

Acknowledgements

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISMS?

What do we mean when we speak of the phenomenon of “religious fundamentalisms”? Is the term useful for women’s rights activists? Who are the main fundamentalist actors in the contemporary world? By grappling with these questions, this publication aims to understand how women’s rights activists from different parts of the world experience and define the complex phenomenon of religious fundamentalisms. Based on the responses of more than 1,600 individuals to AWID’s survey in September 2007, and 51 in-depth interviews conducted by the AWID research team, this publication aims to explore how women’s rights activists characterize religious fundamentalisms and to reach a better understanding of their views and experiences of the issue in various parts of the world.

In particular, this publication presents how women’s rights activists understand religious fundamentalisms by analyzing three interrelated questions. First, how do women’s rights activists construct or define religious fundamentalisms as a contemporary phenomenon? Although an immense amount of analytical work has been done on how fundamentalisms should be defined, there is much less on how activists, particularly women’s rights activists, are actually defining it. These voices are crucial because women’s rights activists find themselves at the centre of today’s political struggle between those aiming to open up legal, social and cultural spaces for pluralism and equality, and those attempting to reinforce economic, social and political structures that reduce those spaces.

Next, this publication addresses how useful the term “religious fundamentalisms” is for contemporary activism on women’s rights. In spite of its wide usage by activists, academics, politicians, journalists and others, it is also a very controversial term. To label certain institutions or groups of individuals “fundamentalist” suggests that they share some common elements. However, is there clarity or agreement on what these shared characteristics of fundamentalism are? Adding to the complexity is the fact that the use of the word fundamentalist has taken on a new political dimension – often one with racist or xenophobic undertones – in the narratives relating to war, terrorism, security and identity after the attacks in the United States of America on September 11th, 2001. Considering these factors, we will examine if the term is still a useful and strategic way for women’s rights activists to define the phenomenon and thereby collaborate in terms of effective and collective strategies.

The final part of this publication considers the main types of fundamentalist actors as identified by women’s rights activists. The opinions and experiences of women’s rights activists are important for identifying not only the most obvious religious fundamentalist actors, but also those who are the most implicated when the issue at stake is women’s rights. In the experiences of women’s rights activists, almost all religious traditions have fundamentalist elements. They also identify a complex picture of actors who transverse local and global, religious and secular spaces, and operate within elite circles as well as through followers of this ideology.

The complexity and multidimensionality of religious fundamentalisms in the contemporary world cannot be overstated. By defining religious fundamentalisms, assessing the usefulness of the term, and identifying the main types of actors, women's rights activists from around the world provide invaluable insights for understanding the phenomenon. There are significant similarities in the ways that women's rights activists from very different contexts characterize and experience religious fundamentalisms. This provides an interesting basis for considering transnational strategies and agendas in order to confront the global rise of religious fundamentalisms.

How do women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms?

The term "fundamentalism" originated at the turn of the 20th century when a group of militant North American Christian Evangelicals positioned themselves as fighting for the "fundamentals of faith" in the context of the modernization of most other religious sectors. Since its Christian origins, fundamentalism has referred to a wide variety of groups and actors across religious traditions and regions, and applied to other ideologies that may have nothing to do with religion. Due to the diversity of ways that it is presently applied, the first challenge of defining religious fundamentalisms is the difficulty – and for some the impossibility – of referring to it as a singular phenomenon. To resolve this, some have proposed ways to classify the many manifestations of fundamentalisms into certain types in order to avoid vague and broad definitions, while still referring to the same political phenomenon.¹ Others consciously use the term in the plural for the same reason.

Here it may be helpful to consider "family resemblances" or similar characteristics between different manifestations of religious fundamentalisms.² Instead of a broader definition seeking to capture religious fundamentalisms as a worldwide phenomenon, the concept of family resemblances contemplates the common features and overlapping characteristics, which may then form a similar phenomenon. The challenge, then, is to identify what these common characteristics are in the experiences of women's rights activists.³

This publication presents an analysis of the most relevant and frequently cited characteristics identified by women's rights activists when defining religious fundamentalisms, and maps the main elements associated with fundamentalisms in their experiences.

Identifying shared characteristics among religious fundamentalisms

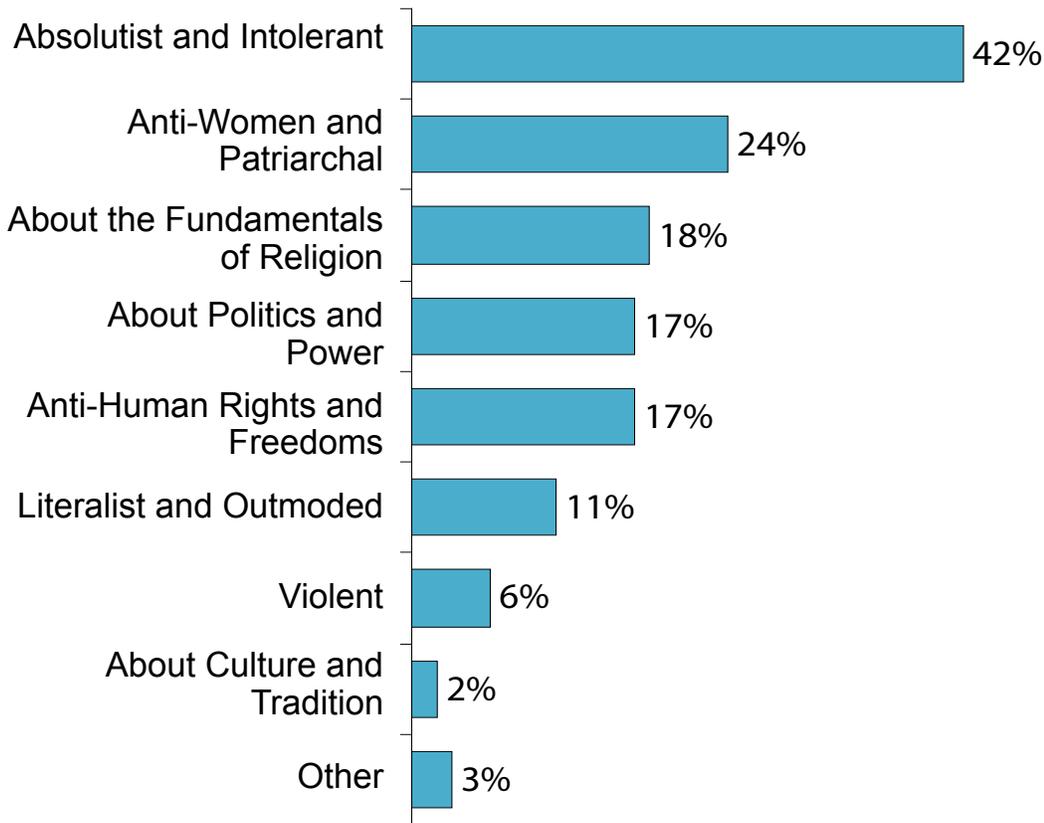
The survey responses identify the characteristics of religious fundamentalisms most frequently mentioned by women's rights activists asked to define the phenomenon. Eight main identifiers cover most of the survey responses. These characteristics hold true despite differences across regions and religions.

