



## Introduction: gender, development and fundamentalisms

Caroline Sweetman

To cite this article: Caroline Sweetman (2017) Introduction: gender, development and fundamentalisms, *Gender & Development*, 25:1, 1-14, DOI: [10.1080/13552074.2017.1304063](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2017.1304063)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2017.1304063>



Published online: 22 Mar 2017.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 881



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



## Introduction: gender, development and fundamentalisms

Caroline Sweetman

This issue of *Gender & Development* focuses on the impact of religious fundamentalisms on women's rights and gender justice. While the term fundamentalisms is both emotive, and contested<sup>1</sup> the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) argues for its use as 'the term most commonly understood by activists' (AWID 2016, 5). AWID defines religious fundamentalisms as extremist ideologies which invoke religion to gain political, economic and social power, and justify discrimination, intolerance and violations of human rights; which use coercion and violence to impose their ideologies; and which draw on the notion of a communal, shared identity ('us') against all others (*ibid.*).

It has been argued that the 21st century will be 'God's century' in the sense that religious views will be central to politics – both international and national – for decades to come (Hibbard 2015). Religious fundamentalisms – and fears about them – are currently acting as a lightning rod into politics from global to sub-national levels, accentuating xenophobia, violence, and conflict. Fundamentalisms need to be understood and addressed in their wider context of threats to internationalism and liberal notions of universal human rights and freedoms; economic globalisation; and growing inequality, conflict, and fragility. Activists struggling to further – and hold on to – human rights are operating in a shrinking space as powerholders clamp down on civil society, citing security concerns, in both the global South and North.

As Ayesha Imam, Shareen Gokal, and Isabel Marler highlight in their article in this issue drawing on AWID research, religious fundamentalisms present a profound challenge to ideals of human rights, liberation, and equality, including women's rights and gender justice. The latter underpin visions of human development based on human rights, most recently expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in 2015. All the articles in this issue are written by feminist activists challenging religious fundamentalisms. Though offering insights and analysis on a range of topics in different contexts, they aim to contribute to a better-informed and more conscious response to religious fundamentalisms. Authors work at a range of different levels, in research, advocacy, and campaigning, and direct work to provide services to women and girls, and wider communities.

This issue has been a challenge to create: many progressive organisations, and individual activists, are working in circumstances of danger, to themselves and to the individuals and communities with which they ally themselves. Working to promote awareness of the

ways in which the powerful manipulate populations by fanning the flames of intolerance of difference, and hatred of ‘the other’, necessarily involves cautious – sometimes covert – strategies. Sometimes, sharing those strategies involves unacceptable risk, placing workers – and the work itself – in jeopardy. In the course of editing the issue, two articles were ‘pulled’ from the issue for security concerns.

### Politics, religion, and human rights in an unequal world

Global and regional statistics confirm the scale of human rights abuses associated with religious fundamentalisms. Religious fundamentalisms are responsible for attacks on human rights standards and the social justice movements that defend them; a particular target are the human rights of women. In the territories where they wield power, fundamentalists entrench discrimination, and cause and aggravate violence and insecurity. While the fundamentalist movements that associate themselves with Islam and Christianity may attract most media attention globally, all religions are involved. Figures bear testament to the scale and nature of the violence linked to religious fundamentalisms:

It is estimated that between 2010 and 2014 there was a 58 per cent growth in the number of Islamist terror groups, a doubling of Jihadist fighters, and a tripling of attacks by Al-Qaeda ... Christian fundamentalisms are also responsible for driving violence in multiple contexts. In the Central African Republic, a fundamentalist Christian militia known as Anti-Balaka has killed, mutilated, and displaced thousands of Muslim civilians, with the stated intent of eliminating Muslims from the country ... [I]n 2012–13, attacks by the Buddhist fundamentalist nationalist 969 Movement in Myanmar resulted in hundreds of Muslims being killed, raped, and tortured, with over 150,000 people homeless and displaced ... In the first 100 days following the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party, an explicitly Hindu nationalist party, in India, over 600 ‘communal incidents’ against Muslims, and several forced ‘re-conversions’ of Christians and Muslims, were recorded .

(Ayesha Imam, Shareen Gokal, and Isabel Marler, this issue)

As authors in this issue show, fundamentalists also have serious and long-lasting impact on the access of populations they control who may be spared extreme violence yet still find their basic needs go unmet, and their freedoms threatened. Religion and politics have always been enmeshed, even where efforts have been made to separate them formally (Razavi and Jenichen 2010).

