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Fundamentalism, Women's Empowerment and Reproductive Rights

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Reproductive Health Matters has until this issue of the journal focused almost exclusively on secular threats to women's reproductive rights. However, given the extent of the influence of politically motivated fundamentalism intentionally, not least at the Cairo and Beijing conferences, this seemed an important moment to focus on the influence and dangers of the many faces of fundamentalism for women and women rights.

The term 'fundamentalism' originated in relation to 19th century Christianity to describe Protestant religious and political movements, which attempted a literal or 'fundamental' interpretation of Biblical scripts, but it has acquired a much broader usage today. As several of the papers here illustrate-Feldman and Clark, Freedman, Hoodfar - there are distinct definitions of fundamentalism as well as many hesitations about using the term at all.

The term is currently used to describe a range of movements and tendencies in all regions of the world, which aim to impose what they define as tradition - whether religious, national, cultural or ethic - on societies they consider to be in danger of straying from the fundamental tenets that hold them together. The 'fundamentalism' of these politically motivated ideologies is that their adherents seek to raise them above the political on the basis of divine sanction or by appealing to supreme authorities, moral codes or philosophies that cannot be questioned. [1] As El-Hadi shows, however, the every political basis of those beliefs belies the sacredness they seek to attach to them. Hoodfar illustrates this also in Iran, where a government that must fulfil its promises to stay in power, has revised its adherence to fundamentalist principles a number of times for reasons of pragmatism, again showing that such policies come from man rather than God.

The appropriateness of the term 'fundamentalist' outside of its original context, and used most commonly in a negative sense, is seen by many as problematic,

because it may serve to obscure major differences between the disparate ideological tendencies often included under this rubric and to encourage existing prejudices. Thus, there is no consensus as to whether using the term is valid or not, nor has a more appropriate term been found. [1] Yet there does appear to be agreement that something is happening globally that deserves to be identified by a common referent, including as this relates to women, and that can be understood on a global scale. To counter assumptions that fundamentalism today equals Islam, many of those who are studying this phenomenon and responding to it as activists, e.g. the international network Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Women against Fundamentalism in England, pluralise the word, as a way of saying that there are many 'fundamentalism's' in the world today and not one cultural-religious-political tendency only.

In Search of Meanings

Most societies are undergoing rapid social changes due to the globalization of national economies, the expansion of international communications, and for many other reasons.

The particular economic and social changes taking place have brought with them increases in female literacy, increased participation by women in the paid labor force and a significant presence of women in the public domain. This has had a major influence on childbearing and women's roles in the domestic sphere. Financial independence and accompanying increased autonomy have empowered many women and improved their lives in both developed and developing countries. At the same time, however, men's economic and social roles are also changing not always for the better and living conditions have become worse for many people. The poverty gap has become worse in many countries, e.g. because of the international and national failure of current economic and social policies to narrow that gap or keep it narrow, or to find alternatives to widescale unemployment, the dismantling of social welfare and other public services, or ways to effect a more equitable redistribution of wealth.

These changes and conditions have caused anxiety among both men and women as to what the future holds, including in relation to the apparent breakdown in their respective gender roles. A profoundly conservative social and political reaction, and in some cases reactionary and even fascistic backlash against change has occurred, in the form of political movements that advocate 'the reconstruction of the moral order'. [2] and which are being described as fundamentalist. These movements have taken advantage of people's anxieties

and concerns and gained strength by playing on people's fears of change and existing prejudices - whether racial, ethnic or sexual. They have had some considerable success in every continent in the face of widespread perceptions of social fragmentation and alienation, the impact of war, migration and other forms of social and political upheaval.

Such movements have sought, successfully and unsuccessfully, to gain support for views that are expressed through the language of religious dogma, combining critiques of changing social norms and condemnation of individual behavior labeled as immoral - often based in appeals to a narrowly defined and carefully constructed tradition. No matter what the language, however, fundamentalist movements are seeking to win or consolidate political power and social control and/or assert religious or cultural nationalism.

Fundamentalism and Women's Empowerment

Among the major preoccupations that fundamentalist movements appear to have in common, as described in all the features in this issue of the journal, are gender issues, images of women, and the attempt to regain social/male control over that many perceive to be women's growing autonomy in general, and over women's sexuality and reproduction more specifically.