1 Among them, the one proposed as part of the Fundamentalism Project has had an important theoretical impact. It distinguishes different types of religious fundamentalisms: world conqueror (aiming to control society), world transformer (seeking to gradually transform the individual and society), world creator (creating enclaves for alternative societies), and world renouncer (separating oneself from community). See Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan and R. Scott Appleby, "Explaining Fundamentalisms," in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, Volume 5, eds. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

2 The concept of "family resemblance" originally proposed by Wittgenstein is used as an analytical device to consider the overlapping characteristics between phenomena without using a catch-all definition. It is also used by many scholars as a way of proposing the existence of a common fundamentalist phenomenon beyond multiple specificities.

3 Some of the following are usually regarded as the main characteristics of religious fundamentalisms: scripturalism, radicalism, extremism, exclusivism, militancy and, central for this research, the idea of a "radical patriarchy." See Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and Martin Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Figure 1: How would you define “religious fundamentalisms”?



Note: Multiple responses accepted; percentages will not total 100%

Base: 1,483 survey responses

Many women’s rights activists define religious fundamentalisms as a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to only one characteristic. Therefore, the many responses were placed in more than one defining category (the total percentage in Figure 1 is greater than 100%). This multidimensionality is also apparent in the one-on-one in-depth interviews, where activists with long histories and experiences of working on the issue commonly define religious fundamentalisms by referring to a combination of characteristics. Take, for example, the following definition that combines: political use of religion, an ideology not open to other alternatives, and one that is patriarchal.



The term has several elements: (i) [it] shows that it’s a political use of religion; (ii) unlike liberation theology, it is not open to other ways of being religious, especially of the same religion. They say there is one version which they impose through various media on their constituency. and; (iii) in most cases, this version of religion, because it also tends to be pre-modern and talk about “purification” and going back to The

Participants of AWID's Young Women's Institute⁴ use the following words to describe religious fundamentalisms: regressive, archaic, angry, oppressive, miscommunication, mental illness, strong position, reproductive control, fear, conservatism, imposition, selfishness, manipulation, dogma, unorthodox, fanatic, ultra-conservative, monopoly, anarchism, absolutism, obsolete, hate, blind, injustice, power, coercion, lack of knowledge, intolerance and anachronistic.

It is clear from these descriptions that religious fundamentalisms are considered inherently masculinized and negative in their experience. Participants noted that these initial reactions may mask a critical role played by women in supporting and perpetuating religious fundamentalisms.

Truth, latches [on] to patriarchal modes of society and control of women. Most religions emerged in pre-modern times when sexism was much more shameless and dominant. (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom)

Religious fundamentalisms are “absolutist and intolerant”

The most commonly identified characteristic of religious fundamentalisms by women's rights activists is “absolutist and intolerant” (more than 40% of responses). This experience applies equally not only across regions and religions, but also across ages. In addition, a significant portion of women's rights activists state that religious fundamentalists take positions that are not open to debate or challenge. This definition considers religious fundamentalisms as opposing what democracy and democratic values are supposed to be. A variety of characteristics used by the survey respondents are included in this descriptor, such as anti-pluralist (within one's own religion as well as with respect to others and to non-religious people), suppressive of dissent, dogmatic or fascist.

People interviewed from a wide variety of contexts also support the idea of absolutism and intolerance as central to understanding the phenomenon. This is often expressed by combining the idea of a unique truth with the intention of imposing that truth on others.

Christian extremists, what we call fundamentalists, believe there is only one way of doing things and they interpret that way for their followers. (Dorothy Aken'Ova, Nigeria)

Religious fundamentalisms are institutions, ideas and cultural practices that, from a single and dogmatic vision of reality, attempt to impose values, behaviours and forms of social organizations and hierarchies, violently excluding and persecuting any differing perspective and practice. (Daptne Cuevas and Marusia López Cruz, Mexico)

Dogmatic thinking and action that defends certain religious positions as unique, true and unchangeable. (Roxana Vásquez Sotelo, Peru)

People who are fundamentalist need to feel that they have the truth; they are the only ones who have the truth. (Alia Hogben, Canada)



⁴ The Young Women's Institute held by AWID in November 2007 brought together a diverse group of young women to exchange experiences and strategies for resisting and challenging religious fundamentalisms.



Fundamentalisms are usually very aggressive because it is not only just “my thinking” or “your thinking” but it is trying to impose some thinking to be the only true understanding [upon] other people. (Eleonora Fayzullaeva, Uzbekistan)

[Religious fundamentalism is] the exaggerated and quite irrational belief in, and conformity to, doctrine. [Fundamentalists] have a tendency to believe that their own religion is the only right one and [use] it to ‘define’ everyone else’s being. (Hope Chigudu, Zimbabwe/Uganda)

Distinguishing religious fundamentalisms from religious conservatism

Distinguishing religious fundamentalisms from religious conservatism is not straightforward. For some women rights activists, there is no clear distinction between these two phenomena; in some contexts, “conservatism” is even used in place of “fundamentalisms” or the two terms are used interchangeably. However, for many women’s rights activists who do differentiate between the two, they regard the characteristic “absolutist and intolerant” as being crucial. Interviewees recognize that both seek to reinforce patriarchy and are very much opposed to the expansion of women’s rights. *“No religion has fully accommodated women and those of us who work within religions just tend to feel that lack more in the religion we are closest to...”* (Frances Kisling, United States)

Yet, there are some distinctions between the two phenomena: dialogue, alliances, debate and negotiation are difficult, if not impossible, with religious fundamentalists, which is not the case with religious conservatives.



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

Conservatives maybe don’t want to rock the boat; if you change things, you’re going away from what things should be. But religious fundamentalists are people who think this is It; this is God-given and written and it can’t be changed. I think they’re more vicious; it’s easier to collaborate with a conservative; you could sit down and get to a common point. Religious fundamentalists might not even want to sit across [the] table and talk to you. (Asma’u Joda, Nigeria)

Religious fundamentalisms “oppose women’s rights and freedoms”

The second most frequently mentioned characteristic, included in almost a quarter of all responses, is that religious fundamentalisms are by definition against women’s autonomy and/or promote patriarchy. One in four respondents considers the anti-women position as a defining characteristic reflecting the “radical patriarchy”⁵ espoused by religious fundamentalisms. Furthermore, the responses reflect that those with experiences of Catholic fundamentalisms (either alone or in combination with Christian fundamentalisms⁶) are those who most often mention anti-women and patriarchal as defining characteristics of religious fundamentalisms.⁷

The anti-women characteristic of religious fundamentalisms clearly emerges in the data collected in the survey. For example, 79% of women’s rights activists affirm that the overall impact of religious fundamentalisms on women’s rights has been negative, while 69% consider that religious fundamentalisms obstruct women’s rights more than other political forces.

Understanding the relationship between patriarchy and religious fundamentalisms

The focus of religious fundamentalisms on control over women also emerges in most of the interviews. Reinforcing patriarchy is seen to be a key dimension of the phenomenon and is a central concern of religious fundamentalists. Even though patriarchy exists in almost all religions, it takes on a more extreme form in fundamentalisms, as indicated below:

“ The reordering of notions of masculinity and femininity is central to all religious fundamentalisms. We shouldn’t leave out the fact that men’s worlds are being fundamentally reordered also. Part of the demand that religious fundamentalisms are making on men is precisely to control their women – ‘Push them back into the home. Make them behave in ways that are acceptable. Otherwise you’re not a man’. For a lot of young men that is a very attractive proposition... (Gita Sahgal, United Kingdom/India)

Religious fundamentalisms want to re-inscribe a theory of complementarities between man and woman as unchangeable realities. They reject modern ideas of equality between men and women. (Marta Alanis, Argentina)

Gender is very fundamental to the production of collective identity. That is what you are talking about here, the appropriation of a collective identity. Sexuality, and the rules that apply to it and the punishments for contravening set rules are very basic to collective identity. And because fundamentalisms are based on this appropriation of an identity, that’s why, to me, gender is so central. (Farida Shaheed, Pakistan)

5 Martin Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

6 The research team decided to distinguish between Catholic fundamentalism and Christian fundamentalism because the responses clearly identified them as different religious traditions.