In theocracies, religious leaders are the heads of state. In other countries, religious leaders may be included in elected governments. An example is Afghanistan, where former Taliban leaders are now in an elected government (Grau 2016). In other countries, ultra-conservative or fundamentalist forces may operate as *de facto* governments in territories they control, within states, as in areas of Iraq and Syria (Sider and Sissons 2016). Further along the spectrum, ultra-conservative religious organisations can be powerful lobbyists in government, as in Brazil (de Roure and Capraro 2016).

Despite the complexity and scale of the problem, untangling religion from politics is believed widely to be critical for social justice, including gender justice, and all authors in this issue subscribe to this principle. They believe secular governance, based on universal rights and equalities, is essential to attain human development worth the name.

Women's rights activists – in both the global South and the global North – have fought long and hard alongside other social justice movements, to see human rights agreements and principles adopted by their governments, and achieve a formal separation of religion from governance.

These and other issues are explored further in this brief Introduction to the issue.

### **Development and religion: beyond the 'secularisation thesis'**

Religious and spiritual beliefs and practices have informed the evolution of all human societies. Anthropologists consider religion to be part of the wider concept of 'culture' (Tomalin 2011), which narrow visions of economic development saw as largely irrelevant, or retrogressive and potentially damaging to modernisation. The 'secularisation thesis' suggested that scientific discoveries and development would be accompanied by a steady decline in religious belief. Some states – notably those of the Communist bloc in the 20th century – have actively repressed religion when this has been seen as backward superstition which impedes human progress, but religious observance never ceased; rather, it went underground, to emerge after Communist rule ended. State-imposed atheism itself had strong resemblances to fundamentalisms, with its lack of tolerance for plurality or dissent (Tahmina Hakimova-Rees, personal communication, November 2016).

The continued presence of religion and faith in human life today shows the shortcomings of the secularisation thesis. Religion offers a means of explaining the otherwise inexplicable: life, death, and moral questions. In addition to the world's long-established organised religions, other non-traditional religions and forms of spiritual expression are flourishing. The wider vision of human development (expressed most recently in the SDGs agreed in 2015) is underpinned by a more holistic understanding of what it means to be human, seeing the satisfaction of material want as underpinning human aspirations for dignity, justice, and fulfilment. This permits space for religion and spirituality.

Development in 2017 is based on a vision of human rights founded on values of equality and universality. The notion of human rights underpins the international agreements and conventions that have framed notions of human progress and development.<sup>2</sup> Many involved in international development who are informed by this vision of human rights are also religious believers. Today, religion remains globally important, as a 'language to articulate moral purpose, sanction the exercise of power, and otherwise situate contemporary political issues in a wider, normative framework' (Hibbard 2015, 106).

As Ayesha Imam, Shareen Gokal, and Isabel Marler's article in this issue states, there are many factors behind the current rise in religious conservatism and fundamentalisms. There is insufficient space here to discuss all of them, but one widely debated factor is the impact of economic globalisation and escalating inequalities among countries and within populations. Critics of globalisation highlight the poverty and inequality perpetuated (and created) by what Joseph Stiglitz (2002) termed 'market fundamentalisms'. Images of extreme inequalities circulate around the world via social media, potentially creating opportunities for social justice activists at the same time as fomenting anger and dissent.

People living in conflict, fragility, and poverty can become more receptive to the alternative visions of certainty and belonging presented by religious fundamentalisms. A vicious circle is created when tensions are stoked by global political elites who blame particular religious groups, or immigrants, for their own failures to address growing and extreme inequalities.

### **Human rights, women's rights, and religion: exploring the relationship**

Human rights are not antithetical to faith and religion, or antithetical to notions of cultural self-determination. In fact, elements exist within all religions and cultures which recognise human rights and the ideas of tolerance, peace, and openness. These values are echoed in progressive religious values and teaching. The view that no religion gives humanity a single, divinely inspired, 'true' path is central to human rights, which are founded on values of equality and universality.

Women's rights are human rights. Alongside many other social movements – including, for example, those of indigenous peoples, LGBTI, and people living with disabilities – women's rights activists all over the world have seen the principles of human rights and the separation of political and religious institutions as essential to their struggle. They have critiqued and extended the original Western model of human rights, building on its best elements, placing respect for all humanity, and an understanding of intersectional and interlocking human rights, at the centre.

