



# Feminist Dissent

**Issue 2 – Summer 2017 – Special issue on Gender and Fundamentalisms**

**Co-edited by Nadje Al-Ali and Nira Yuval-Davis**

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## Feminist Dissent – Issue 2

### Special Issue on *Gender and Fundamentalisms*

Co-edited by Nadjé Al-Ali and Nira Yuval-Davis

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# Introduction to Special Issue on Gender and Fundamentalisms

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This special issue is based on a series of symposia on **Gender and Fundamentalisms** conducted over the last four years on different aspects of the relationship between gender and fundamentalisms. These symposia took place once a semester at SOAS and were organised by Nira Yuval-Davis from the Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) of the University of East London and Nadje Al-Ali from the Centre of Gender Studies (CGS) at SOAS University of London. Each symposium included presentations followed by discussions among the members of the panel and the audience on a range of related subjects that varied from specific regions (for example, the 'recent political development in the Middle East and North Africa'), to specific religions (e.g. Christianity), to generic themes (e.g. education), or policies (e.g. the Prevent agenda). The events brought together academics, activists, students and a general public.

The united theme, which connected this series of symposia, has been that the growth of religious fundamentalisms has close relationships to gender relations, as notions of 'proper' masculinity and femininity and the relations between the sexes are fundamental to the social and political orders, which these movements attempt to construct as normative absolutes. Women's behaviour, their sexualities, appearance, their relationships and the space in which women are allowed to exercise their agency are strictly controlled as they embody symbolic border guards to the community of belonging. Furthermore, many of our contributors to the series have illustrated the close relationship between the increase in



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fundamentalist movements and the militarization of societies, which in turn often contributes to the privileging of certain forms of militarised masculinities. These hegemonic norms of militarised masculinities tend to be linked to political authoritarianism, the normalization of violence and an increase in gender-based violence.

Religious fundamentalisms are primarily contemporary authoritarian and absolutist political movements which use the latest technology (especially in the fields of communication) as well other forms of access to governmental powers to establish and naturalize their version of 'the truth' as a way to taking control of particular religious, ethnic and national communities as well as society as a whole. There are several explanations to the rise of fundamentalist movements, some specific to particular locations and cultures and some more generic, relating to the failure of post-colonial socialist and nationalist movements in the context of the rise of the neo-liberal global social and political order. As such they are closely related to other, of more secular nature extreme right authoritarian absolutist political movements which are using nostalgic naturalizing discourses of lost national, racial and cultural glory (and dominating superiority). They have arisen both in the South (and among racialized minorities of the South in the North) as well as in the North, affected by 'structural adjustment' policies, post-cold war liberalisation of the ex-Soviet bloc as well as the growing crises of governability and governmentality in the USA and Europe.

Many of the characteristics linked to religious fundamentalism can also be extended to secular right wing and fascist movements, such as the construction of the absolute 'truth' and the rise of populism, frequently through the use of what we have recently coined 'alternative facts'. We have seen this most lately in the right wing and fascist anti-immigration and anti-refugee movements in Europe. However, the ability to evoke 'God', holy scriptures and doctrinally justified norms and practises, largely used in an extremely selective manner, has had a particularly profound

and frequently devastating effect on communities, especially in terms of the shift towards extremely conservative gender norms and relations including heteronormativity and an increase in homophobia. Here it is not only women's bodies and sexuality that are subject to extreme control and policing but also men's bodies and sexualities. Those men who do not fit with hegemonic norms of masculinity and heteronormativity also become extremely vulnerable targets of religious fundamentalist movements.

Paradoxically women often find not only comfort and solace in religion and spirituality but also what Saba Mahmood has called 'the politics of piety' gives some of them a sense of empowerment as well as agency to resist presumed patriarchal ethical superiority. Some women also occupy powerful (but except very rarely) subservient public positions by policing other women to maintain the fundamentalist social order. Some feminists have confused this sense of agency and empowerment with women's liberation in a way that is severely damaging feminist and other defenders of women's rights by relativizing notions of 'culture and tradition'. It is for this reason that Lama Abu Laden has written a review essay on Mahmood's book, in a longer format than our other book reviews. It is also why the first major article in this issue, 'Why Fundamentalism', by Stephen Cowen and Gita Sahgal, is also engaged in a systematic critique of such post-feminist positions as Mahmood's. The authors also provide us with a broader historical and cross-cultural understanding of the development and characteristics of religious fundamentalisms. Their proposed definition centres on the construction of a neo-patriarchal political order as a key objective of religious fundamentalist movements in different religious, historical and cultural contexts.