However, within the label of Christian fundamentalism, a wide variety of actors and sectors are included due to the variety of Christian churches and the fact that many of these churches are non-denominational. In particular, some respondents from Latin America and/or Africa use the terms Born Again, Pentecostal and Evangelical interchangeably.

7 An open question for further exploration is whether the strong presence of the defining dimension of being anti-women is based on the religion (Catholic), the region (Latin America), or a combination of both factors.

Religious fundamentalisms are about “the fundamentals of religion”

Another commonly mentioned characteristic is that religious fundamentalisms are about “the fundamentals of religion” and/or those who follow strict beliefs (18%). Two aspects of “the fundamentals of religion” should be noted. On the one hand, it means that some women’s rights activists consider the problem to be religion itself. Accordingly, there is not much difference between religion and fundamentalisms since all religions are, in the end, problematic for democracy and for women’s rights.



[A] universal issue that continues to hound humanity is religions. Religion and related issues such as racial discrimination and other forms of intolerance are old issues that have long divided the world as west and east, as majority race and minority race, and the people as men and women. (survey respondent, Indonesia)

On the other hand, a minority of responses consider that religious fundamentalisms are defined as following a religion closely, with either neutral, or perhaps even some positive, consequences.

[Religious fundamentalisms] are essential requirements/bases/ guidelines of a religion, i.e., what is meant to be and what is not right for a particular religion. The different responsibilities, rights and obligations of different persons (Man and Woman) in a given religion. (survey respondent, Uganda)



There are some differences among those who define religious fundamentalisms as being about “the fundamentals of religion” as concerns different contexts. Those who identify their context as being affected by Catholic fundamentalisms tend to indicate this characteristic the least. On the other hand, those respondents working in Christian fundamentalist contexts, or a combination of Christian and Muslim fundamentalisms, define it as being about the fundamentals of religion with greater frequency than those in contexts affected by Muslim or Catholic fundamentalisms only. When regional focus is factored in, those working on sub-Saharan Africa make up the highest percentage of respondents who understand religious fundamentalisms as being about the fundamentals of religion (27%).

Religious fundamentalisms are about “power and politics”

Being about power and politics is another characteristic associated with religious fundamentalisms (17%). The connection to power, of course, varies in different contexts, from the indirect influence of religious fundamentalisms on lawmakers to directly gaining state power in order to advance fundamentalist agendas. Whether religious fundamentalists hold power or not, or whether they are working within a democratic system or not, influences how religious fundamentalisms operate and the main strategies they use. Women’s rights activists from different contexts also mention this characteristic in the one-on-one interviews:



In the case of Muslim countries, we need to see religious fundamentalisms as a process. We need to differentiate between when they are in opposition and when they are in power because their strategies and their language change completely. Two important elements in religious fundamentalisms [are] their absolutism [and] their lack of tolerance for any pluralism both in religious, political and social terms. Also [they] use... politics to enforce their vision of religion. (Ziba Mir-Hosseini, United Kingdom/Iran)

Political movements that use religion in its most conservative forms to access political (and economic) power and/or to maintain it... (Alejandra Sardá, Argentina)

Religious fundamentalisms are “against human rights and freedoms”

Religious fundamentalisms are also considered “anti-human rights and anti-freedoms” (17%). As the mapping of responses in Figure 2 in the next section shows in more detail, religious fundamentalisms are also characterized as a direct negation of rights in general, even the most basic of human rights.



Religious fundamentalisms include any set of norms or [dictates] that restricts the freedom of thought, movement, work, marital status, sexual orientation, political participation and education, on the basis of ‘divine law’. (survey respondent, Israel)

Religion that has dogmas and practices that do not affirm the human rights, dignity and freedom of all people. (survey respondent, Nigeria/United States)

Religious rules with no respect for basic human right [to] life. (survey respondent, Poland)

Religious fundamentalisms are “literalist and outmoded”

It is interesting to note that only one in ten survey responses mentions “literalist or outmoded” as a characteristic of religious fundamentalisms. This suggests that the term as understood by women’s rights activists today has shifted away from its genealogy (i.e., a literalist interpretation of the Bible). As suggested before, the term has evolved from its original context and meaning, and is now used to describe a much wider phenomenon. It is also clear that women’s rights activists increasingly understand the contemporary phenomenon of religious fundamentalisms as a sophisticated and modern one, and stress motivations and agendas of various religious fundamentalist actors over the particular historicity of the term.



There is a strict, historical concept and another that is a [wider], more political use of the concept... In the latter case, religious fundamentalism is applied to all religious movements that have a strong conservative or reactionary position against modern values, such as autonomy, particularly women's autonomy, and democratic freedoms. It is also applied to the ways those religions try to influence public policy. (María José Rosado-Nunes, Brazil)

[T]he term comes out of the Christian tradition and is based on the notion of taking scripture literally... Jews never take scripture literally – on the contrary, we pile on layers and layers of commentaries and interpretation and in that sense it is not applicable and I think Muslim colleagues might concur – but certainly many of the other features that we brought out, such as patriarchy, an attempt to use religion to manipulate people, to have power over them, intolerance, not making room for the other, etc. I think unfortunately we do have movements in Judaism that embody those characteristics, so the objection to the word is more of a... scientific analytical objection and not an objection in terms of reality, if I can make that distinction. (Debbie Weissman, Israel)



Religious fundamentalisms are “violent”

Finally, very few survey respondents define religious fundamentalisms as inherently violent (6%). This does not mean that women's right activists deny the existence of violence on the part of some fundamentalist actors. On the contrary, when referring to the impacts of religious fundamentalisms on women, activists report religious fundamentalisms as being violent, particularly when verbal and psychological violence is included. For example, almost half of women's rights activists mention that they themselves or people they know have been verbally attacked or insulted by religious fundamentalists. Furthermore, three out of four respondents state that religious fundamentalisms verbally or physically target people in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community, human rights activists, or people who do not match the religious fundamentalists' expected norms of behaviour.

There is, in this respect, a gap between the ways in which women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms, and their experiences of the impacts of those religious fundamentalisms. This may be important to consider when formulating feminist strategies and conceptualizing the phenomenon.