While many women's rights activists are atheists or agnostics, others possess strong personal faiths. Some women's rights activists see their political struggle for gender justice as rooted in deeply held religious convictions. But it is important that when recognising this, we do not forget the importance of the principle of a secular system of governance. A feminist struggle for secularism is a struggle for freedom, tolerance, and plurality, including freedom of conscience and belief (Isabel Marler, personal communication, February 2017).

### **Fundamentalisms: a gender analysis**

Religion is neither as monolithic nor as undifferentiated as many assume. On the contrary, religion is a multi-faceted phenomenon, which – in its more benign moments – manifests as ethical teachings that counsel peace and reconciliation, while at other moments informs the religious communalisms ... that are at the heart of so much war and conflict. These different interpretations of religion vie with one another for influence, inform competing visions of social life, and frequently define the political fault lines within society. (Hibbard 2015, 104)

From the perspective of gender justice and women's rights, the focus on the rights of the individual in much human rights discourse is liberating, upholding the principle that women and girls are autonomous human beings and rights-bearers, rather than simply as wives, mothers, and daughters. In contrast to international development's vision of universal human rights and equality, religious fundamentalisms are characterised by a vision

of a single ‘truth’, with associated rules for living. The lives and bodies of women are under tight and patriarchal control.

Ultra-conservative and fundamentalist religious movements are concerned with creating human societies that conform to their narrow interpretation of religious texts. The principle of separating religion and politics is undermined, and the autonomy of the individual citizen to determine her or his own way of living, under the laws of the state, is replaced by a focus on the wellbeing of the community, led by men and united by shared religious identity (often also sharing a common ethnic or national identity, interpreted in narrow terms). People living in communities ruled by religious fundamentalists find themselves under pressure to conform to particular ways of behaving, with significant impact on human rights and freedoms.

Religious fundamentalisms are widely associated with extreme control over gender relations, enforced by violence – including violence against women and girls, but also against dissenting men, and LGBTI people whose existence threatens patriarchal gender relations. As the grip of religious conservatives and fundamentalists tightens on a society, male identities may become more aggressive, characterised by ‘hypermasculinity’ (Harris 2000) defined as ‘a type of masculinity whose core elements are physical strength and aggression’ (Flisi 2016, 393). Male gender identity becomes increasingly militarised – that is, aggressive and prepared to take part in armed conflict (Enloe 2008). Violence increases, and religion, culture, and tradition may be used to justify it.

The phenomena described here are an extreme expression of patriarchal gender relations. In all patriarchal cultures worldwide, the position of women, and culturally accepted ways of being ‘female’ and ‘male’, have particular importance in the stories that communities tell about their culture. Women are seen as carriers of culture and religion, and their ‘deportment, dress code, and sexuality are often rendered markers of the “good society” envisaged by different groups’ (Razavi and Jenichen 2010, 3). Even in peace-time and societies where human rights are upheld, communities tend to pride themselves on respect for ‘their women’ and the importance of protecting women, telling a story of ‘tradition in which women [a]re the centre of families which, in turn, [a]re collectivities of mutual co-operation, love and sacrifice’ (Mukhopadhyay 1995, 14). However, these stories cloak a patriarchal control of women’s lives, commoditising their bodies and reproductive functions in particular.<sup>3</sup>

This process intensifies in communities governed by religious conservatives and fundamentalists. Gender inequality is unique in the way it relates to perceived biological difference between people: being born as a man or a woman is a primary dimension of difference. Failure to conform is policed, depending on the degree of conservatism in a community. Ideas of what it means to be a ‘good woman’ in different religious and cultural settings are highly political. Women’s bodies can become contested spaces.

### **Mapping threats to progress on women’s rights and gender justice**

Essentialised notions of community, culture, and religion have been invoked down the centuries by many seeking to consolidate political and economic power. But the current

marked rise in religious fundamentalisms is currently undermining the global progress made – in particular since the Second World War – on women’s rights and gender equality. While international and national legal agreements are far from enough to secure gender justice and women’s rights for the world’s women and girls, they exist as a powerful framework setting out principles for living: a secular, rights-based code which exists as an alternative to conservative and fundamentalist interpretations of religious texts. Enormous progress was made to assert women’s rights as human rights in a series of relevant United Nations (UN) Conferences from the 1970s to the 1990s – among them, in particular, Cairo in 1994 (focusing on reproductive and sexual rights) and the Fourth Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing.