Our second main article in this special issue looks specifically at the rise of *Hindutva*, that is the majoritarian political ideology based on the presumed superiority of Hinduism. Rashmi Varma analyses the rising force of Hindu fundamentalism and supremacism linked to Narendra Modi's ascension to power in India in '(Un)Modifying India: Nationalism, Sexual



Violence and the Politics of Hindutva'. She shows that sexual violence has played an important role in rejuvenating a masculinist state and society. The rise of another masculinist and authoritarian state also provides the backdrop against Mariz Tadros' discussion of the Muslim Sisters (the movement of Islamist women linked to the Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt. Tadros examines the agency and ideology of the Muslim Sisters in the context of the reconfiguration of power dynamics generated by the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Finally, the fourth major article in this special issue refocuses our attention to Christian fundamentalist movements within the UK. Based on long-term fieldwork, Sukhwant Dhaliwal critically explores two major streams of Christian fundamentalism in the UK: the Christian Peoples' Alliance and the Conservative Christian Fellowship. The intersectional approach of the critique explores issues around class, ethnicity, racism and women's reproductive rights.

In our 'Voices of Dissent' section, Rahila Gupta provides a nuanced and thought-provoking discussion of the government's Prevent agenda to stop religious radicalisation. While extremely critical of the counterproductive Prevent strategy developed by the increasingly authoritarian government, Gupta bemoans the lack of spaces for secular feminist voices who are critical of Prevent but are also weary of the increase of religious fundamentalism within communities in the UK. Isabel Marler, in 'Feminist futures are the seeds we plant today': Challenging Fundamentalisms at the 13th AWID International Forum' provides an insightful account of the debates and tensions at the recent AWID forum in Bahia, Brazil (8-11 September 2016). She explores the impact of religious fundamentalism in Brazil as part of a wider global trend of 'rising sectarianism, identitarian religious politics, and ethno-nationalist movements, political polarisation, and the rise of 'post-truth' populist politics'. In this section, we are also sharing AWID's 'Seven Pointers for Development Actors Navigating Religious Fundamentalisms and Women's Rights'.

The issue of abortion and women's right to choose is crucial in struggles of feminists against Christian feminsims. We are including therefore two short articles on women's struggles on this issue in Poland by Paulina Wawrzynczyk as well as on Northern Ireland by Pam Lowe. Interwoven among the articles in the issue are a performance stanza by Gail Simon, 'Indigenous and Other Ways', which problematises and subverts dominant discourses so vital in feminist anti-fundamentalist discourses. We also have two previously unpublished poems by the Indian feminist and anti-caste writer and activist Meena Kandasamy. Both poems evoke the despair and anger, but also resistance, against the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and its attendant oppression of women and dalits in India today.

**Nadje Al-Ali** is Professor of Gender Studies at the Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS, University of London, where she is also head of the Doctoral School. She has published widely on women and gender in the Middle East as well as transnational migration and diaspora mobilization. Her publications include *What kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (2009, University of California Press, co-authored with Nicola Pratt); *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives* (Zed Books, 2009, co-edited with Nicola Pratt); *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (2007, Zed Books) and *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press 2000). Her most recent book (co-edited with Deborah al-Najjar) entitled *We are Iraqis: Aesthetics & Politics in a Time of War* (Syracuse University Press) won the 2014 Arab-American book prize for non-fiction. Currently, she is working on a research project about the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Professor Al-Ali is a member of the *Feminist Review* Collective and on the advisory board of *Kohl: A Journal of Body and Gender Research*, based in Beirut.

**Nira Yuval-Davis** is a diasporic Israeli Jew, the Director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at the University of East London. She has been the President of the Research Committee 05 (on Racism, Nationalism and Ethnic Relations) of the International Sociological

Association, a founder member of Women Against Fundamentalism and Women In Militarized Conflict Zones. She has acted as a consultant, among others, to UNDP, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Amnesty International and AWID.