Mapping definitions

When asked to define religious fundamentalisms, women's rights activists emphasize different aspects and characteristics that they have experienced in relation to the

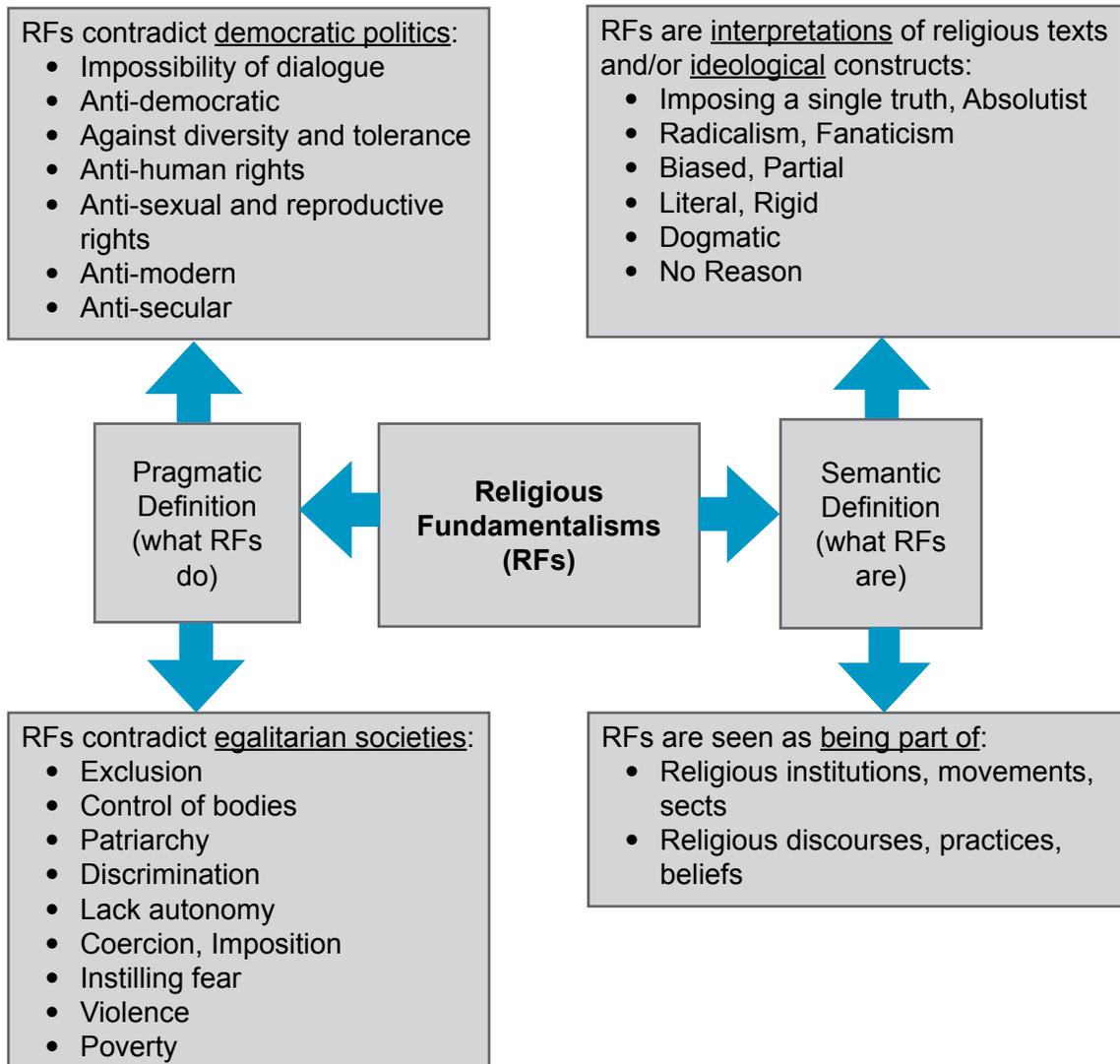
phenomenon. Another way of analyzing these responses is to provide a mapping (Figure 2) representing an integrated analysis of the defining characteristics of religious fundamentalisms as highlighted by women’s rights activists.

Mapping women’s rights activists’ definitions of religious fundamentalisms⁸

As Figure 2 shows, the various defining characteristics of religious fundamentalisms according to women’s rights activists can, for analytical purposes, be grouped into two types (many actual responses combine both):

- semantic (i.e., what religious fundamentalisms are);
- pragmatic (i.e., what religious fundamentalisms do, or the effects that religious fundamentalisms have on society and the individual).

Figure 2: Mapping how women’s rights activists define “religious fundamentalisms”



Base: 1,483 survey responses

⁸ Due to the large amount of textual data involved, this first level of analysis was done using qualitative analysis software to organize the information. ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, helps to systematize, understand and interpret information by identifying the main codes when dealing with large amounts of text. We would like to thank Candela de la Vega for her help with ATLAS.ti.

Semantic definitions

Semantic definitions by women's rights activists concentrate on what fundamentalisms are rather than what they do. For some activists, religious fundamentalisms are certain interpretations of religious texts that present the truth as singular and present a dogmatic understanding of the world. The idea of "literalism" (an obvious reference to the historical origins of the term) is also mentioned. Still others consider religious fundamentalisms as promoting extreme and fanatical interpretations and understandings of religion.

The following quotes characterize religious fundamentalisms as narrow and dogmatic ways of interpreting truth, religious texts and the world:



A collection of religious positions involving interpreting sacred texts as literally as possible, and assuming that doing that gives higher "truth and holiness" to religious claims based on the interpretations, and higher moral status to the makers of those. (survey respondent, Netherlands)

Dogmatic interpretation of the Bible/Quran or other religious publications which does not attempt to connect achievement of spiritual wellbeing with social realities that may include manifestations of injustice and inequality. This results in beliefs and practices that tend to violate the rights and dignity of persons in the name of religious piety. (survey respondent, Philippines)

Religious fundamentalisms are those which, from a very particular and biased interpretation of religion, impede other, more inclusive readings. (survey respondent, Ecuador)



Another set of responses that also defined religious fundamentalisms as "ways of interpreting" focus more on its political component. These responses regard religious fundamentalisms as ideological projects aiming to control the individual and/or society as a whole. Religious fundamentalisms in these experiences are about imposing on others a certain way of interpreting and understanding the world. In these responses, the term "religious fundamentalisms" is less a definition of how they interpret religious texts and more a vision of the world closely connected to power.



[F]undamentalisms, in general, are not just a form of theology, but rather, an ideology that opposes any kind of pluralism and joins forces with identifiable social and political interest groups. (survey respondent, Colombia)

Ideological and cultural constructions created by people or institutions to gain control and power, subjugating population groups. (survey respondent, Nicaragua)

Political ideologies which seek to impose an orthodox monolithic and exclusionary vision of religion upon communities, and to define faith and practice along such lines. (survey respondent, Bangladesh)

Finally, there is another cluster of responses within this semantic definition that characterizes religious fundamentalisms by who they are and how they seek to shape the world around them. Instead of stressing interpretations, they concentrate on religious fundamentalist actors and their agendas. On the one hand, some women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms by identifying the main proponents. On the other hand, there are women's rights activists who consider the main discourses, practices and/or beliefs that characterize religious fundamentalisms in the contemporary world.



It relates to politico-cultural movements whose power lies in the fact that, in [their] alliance with powerful economic segments, they exert great influence on the subjective formation of important sectors of the population. (survey respondent, Argentina)

Religious fundamentalism is the misuse of religion by conservative and retrograde movements for their political aims and to restrict the rights of minorities and confine women to traditional roles. (survey respondent, Serbia)

It is a set of beliefs rooted in a community, passed on from generation to generation, whose principle is the dogma by which no discussion or criticism is brooked. It is taken up by the whole community without questioning. (survey respondent, Mexico)

Pragmatic definitions

The other way women's rights activists define religious fundamentalisms is in a pragmatic sense, which focuses more on the specific effects that religious fundamentalisms have on society and the individual. Instead of providing a conceptual definition, the responses characterize religious fundamentalisms by identifying what their consequences are. The responses can be grouped into two main types: those that define religious fundamentalisms by identifying the negative consequences they have on society, particularly with respect to equality and freedom; and those that consider their negative effects on the political system, particularly with respect to democratic and pluralist values.⁹

Religious fundamentalisms as an obstacle to social equality

Characteristics associated with the responses that stress social inequality and exclusion as consequences of religious fundamentalisms include: coercion, imposition, violence, exclusion, poverty, patriarchy, lack or suppression of dialogue, discrimination and oppression of women, among others. These types of responses

⁹ The separation between having effects on societies and/or on democratic politics is proposed for analytical purposes. It is not our intention to imply that they are separate in actual political dynamics.

see religious fundamentalisms as opposing what a society should be according to women's rights activists. In this sense, religious fundamentalisms attack core values of equality, justice and freedom.