Currently, the power of the religious right has grown and the rights gained are placed in jeopardy by political action to ‘roll back’ the commitments made, diluting language and editing ideas articulated in policy declarations as a step towards ending practical progress to realise rights ‘on the ground’. At national level also, similar attempts are mounted by religious right-wingers to derail progress on rights.

In this issue, a number of articles focus on specific threats to progress on women’s rights and gender justice, in different sectors. These rights are not fully protected even in states where there is a formal separation between governance and religion, let alone in states where this separation is frail, partial, or absent:

Modernist and secularist pretensions notwithstanding, few ‘secularist’ states were willing to risk their political survival by radically interfering in matters of the family, marriage and personal laws which were widely seen as the domain of religious authorities. (Razavi and Jenichen 2010, 3)

Women’s citizenship rights remain partially realised in many country contexts. Citizenship is ‘a means to social, political and economic participation in a society, and implies a reciprocal relationship between citizen and state’ (Abou Habib 2011, 442). Women are traditionally seen as wives and mothers of men who represent them in the public sphere, and the struggle to establish the principle that women are citizens in their own right is ongoing.

In her article in this issue, Alicia Wallace describes how, in a referendum in her home country, The Bahamas, notions of the identity of this supposedly ‘Christian nation’ were invoked passionately by politicians rejecting laws on citizenship to reflect gender equality, which would have additional implications for tolerance and acceptance of the rights of LGBTI individuals. The ways a society treats women – and LGBTI people – are seen by both fundamentalists and progressives as emblematic of its moral fibre and integrity.

Progress towards legal systems where women have equal status with men are challenged by people who monopolise and use discourses of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ to attain or keep power, or maintain the *status quo*. Often, issues painted as ‘traditional’ are actually modern ideas, or have become resurgent recently, while there may be forgotten histories of comparatively equal gender relations or greater tolerance of LGBTI rights, for example. The citizenship rights that were the focus of the referendum in The Bahamas were therefore of key importance in the struggle for liberation and equality there.

In their article, Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Pragna Patel explore the relationship between the UK state and citizens who are located in Black, Asian, and ethnic minority (BAME) communities. The state can become uneasy about enforcing the rights of women in minority communities, citing culture and religion as reasons for non-intervention (Macey 1999). The article focuses on the current ‘faith agenda’ in the UK which the authors point out has revisioned the relationship between the state and its citizens into a relationship that focuses on BAME communities, mediated by religious organisations. This is happening in the context of an economic austerity agenda has led to the withdrawal of vast state resources from key areas of social welfare provision and displaced responsibility for social welfare on to a growing number of unaccountable religious organisations.

Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Pragna Patel draw on evidence from their work with women in BAME communities to argue that the state is effectively retreating from its duties towards women. In particular, a shift towards funding faith-based organisations (FBOs) rather than feminist secular organisations can compromise women’s access to support services to survive violent abuse, and their access to justice. This has a devastating impact on women’s options to leave violent and abusive families. It can be seen from this case-study that in countries of the global North, as well as the global South, the voice and perspectives of religious fundamentalists are growing louder and stronger, and compromising the ability of people to call on the state to protect their rights.

FBOs may fill a gap with services, but these are inadequate to meet the needs of parts of the population – for example, women and girls – or offer their services only to particular parts of a population, discriminating by religion, ethnicity, or on other grounds. The influence of the religious right can also be seen in education policies. Education is a critical element in the empowerment of women and therefore a highly political issue for religious conservatives and fundamentalists. Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Pragna Patel highlight how an uncritical acceptance of the notion of faith-based education may mean young people receive an education that perpetuates gender norms and unequal roles and relations.

The issues around education and faith-based education are even more acute in fragile- and conflict-affected countries, where the principle of educating girls and women hangs in the balance in areas where fundamentalist religions have taken hold. An article was commissioned for this issue focusing on education of young women and girls in a conflict-affected context in East Africa. However, it cannot be published here, due to security concerns. In the area explored in the article, fundamentalists are influencing families to stop sending their daughters to school, since education is not required for them to fulfil their ‘primary role’ of wife and mother. In such contexts, the hard-won progress on girls’ education over the past decade is placed at risk in areas where religious fundamentalisms are gaining hold. This article, from an international development organisation working with girls and young women, showed religious fundamentalists challenging progress in girls’ education in ways that will profoundly affect girls and women, policing their role in society and the way they should behave, and limiting girls’ opportunities to fulfil their potential in education. If girls manage to get to school, they may encounter a curriculum that entrenches gendered norms of female inferiority or dependence on males.