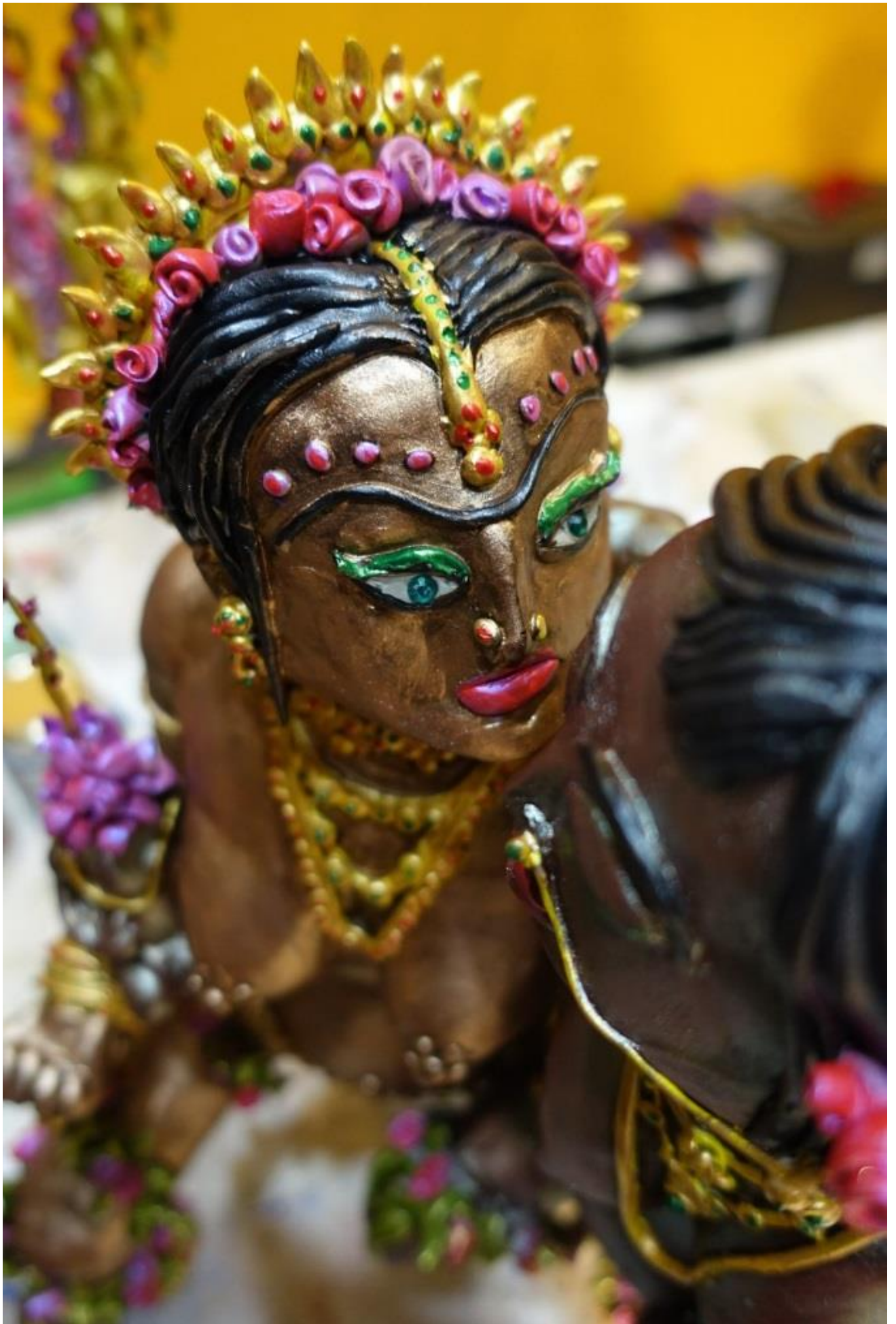
Nira Yuval-Davis has written on theoretical and empirical aspects of intersected gendered nationalisms, racisms, fundamentalisms, citizenships, identities, belonging/s and everyday bordering in Britain & Europe, Israel and other Settler Societies. Among her books are *Woman-Nation-State*, 1989, *Racialized Boundaries*, 1992, *Refusing Holy Orders* 1992, *Unsettling Settler Societies*, 1995, *Gender and Nation*, 1997, *The Warmomg Signs of Fundamentalism* 2004, *The Politics of Belonging*, 2011, *Women Against Fundamentalism*, 2014 and *Bordering (Forthcoming)*. Her works have been translated into more than ten languages.