Extremities and non-accommodation of religious practices and beliefs that lead to segregation/discrimination of persons not affiliated to their religious groupings. (survey respondent, Kenya)

It is the manipulation of woman's consciousness to perpetuate the patriarchal, colonial system. They insinuate the culture of fear into a woman's consciousness in order to dominate and subjugate her. They make womankind submissive, voiceless, and believing in her inferiority to man. (survey respondent, Argentina)

[Religious fundamentalists] are religious group[s] who strong[ly] believe in traditional values, therefore keeping the status quo [and] oppressing and marginalizing the poor, especially women. (survey respondent, Brazil/Canada)

To me, "religious fundamentalisms" describes faith-based ideologies that adopt rigid and totalitarian beliefs and practices, and promote intolerance of beliefs, lifestyles and personal freedoms that conflict with those ideologies. (survey respondent, Canada)

[They are] those authoritarian, exclusionary, conservative and profoundly antidemocratic ideologies that threaten the rights of individuals, particularly those of women, to live a free life and without discrimination. (survey respondent, Chile)



Religious fundamentalisms as an obstacle to democracy and freedom

Another set of responses focuses on the negative effects that religious fundamentalisms have on democratic politics and rights: they concentrate on the effects that religious fundamentalisms have on the legal and political arenas, stressing how they negatively influence human rights, women's rights, and/or sexual and reproductive rights. Some responses are also clustered around the negative consequences that religious fundamentalisms have on core democratic values such as diversity, tolerance, equality, freedom and autonomy. These types of responses locate religious fundamentalisms in clear opposition to a democratic political community.

Religious fundamentalists are those who obstruct (or even control) freethinking and democratic functions of civil society

by curbing them in the name of religion... (survey respondent, India/United States)

A religious attitude in which the religious rules supersede human rights and national legal standards in the opinion and practice of the followers. (survey respondent, Netherlands)

Religious perspectives that work against women’s autonomy, don’t recognize their moral authority and ethical capacity to make decisions about all aspects of their lives, and fight against women’s sexual rights and reproductive rights. (survey respondent, Brazil)

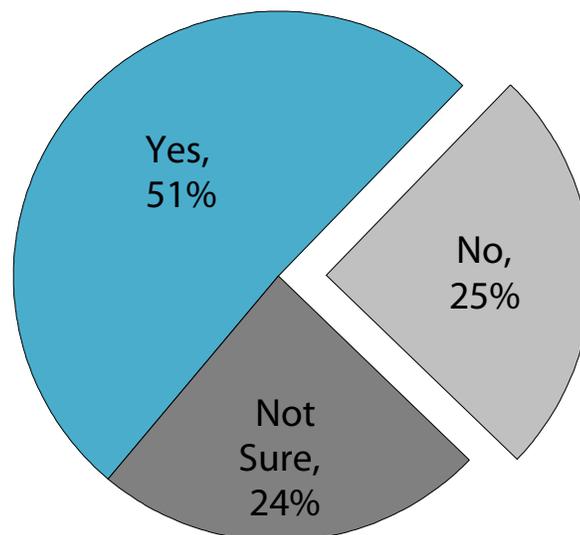


The usefulness of the term “religious fundamentalisms” for activists

Another important question related to the definition of religious fundamentalisms is to explore whether women’s rights activists consider the term useful. Although the term is widely used, its utility remains a central concern for academics and activists alike. While it is clear that for some, there is undeniably a dimension of religion that can be considered fundamentalist, for others the label itself is problematic and should be discarded because of its many limitations.¹⁰ Both the complexities of defining the term and the unease some people feel with its use, especially in the context of the ‘War on Terror’, raise some concerns about the use of the term for the purposes of activism.

Figures 3 and 4 show the responses to the question of whether the term is useful and the main arguments of those who do not consider it so.

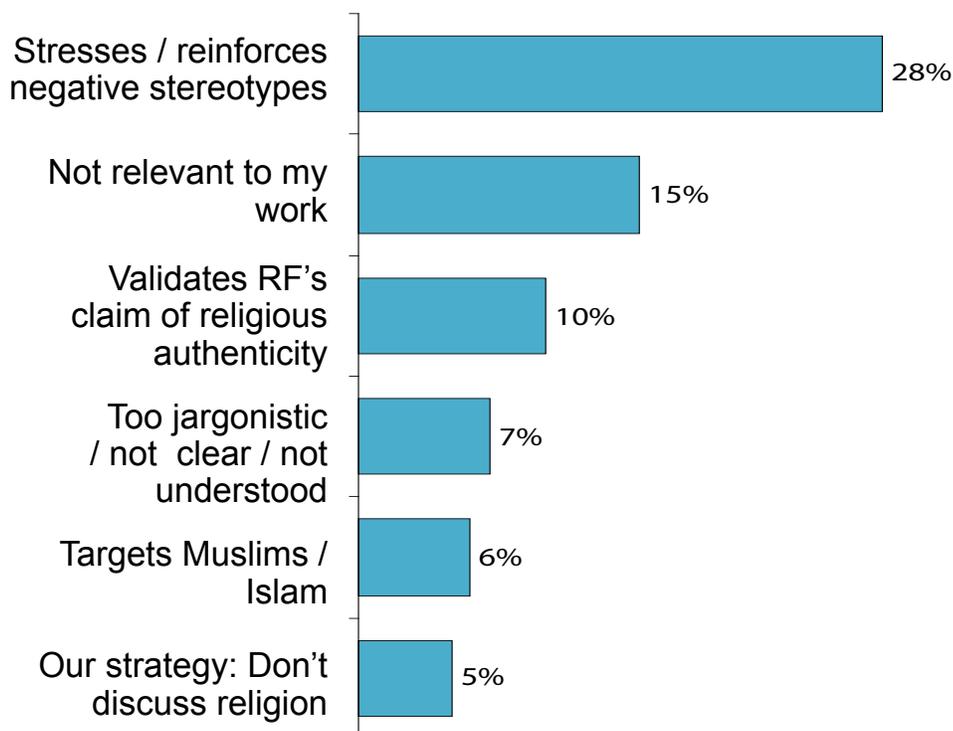
Figure 3: Do you find the term “religious fundamentalisms” useful in your work?



¹⁰ Most people recognize the limitations of the term and are uneasy about using it, but still consider it useful for describing a heterogeneous set of movements and ideologies in the contemporary world. David Zeidan, *The Resurgence of Religion: A Comparative Study of Selected Themes in Christian and Islamic Fundamentalist Discourse* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003).

Base: 1,586 survey responses

Figure 4: If not, why?



Base: 317 survey responses

Half of women's rights activists find the term useful

The responses reflected in the AWID survey convey the complex relationship that women's rights activists have with the term "religious fundamentalisms". While half of survey respondents affirm that the term is useful in their work (51%), the other half express doubts about its usage – either they are not sure that it is useful or they have clear reservations about its usefulness. Therefore, in spite of its wide use, it is important to bear in mind that a significant percentage of activists do have concerns about its use.