In his article on reproductive rights and health care, Jon O'Brien, of the organisation Catholics for Choice, notes a similar concern around health provision, in particular women's health, and the most contentious area of women's rights concerning reproduction and sexual rights. Reproductive and sexual rights are among the first to be challenged when right-wing religious politics take hold (de Roure and Capraro 2016). Reproductive and sexual rights hit at the roots of patriarchy, concerned as they are with the right of an individual person to 'own' and control their body. Women and LGBTI people's rights are in the balance. These rights are the most recent to be recognised, and remain acutely contentious in many contexts.

Local FBOs play a huge, and growing, role in health care, often operating as the key social institution in contexts in which governance is fragile or failing. While state services themselves are often informed by profoundly conservative values regarding women's rights, and reproductive and sexual rights in particular, conservative FBOs base their interventions and support services in a vision of gender relations which is often based on notions of community and family welfare at the expense of the rights of the individual. In the fight for patriarchal control over women's bodies, control over sex and child-bearing decisions is wrested from women to religious leaders.

In his article, Jon O'Brien turns his gaze upwards from the reality of women's lives at the local level, to frame this in the national and international contexts. The religious right are currently active in their attempts to dismantle the notion of women's individual rights to control their reproductive and sexual lives and choices. In 2016, the Commission on the Status of Women saw a particular assault on reproductive rights from religious groups and some government representatives. While international agreements around reproductive and sexual rights have been under threat since the great steps forward at international level at the UN Conferences at Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995),<sup>4</sup> the power of the religious right in international spaces is particularly concerning now. Fundamentalist political actors are operating at international and national levels, challenging the principles of reproductive and sexual rights.

### **Development responses to religious fundamentalisms**

In these and many other ways, religious fundamentalisms threaten to prevent further progress towards liberation and equality, invoking ideas of achieving heaven on earth, a 'golden age' in which communities are governed by religious laws rooted in divine truth. This myth, and the very real threat it represents to human rights, is being challenged by social justice activists from both inside, and outside, faith communities. The article in this issue contributed by AWID from their report *The Devil is in the Details* (AWID 2016) reflects on how different actors in development might respond better to the threat posed by fundamentalisms, in solidarity with social justice activists. The authors, Ayesha Imam, Shareen Gokal, and Isabel Marler, argue that development policymakers and practitioners need to be better equipped to support women's rights and gender equality in the face of the considerable challenges that religious fundamentalisms pose to women's rights and gender

equality in particular, and beyond, to notions of equalities and human rights more broadly.

First, to succeed in delivering on development agendas in an era of concern for rising violent extremisms and ever-growing demand for resources and services requires a more transformative approach. This would be rooted in a power analysis of religion and politics operating in particular places – and this has to be a feminist power analysis, so that the interpersonal level is not neglected. In the absence of a power analysis, a focus on gender justice and women's rights risks becoming a programme that simply works 'with women', in ways that entrench existing inequalities.

In her article in this issue, Sophie Giscard d'Estaing demonstrates how public policies can be formulated that draw on these stereotypes in ways that diminish women's ability to act, whilst placing them at risk by requiring them to represent the interests of the state without supporting their empowerment. It is ironic that the policies focused on in the article aim to counter and prevent violent extremisms (CVE/PVE), relying on women as wives and mothers to help the state reduce instances of radicalisation. This article highlights a very different – and more effective – approach to both gender justice and CVE/PVE. This would be to adopt the UN's strategy known as the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, which supports women as activists in the public sphere rather than focusing conservatively on their role within the family. Gender justice goes hand-in-hand with the goal of peace.

Gender stereotypes about how women are treated in particular communities and religions can also be used as a conscious strategy to justify intervention in that community. Without a genuine commitment to long-term support for women's empowerment, and a nuanced approach which reflects local women's own priorities and analysis of the issues, this can – at best – herald in a period of progress, and at worst may worsen the situation and increase women's vulnerability. Women's rights and gender equality are often 'offered up' as concessions in political bargaining between fundamentalists and conservatives, on the one hand, and governments, on the other. This has happened in contexts including Afghanistan (Grau 2016), to justify and encourage Western intervention in the wake of 9/11.<sup>5</sup>

There is a critical need for development actors to support social justice activists and human rights defenders, including women's human rights defenders. In some contexts, their grounded analyses of what women and girls need in often desperate situations of conflict, violence, and need is sidelined by the arrival of international forces, promising to rescue women, yet paying little attention to the need to support women's own solutions – a point made forcefully by Sophie Giscard d'Estaing in this issue.

