of vehemence on their part, it is also a statement of weakness. There is no shortage of examples of rights advances in the face of religious fundamentalisms, and our efforts can draw strength from these. Women's organizations 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.

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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:

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.

Exposed: Ten myths about religious fundamentalisms

This publication exposes and deconstructs the ten most commonly held myths about religious fundamentalisms. These are myths that we hold about religious fundamentalisms, as well as myths that religious fundamentalists would like us to believe. Drawing on the experiences of women's rights activists, this publication reveals that the workings and impact of religious fundamentalisms are more negative than they would like to admit, and that this phenomenon is not as simple to analyze as we often believe.