Promoting racist stereotypes?

According to the survey results, the most frequently cited concern regarding the term is that it stresses and/or reinforces negative stereotyping: 28% of respondents who do not consider the term useful provide this reason. This answer, together with the idea that the term directly targets Muslims and/or Islam (6%), is by far the most prevalent reason for which the term is not considered useful by a significant proportion of women's rights activists. The fear that challenging religious fundamentalisms may contribute to or increase prejudice and racism against a religious or ethnic community is considerable for many women's rights activists. According to the survey, 20% affirm that efforts to challenge religious fundamentalisms are greatly increasing prejudice and racism, while 30% consider that efforts to challenge religious fundamentalisms contribute to some extent to increasing prejudice and racism. Although we cannot know for sure, it would be safe to assume that the manipulation of the discourse of "fundamentalisms" and the subsequent demonizing of Muslims in the context of the "War on Terror" has contributed largely to this concern.

Other reasons the term may not be useful

Some activists do not find the term useful because it is not relevant in their work (15%). Another reason provided is that the term reinforces or plays into the religious fundamentalists' claim that they represent true believers or that they are simply following the fundamentals of their faith (10%). Finally, some activists feel that the term is limited by a lack of shared understanding of what it means, finding it too complex or academic, or that it sounds too much like jargon (7%).

Little agreement on alternatives to the term

Despite the multiple limitations mentioned by women's rights activists, few respondents or interviewees provide alternatives to the term. Only 29% of survey respondents who do not find the term useful offer any alternative suggestions. Furthermore, these suggestions are scattered across a range of possibilities with no clear favourite. Alternatives to "religious fundamentalisms" include terms that emphasize the violent, anti-pluralist, extremist, fanatic, or intolerant aspects of religious fundamentalisms (such as "extremisms" and "fanaticisms"). Some emphasize the political nature of the phenomenon (such as "political Islam", or "the religious right"), while others prefer very local terms (such as "Hindutva"), which do not capture the more global/transnational manifestations of religious fundamentalisms.

Differences in usefulness across regions and religions

Respondents in the context of Muslim fundamentalisms tend to find the term less useful (28% responded that the term was not useful) than those affected by Catholic fundamentalisms (17% responded that the term was not useful). This points to the limitations discussed before, i.e. that the term is used in racist or xenophobic narratives against Muslims, particularly post-9/11. There is also the consideration of the context and origins of the term, which clearly tie it to a particular geographic and religious history relating to Christianity in the United States. However, it is important not to overstate this point, since even for respondents dealing mainly with Muslim fundamentalisms, over half of women's rights activists surveyed still do find the term useful in their activism.

In terms of regional variations, women's rights activists focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean region are more inclined to find the term useful (61%). This significant difference with other regions can likely be explained by two main factors; first, the existence of successful campaigns in popularizing the term (such as the *Articulación Feminista Marcosur* campaign, *Tu Boca es Fundamental contra los Fundamentalismos*); and second, the minimal presence of Muslims in the region means that concerns over the term being used against them are less relevant.

The greater popularity of the term in Latin America and the Caribbean also emerges in interviews with women's rights activists from the region. Although none of the activists suggest replacing the term, some do express doubts about how comprehensible it is to the general population.

Arguments in favour of the term

The interviews from other regions reflect a similar point of view to the one emerging from the survey. There seems to be a slight tension between using an already established term while recognizing its limitations. Similar to the survey respondents, interviewees indicate that the term can be problematic, particularly since it *“has become obfuscated by the Western perception of terrorism and in fact is used interchangeably with the term ‘terrorism’”* (Waheeda Amien, South Africa).

Nonetheless, even when recognizing the problems with the term, many women’s rights activists offer very powerful arguments in favour of keeping it.



All our attempts to look for other terms which could be generic have not been successful till now. I don’t have a particular attachment to the term but we need to keep it in order to show that what is called a violent political Islam has something in common with a similar phenomenon that has emerged in all other major religions. (Nira Yuval-Davis, United Kingdom)

[W]e’ve all been through many debates on whether we should move on from that language. It’s a phenomenon that applies across all religions. [The concern is that] it gives up too much to the fundamentalists – it allows them to define what are the fundamentals of religion. But I still use it as an easy catch-all. (Sara Hossain, Bangladesh)

To summarize, a paradox exists in views on the usefulness of the term: while a substantial number of women’s rights activists feel uncomfortable with it, and with good reasons, very few feel it should be abandoned or are able to propose viable alternatives. One way to resolve this paradox is by being aware that while the term seems unavoidable, it is necessary to remain mindful of its possible limitations or abuses; that is, employing a critical use of the term. As part of this critical use, it is necessary to dissociate the term from any one particular religion, particularly Islam. For this reason, it is necessary to stress that fundamentalism exists within all religions without exception. As one interviewee states:



I’m part of a movement of trying to delink it from Islamic fundamentalism, so for me what’s been the most useful thing is to use the word “fundamentalisms” and say it applies as much to Christian fundamentalism in the United States and Hindu fundamentalism in India as to Muslim fundamentalism in Iran. That helps me show that the others are not better, particularly because the Hindu fundamentalists like nothing better than to argue that they are not fundamentalist, it’s just these barbaric Muslims who are fundamentalists. [It can be used] to argue that they’re all part of the same problem. (Pragna Patel, United Kingdom)

Main fundamentalist actors

Another important aspect when characterizing religious fundamentalisms is to understand who the main fundamentalist actors are according to the experiences of women's rights activists. They have a privileged perspective: their fight for women's rights puts them in close confrontation with religious fundamentalist actors.

Both in the interviews and the AWID survey, respondents were asked to name the most important religious fundamentalist actors in their contexts.¹¹ While we cannot claim that the results are a representative sample on a global scale, they do provide a substantial amount of information about types of religious fundamentalist actors across regions and religions.

The varieties of actors defined as religious fundamentalists

First, it is clear that religious fundamentalism is not the monopoly of one or a few religions and that no religion is free from fundamentalist actors. When asked to name the most influential fundamentalist actors that they confront, women's rights activists identify individuals or groups from almost every major world religion as well as some minor ones. This reinforces the assertion that the term "religious fundamentalisms" can be applied transnationally and across religions.

Although survey respondents were permitted to name actors from a combination of different religions, two-thirds of women's rights activists name only one religion when responding to the religious affiliation(s) of the most influential fundamentalist actors in their contexts: Islam (25%), Catholicism (20%), Christianity (16%), Hinduism (3%), Judaism (1%) and Buddhism (1%). The most frequent combinations are Catholicism and Christianity (15%), followed by Christianity and Islam (11%), Catholicism and Islam (4%), Hinduism and Islam (2%), and Christianity and Hinduism (1%).

An additional 4% name other religions, including Sikhism; animism; African ethno-religious movements such as the Kenyan Mungiki and Congo's Kimbanguists and Bundu dia Kongo; Afro-Brazilian Candomblé; Mexican indigenous Tepehuán; Nepali shamanism; and new religions such as the Unification Church ("Moonies") and Shinto-related Seicho-No-Ie in Japan.

Moreover, women's rights activists identify a wide variety of types of actors, making it clear that there is no "typical" fundamentalist actor. Women's rights activists from different parts of the world indicate that there is a heterogeneity among forms of religious fundamentalisms that includes actors such as political parties, sectors within religious institutions, NGOs, politicians and state officials.