Women's rights organisations have long highlighted the impact of religious conservatives and extremists on women's lives, bodies, and human rights, but they do so in the full knowledge of their political, cultural, and economic contexts. Women's community-based organisations and local NGOs are working to offer all whose lives are affected by religious conservatism and fundamentalisms support, based on values of secularism and inclusivity. A key and important part of responding to religious fundamentalisms as they impact on women's rights and gender justice is to support women's movements operating within

contexts where fundamentalisms and extremisms are threatening women's rights, and where the role of defending these rights comes with danger and risk. Some of these movements will include women of faith; others will be clearly secular. The critical foundation is a shared vision of equality and rights, and a willingness to work across traditional divides: not only religious affiliations, but across race, caste, class, and other aspects of 'difference'.

In this issue, Dido Michielsen's article discusses the experience of 30 women's rights organisations working across the Middle East, in seven different countries. The Women on the Frontline (WoF) began in 2013, during the optimistic years of the Arab Uprising, and an encounter between Middle Eastern women activists and others, from Europe. The initiative that has resulted is supported by Oxfam. Its strategies include networking – to assist movement-building, solidarity, and 'self-care' – looking after oneself amid risks, for replenishment and renewal – between women's rights activists in a region threatened by complex crises from war, fragility, and threats to pluralism and tolerance.

This experience shows the potential that can be unleashed if international development organisations adopt political ways of working which respect women's rights activists working locally to determine their own strategies, and facilitate this work. As individuals and in groups, women have worked to counter patriarchal social norms in cultures throughout the world, down the centuries. They may need resources, but rarely require outsiders to dictate solutions to them. In situations of growing danger for women's human rights defenders, it is all the more important that women evolve their own course of action based on their analysis of risks.

Currently, FBOs are increasing their role in health and education provision. In some contexts, FBOs play an essential role providing basic services, including health and education, where states are unable or unwilling to play this role. This trend is escalating. As Jon O'Brien discusses in his article in this issue, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 40 per cent of the health-care services in sub-Saharan Africa are provided by FBOs (Bandy *et al.* 2008, 9). Jon O'Brien writes:

Because of their extensive networks and infrastructure, faith-based providers are a critical component of health service delivery in many resource-constrained countries where governments lack the funding to provide services, and the private sector is poorly developed. In addition, faith-based providers are often well-respected and offer the most advanced care available in many countries. Faith-based providers also have the advantage of 'reach' and influence in communities. They are active in public health initiatives such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria prevention; in maternal and child health initiatives; and in capacity-building programmes such as health-care supply chain development and management. They are often the only genuine non-government organisations (NGOs) in many rural parts of poor countries, and in others, they are the strongest and/or most influential ones. FBOs focusing on health are able to mobilise people and resources and reach rural or isolated areas because of their vast organisational networks. FBOs tend to have a good understanding of local social and cultural patterns, and larger ones have strong, expansive infrastructures.

(Jon O'Brien, this issue)

Looking to FBOs to provide essential services is increasingly popular among multilateral and bilateral development funders, in light of the fact that that it is estimated that almost

half the world's people in poverty will be living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts by 2030,<sup>6</sup> and FBOs may be present where no other alternatives exist. But as articles here show, working with FBOs can pose dilemmas from a social justice perspective. International aid needs to be disbursed carefully to FBOs in order to ensure appropriate and high-quality health, education, and other services reach the populations who need them so much.

There is currently a growing awareness to learn more about religion and development, and the role of FBOs. Governments across the Western world have expressed interest in working with FBOs, and on the wider topic of religion and development (Petersen and Le Moigne 2016). Until now, relatively little attention has been paid to the need to distinguish between faith-based organisations working from progressive, conservative, and fundamentalist perspectives, and recognise the diametrically different impact on human development and rights that these three very different perspectives have. Some Western feminists working internationally have also failed to see the importance of engaging with faith and religion. Only a decade ago, an earlier issue of *Gender & Development*, devoted to the issue of working with FBOs, suggested that faith had been 'a neglected subject for mainstream development and feminism' (Greany 2006, 341).