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# Why Fundamentalism?

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## Abstract

*This article is intended to generate a discussion about religious fundamentalism. We begin by proposing a definition and arguing for the value of 'fundamentalism' as an analytical category that allows the understanding of common political discourses, interventions and practices across different religions and diverse contexts. We then delineate key components of fundamentalist movements, looking in particular at the construction of a neo-patriarchal political order as a key objective.*

*We then move to trying to understand why fundamentalism has emerged at this particular point in time. We argue that the weakening of a commitment to a secular politics has occurred through the convergence of several related factors. Firstly we see the crisis of both 'progressive' versions of nationalism as well as of the political Left (locally and internationally) as having provided a major opportunity for religious fundamentalism, which it has adeptly occupied. Secondly fundamentalists have interpolated the massively disruptive social changes caused by neoliberal globalisation taking place particularly but not exclusively in the developing world. Thirdly we see intellectual understanding of the fundamentalist threat to human rights and women's rights in particular has been significantly impeded by the rise of postmodernism and postcolonialism where the romanticisation of essentialised 'other-identity' claims has prevented the development of a critique of the fundamentalist agenda.*

*Keywords: Fundamentalism, Feminism, Secularism, Postcolonialism, Neoliberalism*

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## **Introduction**

In the state of Borno in North-Eastern Nigeria, an internally displaced person offered the following harrowing account of what took place when members of the group Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati wal Jihad (JAS), commonly known as Boko Haram, arrived at their village:

In the town of Damaskin Bama LGA...all school age girls and boys were reportedly placed in a large compound where they received systematic and intensive religious instruction. Initially, parents were pleased that their children were being taught the Quran, but in December 2015, 300 children disappeared from the compound. Furthermore, though interviews with children who had received religious instruction demonstrated a continuity in the subject matter taught by previous Quranic teachers, there was one important difference: JAS's instruction included injunctions to use violence against anyone opposing the teachings that they received, including their own parents (Ladbury, S et al 2016:5).

In Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, UK in September 2016 a wedding ceremony took place: an interfaith marriage, between a Sikh bride and non-Sikh groom at the Warwick and Leamington Gurdwara. However the event was severely disrupted when 55 members of Sikh Youth UK arrived to stage a protest in opposition to actions of the Gurdwara committee who had allowed this ceremony to take place. As the protestors were wearing Sikh kirpans, a ceremonial dagger worn traditionally by Sikhs, the police were called and the protesters removed. According to Shamsheer Singh, a member of the Sikh Youth group which organised the protest, their objection was not against inter-faith marriage as such, but the protestors 'justifiably objected to an interfaith marriage that was to be carried out as a Sikh religious ceremony.' He situated the protest in a context of 'more and more young people are becoming interested in the true interpretation of what it means to be Sikh...The elder generation arrived [in the UK] and fitted

their faith round the need to assimilate, survive and to get work...Now younger people want to reclaim Sikhism as a deeply spiritual peaceful and encompassing religion and this is why we are seeing these protests.' (Guardian, 12/11/16).

These are two events which have taken place in two entirely different contexts, in different countries, involving two entirely separate religions, involving people with no connection to each other. However the central point we want to make in this piece is that both of these events are significant signs of the times we are living in. Without arguing for any sort of moral equivalence between these two situations described, what connects these instances is the way they manifest the resurgent power of religious fundamentalism. Why is it that British Sikhs involved in protests like the one in Leamington are so preoccupied with interfaith marriages? Journalist Herpreet Kaur Grewal has expressed concern that in these protests the focus is always on Sikh girls marrying out while there is relative silence and inaction on caste discrimination and female foeticide (Independent 14/9/2016). Sukhwant Dhaliwal has noted similarly that 'throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the prohibition on mixed relationships manifested itself in regular reprisals between Sikh and Muslim gangs for targeting 'their' women. The question is, why has this resurfaced now?' (Dhaliwal, 2016). This central issue is the focus of this discussion.