The players are many: political parties, the religious right amongst Hindus and Muslims, the social and cultural wings of the Hindu right and organizations and individuals who subscribe to the philosophies being perpetuated. (Pramada Menon, India)

¹¹ The AWID survey includes a question asking women's rights activists to name the two most influential religious fundamentalist groups, parties, institutions or individuals in their contexts and to state their religious affiliations.



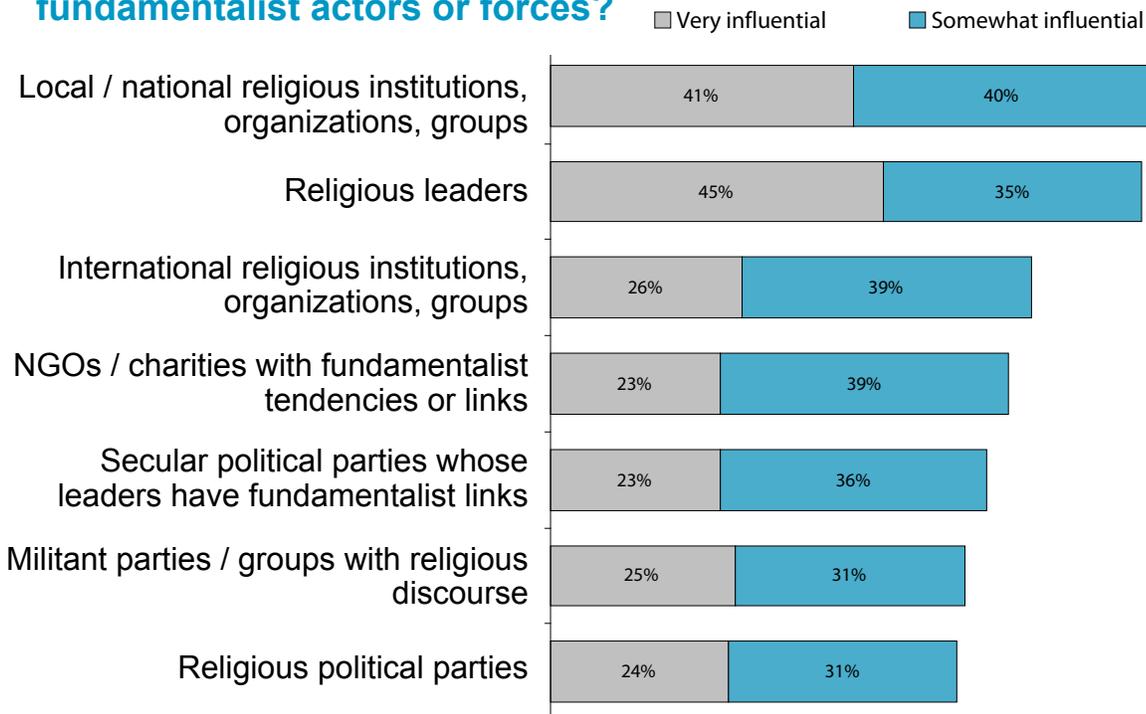
'Union of Orthodox Parents' (NGO that can be explicitly named as fundamentalist) has a big influence on public opinion. Members are Orthodox Christians. 'Conservative Party of Georgia' – a political party which aims to protect traditional values, Orthodox customs, etc. (survey respondent, Georgia)

In Mexico, religious fundamentalisms operate through various actors: the Catholic hierarchy and its network of priests, nuns and parishes installed throughout the country; the National Action Party, which today has the Presidency of the Republic and the majority in Congress; ultra-right groups such as the Legion of Christ and Opus Dei that are characterized by the training of leaders, their insertion in public office and various tactics of blackmail and extortion against opposing groups; civil society organizations such as Provida or ANCIFEM that, under the slogan of the right to promote citizen participation, promotes values and practices associated with religious fundamentalism; corporate monopolies including Televisa (which has a monopoly on mass media), or Sabritas and Bimbo (which have monopolies on the manufacture of bread and candy). (Dapthe Cuevas and Marusia López Cruz, Mexico)



In spite of women's rights activists naming a wide variety of actors, when they have to indicate the levels of influence of these actors, religious leaders and local or national religious institutions are considered the most influential of all (Figure 5).

Figure 5: In your work, how influential are the following fundamentalist actors or forces?



Base: 1,500 survey responses

Third, some types of actors are more frequently named in association with particular religious traditions.¹² For example, political parties are the most common means through which religious fundamentalisms operate in Muslim contexts, as well as through organizations such as Hamas or Hizbullah which encompass armed wings while also standing for elections through political wings. A significant number of women's rights activists affected by Muslim fundamentalisms specifically name the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i Islami as influential religious fundamentalist actors; this challenges their portrayal as "moderates", especially by some analysts in Western Europe and North America. However, armed and jihadist groups also play a significant role in Muslim fundamentalisms, as do individual religious scholars.

When considering Catholic fundamentalisms, the Vatican and the Catholic Church as institutions top the list. However, Opus Dei¹³ is singled out by approximately one in ten respondents from Catholic fundamentalist contexts. NGOs and charities are also a vital means of operation for Catholic fundamentalisms and a name that repeatedly comes up is Human Life International. Politicians and/or political parties influenced by fundamentalist Catholic doctrine are also considered important fundamentalist actors.

In terms of Christian fundamentalisms, NGOs and charities seem to have a large role to play, but equally important are very localized churches, individual preachers, and religious fundamentalist influences within nominally or purportedly "secular" parties.

For those affected by Hindu fundamentalisms, the religious hierarchy itself is a less visible or tangible religious fundamentalist force. Instead, the most influential force is organized political parties (such as the Bharatiya Janata Party or Shiv Sena), or identity-based "cultural" organizations (such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or Bajrang Dal) that do not stand for election but act as powerful pressure groups. In general, monks and monasteries are named as the main religious fundamentalist actors within the Buddhist tradition. Women's rights activists who focus on Sri Lanka say that Buddhist fundamentalisms function through Sinhala nationalist political parties.

Finally, a noticeable percentage of women's rights activists (around 15%) identify an entire religion as the most influential fundamentalist actor in their work. Survey responses include such statements such as: "*Christians in Nigeria*", "*Presbyterians*", "*Muslims (e.g., immigrant students from Morocco or Turkey)*" or "*Catholics*". Interestingly, this is not a perspective found in any of the one-on-one interviews. In other words, a significant minority tends to associate the problem of religious fundamentalisms with an entire and specific religion. These responses that label the fundamentalist "other" and fail to recognize internal diversities pose a challenge for feminist analysis of religious fundamentalisms and for movement-building. One way to address this issue is by ensuring that religious fundamentalism is not associated with one religion only, and not presumed to be the automatic consequence of religious belief.

¹² As previously stated, the responses to the survey cannot be taken as globally representative, and therefore it would be unwise to compare precise percentages of which groups or institutions are named by women's rights activists as influential religious fundamentalist forces in their work.

¹³ Opus Dei is a conservative Catholic organization founded by Josemaría Escrivá in Spain in 1928; since 1982 it has official status as a personal prelature according to the Vatican.

A complex picture of actors

The actors named by women's rights activists as influential in the arena of religious fundamentalisms present a complex picture that resists simplification. Women's rights activists caution against any presumptions about who is or is not likely to be fundamentalist. From their analysis, a complex picture emerges of religious fundamentalist actors operating across some major dualities: (a) the local and the global); (b) the religious and the secular; and (c) elites and followers.