Perhaps greater religious literacy is needed to build understanding of the need to be nuanced and thoughtful when considering working with FBOs. It would add to knowledge in development and governance about the relationship between religion and politics, and lessen a tendency to see religion as a matter of 'conscience', rather than an issue of enormous political significance, with importance for human rights. 'Religious literacy' is defined by the Religious Literacy Project of Harvard University, in the USA, as

the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess, 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place. (<http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy>, last checked by the author 10 January 2017)

Sadly, others involved in dispensing international aid are well aware of the differences between progressive, conservative, and fundamentalist agendas in health care in particular, and actively opt to channel international aid to the conservative FBOs. Jon O'Brien's article in this issue highlights that some FBOs use conservative interpretations of religious teaching to deny access to critical care, including family planning, abortion, and HIV/AIDS prevention services – in particular condom distribution, and counselling about condom use. The power of the religious right to shape women's access to reproductive health care in countries of the global South is growing. Religious conservatives and fundamentalists in the global North can now control women's access to reproductive health care in countries of the global South through aid spending, even when national laws have given them the right to access a whole range of services.

## Conclusion

The struggle of the women's movements has included many women of faith who do not wish to abandon their essential beliefs or be forced out of religious communities. Instead, they tell alternative stories of culture and religion, recognising these are not monoliths, and challenging the inequalities, conflict, injustices, and abuses that can exist within communities of religious believers. They argue not for an end to religion, but for reform, and to rethink the role of religion in relation to the state. Religion is very much alive in the world and while every religion has its fundamentalist, extreme elements, every religion also contains progressive elements supporting tolerance and pluralism, human rights, and equality.

Currently, the notions of what development is, and who and what is developed by whom, are under question as part of a complex process of soul-searching by many players on the global stage, as political, economic, and cultural power relations between different nations and regions shift and we progress further along since the post-World War Two settlement. Focusing on questions of fundamentalisms, extremism, and the increase in religious influence on politics are all part of that soul-searching process.

Writers in this issue share insights to increase religious literacy and, in particular, emphasise the need to distinguish between progressive, conservative, and fundamentalist visions within each religion. They point out the internal diversity that exists within each and every religion, as well as the scope that exists for coalition-building that comes from the similar informing visions and beliefs of progressives within all religions (and none); and in particular, the fact that fundamentalists are already operating as a coalition in some contexts, on issues of shared concern, including women's reproductive rights, and the issue of sexual rights; and challenges from fundamentalists to the universality of human rights.

The key challenge of opposing fundamentalisms comes in the need to continue the struggle for liberation and equality. The global community needs to come to grips better with the pernicious ways in which fundamentalist groups manipulate all these identities – and many others – to create intolerance, dissent, and conflict, in the furtherance of power. As can be seen from the understanding of religious fundamentalisms shared by authors in this issue, fundamentalisms of all religious persuasions have common characteristics. They require challenging in ways which emphasise mutual understanding and a recognition of what human beings have in common, underpinned by a vision of justice and human rights. The progressive elements of all belief systems – whether Christian, Muslim, humanist, or other – would certainly support this, and the principle of politics based on values of secularism and human rights.

## Notes

1. As AWID (2016, 5) states: 'the term is contested. For some, it is imprecise and not relevant in all contexts. Others object because of the way it has been used to stereotype and target particular communities. In some contexts, the term has a positive connotation because it is assumed simply to mean following the fundamentals of a religion'. The term fundamentalisms is widely used as a

looser term meaning forms of violence and oppression linked to extreme beliefs and intolerance, beyond religion.

2. Human rights as a concept focused originally on the rights of the individual person, although in later years there have been interesting developments towards extending the concept to denote rights that belong to humanity as a whole (the so-called ‘third generation’ rights to development, peace, environmental rights, and so on).
3. In the gender division of labour, gender inequality is ‘structured into the organisation of social relations as fundamentally as class is in capitalist societies, as race was in apartheid South Africa, and as caste is in India’ (Kabeer 2015, 203). Women and men are seen as two distinct biological and social categories. Girls are raised to fulfil narrow socially prescribed roles: chaste daughters, faithful and obedient wives, caring mothers. Individuals whose bodies, minds, or sexual/gender identities challenge social norms may be forced to conform, regardless of the suffering involved.
4. The Cairo Platform for Action is available at [www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/programme\\_of\\_action\\_Web%20ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/programme_of_action_Web%20ENGLISH.pdf); the Beijing Platform for Action is available at [www2.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa\\_e\\_final\\_web.pdf?vs=800](http://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa_e_final_web.pdf?vs=800) (both last checked by the author 27 January 2017).
5. This is not new: feminist historians have highlighted how conflict and conquest has been justified at different moments in history by critiques of the way women are abused and subjugated in cultures which are then more easily labelled ‘inferior’ (Mirza 2002).
6. See [www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview](http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview) (last checked by the author 23 January 2017).