There is clearly a clash of deeply held values and principles taking place at personal and political level, in some countries more surreptitiously and in others in a more highly charged atmosphere. Fundamentalist ideologies perhaps represent the most extreme versions of these differences with feminist and human rights values, rather than the only ones. Thus, for example, in a paper that is not about fundamentalism, Cheka shows how the law in Cameroon contains the legal determinants of male domination over women, based in traditional gender roles adopted but not created by fundamentalists.

Pressure on women to 'return' to traditional gender roles and the control of women's sexuality and reproduction are currently at the heart of many fundamentalist agendas, but as Hoodfar shows in Iran, women are challenging and resisting this pressure, as well as turning it to their own ends and taking leadership roles in spite of it. In India, as Basu describes, women are taking leadership roles even within fundamentalist movements, both in spite of and because of their experiences as women.

The call for adherence to traditional gender roles is perhaps not so much a call to go back in time, as it is call for modernizing differently. In this sense, the social destabilization caused by modernization in the 'public' sphere - which is globally determined and cannot easily be prevented - must be counter-balanced by stability and the upholding of 'tradition and culture' in the private sphere, a tack designated primarily to women. This seems to be at least one reason why these very disparate movements have a focus on women in common.

Women are critical in the formulation of fundamentalist identities. They mark group boundaries and produce group differences...[and] are seen as the cultural carriers of the collectivity.... who will transmit it to future generations. [3]

Fundamentalist movements may appeal to women to subordinate their identity as women in order to take up the 'higher' calling of upholding their religious, cultural and/or ethnic identify as Basu describes in the conflicts between Hindu and Muslim in India. Where these conflict, women may find themselves caught between the need to belong to the community and/or their religion and the need to identify with women from other communities and religions, [4] both legitimate forms of self-identification, that ought not to be conflict. Where they do come into conflict, however, women any end up being and ethic lines. Feminists have shown how some fundamentalist movements purposely encourage this conflict among women, and not surprisingly, fundamentalist movements have accused feminists of divisiveness as well, i.e. dividing women from their husbands and families.

In cultural terms, a fundamentalist agenda can appeal to women as well as men from those classes, which are most alienated from the elite in highly class-differentiated societies. Support for fundamentalism could emerge as a form of protest against whatever is labeled 'Western' because this symbolizes the values upheld by the elitist class. Thus, as Freedman describes, fundamentalist movements outside of Western countries demonize Western feminism, in an attempt to divide women in their own countries with feminist sympathies and beliefs from others.

Fundamentalism and Women's Sexual and Reproductive Right

Feldman and Clark open this issue of the journal with an analysis of the links between fundamentalism, religion and opposition to women's reproductive rights. Freedman examines the triangle of conflicting worldviews of fundamentalist, population and feminist movements.

The fact the economic imperatives currently require women to acquire an education and go out to work may be more acceptable, or at least tolerable, as long as control over women's sexuality can still be enforced. One way to do this is to prevent women claiming rights for themselves by insisting on the rights of the family as a whole, rather than the rights of the individuals within it. Fundamentalists are not alone in holding sex-negative attitudes, as Hunt points out, nor in condemning homosexuality or sex between men and women outside marriage (for women particularly), nor in refusing to acknowledge that women have sexual rights at all. Nor are they alone in calling for restrictions on sex education within a traditionalist mould.

In the name of every religion and the overriding importance of a mythologised version of the traditional family, fundamentalist movements in every region of the globe are among the most bitterly opposed to what the international women's health and human rights movements are working for in relation to sexual autonomy and reproductive rights for women. As such, their views represent a major challenge to the goals of these progressive movements. At the same time, however, religious groups, such as Campos Machado describes in Brazil, carry the vestiges of traditional religious fundamentalism (e.g. encouraging women to sacrifice themselves if need be to please their husbands sexually) and at the same time, have taken on some aspects of modernity (such as accepting) the separation of reproduction and sex), with ambiguous consequences for women.

Fundamentalists may be in the forefront of legitimizing and upholding the roles of mother and caregiver and not just pushing a negative agenda of control over women. For women who feel that 'mere home-makers and mothers' are being devalued by their societies because more women are working outside their homes and gaining public visibility and power, this aspect of fundamentalism can have an important appeal. In Iran, as Hoodfar explains, the lack of opportunity to work outside the home makes both fundamentalists and feminists support security for women within marriage as the only viable option, at least in the short-term.