Religious fundamentalist actors as both local and global

Among the fundamentalist actors identified by women's rights activists, we can see both the influence of local or national players in a particular country or region, and those functioning at international or transnational levels. The frequency of these answers indicates that religious fundamentalist actors are politically active in local, national and international arenas, and while some are contained by the borders of specific political communities, most form part of transnational networks and agendas. Take, for example, countries influenced by Catholic fundamentalisms where a transnational religious organization such as Opus Dei (founded in Spain in the early 20th century) is now active globally and co-exists with local churches and organizations. In Indonesia, actors include the transnational Hizb ut-Tahrir (which originated in Haifa, Israel in the 1950s), which coexists with the local Justice Party. Distinguishing between what is transnational and what is local is almost impossible in the case of Sikh fundamentalisms.



[Religious fundamentalists] have been active and successful in lobbying first human rights organizations, then the UN system, and played a decisive role in the recent UN General Assembly decision and subsequent Human Rights Council decision demanding [that] all member states inscribe in their constitutions, in their laws and in their education system “respect of religions and their prophets”. This decision has been met with total indifference from Left forces as well as feminist forces the world over while there should be a global outcry against it. (Marieme Hélié-Lucas, France/Algeria)

Religious fundamentalist actors as both “secular” and “religious”

Being characterized as a fundamentalist actor goes beyond the religious/secular dichotomy. Although most women's rights activists identify actors that are overtly “religious” (such as the hierarchy of a church, a religious political party or a religious organization), an important number of respondents include “secular” actors as part of religious fundamentalist movements, particularly “secular” NGOs or “secular” political parties and leaders. For many women's rights activists, there are

politicians and sectors of civil society that form part of the phenomenon of religious fundamentalisms, without necessarily being visibly identifiable as “religious”. The content of an actor’s agenda is, for some women’s rights activists, more important in defining an institution or an individual as “fundamentalist” than the specific label of “religious”. In this sense, civic or political leaders can be considered part of the phenomenon of religious fundamentalisms if they defend a fundamentalist agenda.

I think that sometimes religious fundamentalism is easy to identify and sometimes it is insidious. In the United States, the current leadership is all quite openly Christian fundamentalist and laws that are slowly revoking the rights of women are being passed by the day. This in turn makes it easier for other state leaders to justify national laws that are based on strict religious beliefs, but no one is calling it religious fundamentalism. (survey respondent, United States)

Religious fundamentalist actors as both elites and followers

There are some women’s rights activists who highlight the role of religious fundamentalist elites, those with religious or political power, while others focus more on the “ordinary” followers, those sectors of the population that identify with religious fundamentalist tendencies. Women’s rights activists clearly point out that fundamentalisms are a complex phenomenon comprised of both elites and followers who have different connections to the phenomenon and are recruited in different ways. In general, when the focus is on religious fundamentalist elites, specific individuals or institutions, the tendency is to consider the anti-democratic components of their agendas. These elites, who tend to be men from wealthier segments of society, are seen as crucial obstacles for progress in women’s rights. A central challenge, then, is how to overcome their influence in the formulation of public policy and lawmaking.

There are, however, some women’s rights activists who define religious fundamentalisms by focusing on those sectors that follow, and identify with, religious fundamentalist tendencies. This type of focus is more concerned with who and/or why some sectors of the population become religious fundamentalists, the effects they have on those around them, and whom they have power over. For women’s rights activists who understand religious fundamentalisms in this way, a crucial concern is the “identification” of women with fundamentalist tendencies, and how to critically examine this identification.



[Religious fundamentalists] give a role to the working class, the poor and the rural, urban migrant women in these communities that they do not otherwise have. And the middle class, the secularists, and the reformists have not managed to mobilize them in the same way. Exactly the same pattern happens in Turkey with how religious Islamist groups

mobilized women in their community and if you read about Christian fundamentalists in the [southwest], it is exactly the same thing. I do not see it as their success; I see it as a failure of the secularists who never managed to understand and relate to the grassroots culture and the community within. (Homa Hoodfar, Canada/Iran)

A shared phenomenon with common agendas

The ways in which survey respondents and interviewees define religious fundamentalisms, their positions on the usefulness or limitations of the term, and their identification of the main types of actors presented in this publication provides a preliminary insight into the views and experiences of women's rights activists. It is a glimpse into understanding the complexity of religious fundamentalisms in the contemporary world, but also contains possibilities for further discussion of strategies and new initiatives for challenging the impacts of religious fundamentalisms on women's rights and human rights.

In spite of the complexity of religious fundamentalisms in the contemporary world, in the experiences of women's rights advocates, there are strong similarities in how the phenomenon appears in different contexts. While there are important distinctions and nuances in people's definitions, the research finds that similarities far outweigh differences. Why are the views and experiences of women's rights activists similar despite such diverse contexts? Why are there not more significant differences in understanding religious fundamentalisms considering the diversity of religious traditions or regions of the world covered by the research? These are complicated questions, but there are possible explanations.

First, religious fundamentalisms are predominantly a transnational phenomenon. Sixty-one percent of women's rights activists affirm that the most influential religious fundamentalists in their contexts have international ties to other organizations/groups in other regions, while only 8% state that they do not have international linkages. Religious fundamentalist agendas are often determined beyond national borders. Religious fundamentalist actors from different faiths cooperate on related or common agendas so as to have a more powerful impact at the international level, such as at the United Nations. It is therefore not surprising that women's rights activists tend to define religious fundamentalisms in similar ways across regions and religions.

Second, religious fundamentalisms are, in many ways, reactionary movements, responding to the successes and challenges brought about by feminist and women's movements. All types of religious fundamentalisms attack women's equal rights, and many of their agendas, strategies and alliances are built with the aim of confronting feminist and women's movements.¹⁴ Furthermore, this antagonism provides a fertile ground for religious fundamentalist alliances that, from a cursory analysis, might seem impossible or highly improbable. The similarities in defining

14 Juan Marco Vaggione, (April 2005) "Reactive Politicization and Religious Dissidence: The political mutations of the religious" in *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 31, no. 2.



religious fundamentalisms may also be based on the similar strategies and agendas that women’s rights activists face in their fight for women’s rights.

Finally, feminist and women’s movements are also transnational. These movements build alliances and agendas beyond state borders. In spite of being located in different regions, women’s rights activists are part of transnational movements that share many concerns and find in most reactionary religious sectors a crucial obstacle in their struggle for women’s rights. Thus, it is possible that the definitional similarities are also connected to the transnational nature of feminism.

These shared views and experiences of women’s rights activists provide an important basis for building alliances and strategies to challenge religious fundamentalisms. At the centre of a feminist definition lies the examination of religious fundamentalisms through the lens of power (i.e., what power they exert, over whom and how), as well as the recognition of their slightly different manifestations in different contexts. The terminology applied may differ and have particular nuances in various circumstances, depending on what is useful and meaningful in each context.¹⁵ Such diversity is to be expected considering that religious fundamentalist strategies are cleverly positioned for different geographies, constituencies and issues, and similarly, our understandings of the concept must also acknowledge this complexity. Yet such acknowledgement does not preclude using the term “religious fundamentalisms” strategically for identifying and advocating against a set of phenomena at the global, regional, and national levels.

¹⁵ We are indebted to the discussions at the AWID Stakeholders Meeting held in Istanbul, Turkey in November 2007 for this concept, and in particular to Sylvia Estrada-Claudio and Anasya Sengupta.

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About the Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative

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

What we hope to achieve:

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

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

Other AWID publications in this series are:

Religious Fundamentalisms on the Rise: A case for action

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

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.