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Shireen Gokal, Isabel Marler, Rita Soares, and Nikki van der Gaag for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

## References

- Abou Habib, Lina** (2011) ‘The ‘right to have rights’: active citizenship and gendered social entitlements in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine’, *Gender & Development* 19(3): 441–454
- AWID** (2016) *The Devil is in the Details: At the Nexus of Development, Women’s Rights, and Religious Fundamentalisms*. Ayesha Imam, Toronto: AWID, [http://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/final\\_web\\_the\\_devil\\_is\\_in\\_the\\_details.pdf](http://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/final_web_the_devil_is_in_the_details.pdf) (last checked by the author 23 January 2017)
- Bandy, Gary, Alan Crouch, Claudine Haenni, Paul Holley, Carole Larsen, Sian Penlington, Nicholas Price and Carolyn Wilkins** (2008) *Building From Common Foundations: The World Health Organization and Faith-Based Organizations in Primary Healthcare*, Geneva: World Health Organization
- Enloe, Cynthia** (2008) ‘Feminism and war: stopping militarizers, critiquing power’, in Robin L. Riley, Chandra Talpede Mohanty and Minnie Bruce Pratt (eds.) *Feminism and War: Confronting US Imperialism*, London and New York: Zed Books, 258–63
- Flisi, Isabella** (2016) ‘The reintegration of former combatants in Colombia: addressing violent masculinities in a fragile context’, *Gender & Development* 24(3): 391–407
- Grau, Bele** (2016) ‘Supporting women’s movements in Afghanistan: challenges of activism in a fragile context’, *Gender & Development* 24(3): 409–26
- Greany, Kate** (2006) ‘Editorial: Working with faith-based communities’, *Gender & Development* 14(3): 341–50
- Harris, Angela P.** (2000) ‘Gender, violence, race, and criminal justice’, *Stanford Law Review* 52(4): 777–807

- Hibbard, Scott W.** (2015) 'Religious Politics and the Rise of Illiberal Religion', in Luke M. Herrington, Alasdair McKay and Jeffrey Haynes (eds.) *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century*, Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 103–111, <http://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Nations-under-God-E-IR.pdf> (last accessed 23 January 2017)
- Kabeer, Naila** (2015) 'Gender, poverty, and inequality: a brief history of feminist contributions in the field of international development', *Gender & Development* 23(2): 189–205
- Macey, Marie** (1999) 'Religion, male violence, and the control of women: Pakistani Muslim men in Bradford, UK', *Gender & Development* 7(1): 48–55
- Mirza, Qudsia** (2002) 'Islamic Feminism, Possibilities and Limitations', in John Strawson (ed.) *Law After Ground Zero*, London: The GlassHouse Press, 108–122
- Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee** (1995) 'Gender relations, development practice and 'culture'', *Gender & Development* 3(1): 13–18
- Petersen, Marie Juul and Jannie Le Moigne** (2016) 'Donor engagement with religion and faith-based organisations in development cooperation: a brief overview', *The Ecumenical Review* 68(4): 387–397
- Razavi, Shahra and Anne Jenichen** (2010) 'The unhappy marriage of religion and politics: problems and pitfalls for gender equality', *Third World Quarterly* 31(6): 833–850, draft version available at [http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/httpNetITFramePDF?ReadForm&parentunid=4ACE883B67ABCDEBC12577690046502C&parentdoctype=paper&netitpath=80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpAuxPages\)/4ACE883B67ABCDEBC12577690046502C/\\$file/TWQ18May10.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/httpNetITFramePDF?ReadForm&parentunid=4ACE883B67ABCDEBC12577690046502C&parentdoctype=paper&netitpath=80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/4ACE883B67ABCDEBC12577690046502C/$file/TWQ18May10.pdf) (last checked by the author 23 January 2017)
- de Roure, Sarah and Chiara Capraro** (2016) 'Faith paths to overcome violence against women and girls in Brazil', *Gender & Development* 24(2): 205–18
- Sider, Rachel and Corrie Sissons** (2016) 'Researching livelihoods recovery and support for vulnerable conflict-affected women in Iraq', *Gender & Development* 24(3): 427–41
- Stiglitz, Joseph E.** (2002) *Globalization and Its Discontents*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company
- Tomalin, Emma** (2011) *Gender, Faith, and Development*, Bourton on Dunsmore, Rugby: Practical Action Publishing in association with Oxfam