Thus, one of the reasons why women in the 'pro-life' movement in the US in the early 1980s were against women having control over their own fertility was that they believed this would break up the very social relationships between men and women that were meant to protect women and children. If men had less decision-making power, they argued, men would also take less responsibility, women would be further degraded in society, and an emotional and social

division of labor that they considered both appropriate and natural would be lost. [5]

In the face of religious-political opposition to women's sexual and reproductive rights, many people whose views are not fundamentalist are influenced in a more conservative direction than they might otherwise be. Fundamentalist campaigns are often highly visible, vociferous and emotive, sometimes masking how small the groups behind those campaigns are, although this does not make them less dangerous or effective. The successes of the contemporary, right wing, fundamentalist-dominated anti-abortion movements in Poland and the US, as Nowicka and Ortiz Ortega show, are examples of this.

Differently from such movements in the 1970s and 1980s, however, fundamentalist campaigns against women's reproductive rights increasingly appear to be engaging in disinformation and fearmongering - e.g. false claims that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer. Adolescents in the US may even be less knowledgeable about sexually than in the past, due to fundamentalist insistence that school sex education programs teach only abstinence. (Round-up)

Channelling Fundamentalism

Current feminist and human rights challenges to fundamentalism include working with progressive policymakers and/or within the framework of progressive political parties, religious and/or cultural movements. Hoodfar describes how in Iran, feminists who support the government on some issues challenge them to revise other policies in support of justice for women.

Within and outside institutional religions, progressive scholars and theologians (many of them women) are writing new texts and analyzing and interpreting old ones in order to create religious doctrine that supports a feminist ethic and goals of non-discrimination, equality and justice for women. Sciortino et al describe workshops for women studying Islamic texts in Indonesia, while Hunt outlines an international research project seeking to define a sex-positive religious ethic in support of women. Others are working outside of religious frameworks to promote secular and policy as an alternative to unjust laws imposed in the name of religion and other authority, as Nowicka describes in Poland.

In this supposedly post-Cold War period, other worldviews, philosophies and views, philosophies and values are clashing, in many cases with life-threatening

consequences, especially for women who refuse to conform. Thus, Kabir describes a frightening experience of extremist violence against women's health clinic in Bangladesh during riots calling for the death of Tasleema Nasrin. A Ortiz reviews a book by Carole Joffe that describes how US abortion providers exchange notes on bulletproof vests at professional conferences. As Jayawardena and de Alwis illustrate with example from south Asia, major acts of violence such as the communal riots in India are only the tip of the iceberg, with other smaller acts of violence happening regularly in their wake.

In the face of contemporary conflicts, it is hard to express hope for an easy or early resolution. The papers in this issue of the journal provide a sometimes bleak picture of how fundamentalist politics and governments seek to influence if not control women in ways which threaten feminist and human rights goals of women's empowerment, sexual autonomy and reproductive rights. Others are more optimistic in describing how fundamentalist perspectives and policies are being challenged, revised and overcome.

Other Themes

We offer a roundtable of views on adolescent pregnancy, and papers on future uses of mifepristone, and training of chemists in Nepal to provide more effective information on and treatment for STDs and promote condoms.

During the International AIDS Conference in Vancouver in July 1996, the demand for 'distributive justice' was perhaps the most important, that is, justice in terms of access to treatment for HIV-related illness-not only to the many new drugs now being studied but also to existing treatments, which are still denied to so many, especially in the countries where AIDS is most prevalent. We have included a round-up on women and HIV/AIDS, particularly related to pregnancy and childbirth, almost all of which was presented in Vancouver and has since been published in the literature.

[1] Kessler CS, 1996. Religious fundamentalism: questioning the term, identifying its referents. Paper presented to the conference 'Challenging fundamentalism: questioning political and scholarly simplifications'. 26-27 April 1996, Kurla Lumpur. (Unpublished)

[2] Moghadam VM and Badran M, 1991. Causes and Gender Implications of Islamist Movements in the Middle East. World Institute of Development Economic Research. United Nations University, Helsinki.

[3] Kaufman DR, 1991. Gender Identity and Fundamentalism. American Sociological Association.

[4] Helie-Lucas M-A, quoted in: Enloe C, 1989. Bannas, Beaches and Bases. Univ of California Press, Berkeley CA.

[5] Luker K, 1984. Abortion and the Politics Mother-hood. Univ of California Press, Berkeley CA.