While the Islamic fundamentalism that characterises the first account is the most visible, our argument is that this is part of a development taking place within all major world religions. While much of the condemnation that takes place around this focuses on this question of violence, it is crucial to see fundamentalism as about more than violence, even if violence remains one of its most defining qualities. It is also important to see that the violence which characterises different forms of religious fundamentalism does not come out of the blue, but emerges over years as a consequence of the societal normalisation of fundamentalist thinking and teaching. Fundamentalism develops as process, and this sows the seeds of

what develops into horrific events such as those in Nigeria (Ladbury, S et al 2016). While religious fundamentalism feeds off localised problems and grievances, we want to argue here that religious fundamentalist movements are, in the words of the Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie-Lucas 'political movements of the extreme right, which, in a context of globalization, e.g. forceful international economic exploitation and free-for-all capitalism, manipulate religion, culture, or ethnicity, in order to achieve their political aims' (Helie-Lucas, 2004). In some instances this influence accumulates as fundamentalists have taken over the process of offering social support to working class and poor communities, particularly in a context of structural adjustment programmes and state withdrawal from social provision.<sup>1</sup> Helie-Lucas describes similarly the rise of Islamist politics in the impoverished suburbs of French cities, noting that:

the big strength of the fundamentalist far-right is that they understood very early that the state abandonment of its duties towards specific categories of citizens, and the decline of the old Communist Parties' social activities in working-class areas of big cities, created a space for them, whether in [North Africa] or in Europe. "Political Islam" is a popular, and populist, movement. This...has been the fertile ground on which young men, and now young women too, become "radicalised", thanks to the social work done by the Muslim far-right: the youth camps and sports clubs; the after-school tutoring; the sermons; the free distribution of clothing (including, of course, distributing so-called "Islamic dress" in the process); and books (including, of course, fundamentalist literature); the material help brought to homes where the bread winner just died; etc. (Helie-Lucas, 2015)

As was argued in the first issue of *Feminist Dissent*, this is all part and parcel of the process whereby 'fundamentalism has spread its tentacles even deeper into our social and political lives and spaces' across the globe (Varma, Dhaliwal, and Nagarajan 2016: 4). Without even attempting an exhaustive list of the contemporary conquest of political power by religious



fundamentalists it is crucial to refer to Bhariyata Janata Party (BJP) leader Narendra Modi, now India's Prime Minister. For many years the questions about his involvement in massacres of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 (Human Rights Watch 2002) led to him being treated as a pariah by western governments. However as his regime now throws the India's doors open to global capital, these questions alongside his ongoing involvement with the far-right, Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), whose policies openly admire European Nazism's project of 'racial purification' (Bhatt, 2001), have become much less of a problem. In the US it is no secret that Evangelical Christians have played a significant role in the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. Trump himself is not an evangelical and anyone listening to the impious racist and misogynist demagoguery during his campaign might have considered this might be off-putting to socially conservative religious people. However as Mugambe Jouet (2016) has argued, the authoritarian black-and-white message, a message which characterises the form of religious fundamentalist ideology everywhere, is deeply appealing to evangelical fundamentalists in a country in which 42% of the population consider themselves 'creationists' (Jouet, 2016). It is also crucial to note that while Trump is not religious, his Vice President Mike Pence has been a consistent supporter of 'America First militarism, the criminalising of abortion and state-sponsored conversion therapy for LGBT people' (Scahill, 2016). These same evangelical Christian movements are also now developing in Central and South America, where fundamentalists are making substantial inroads both within and without the Catholic Church (Allen, 2016). While the contexts are diverse, there is no mistaking the pervasive and powerful fundamentalist resurgence taking place across the globe.

When we think about this it is also crucial to ask where are the progressive and secular forces in the face of this tide of reactionary mobilisation. What has happened to the project of secular, social and in particular women's emancipation? Why is it that leading feminist and

socialist writers and intellectuals are so silent, so confused, or even supportive of the forces behind the fundamentalist grab for power? We also feel it is important to ask why it is that we see – in the face of all the evidence of what religious fundamentalists stand for and the means by which they aim to achieve their agenda – a continued apologetics within leftist, feminist and human rights circles for religious fundamentalists? For many on the left there is a reluctance to accept the legitimacy of the term ‘fundamentalism’ as a way of understanding contemporary politics, reflected for example in the way the actions of Islamist groups in the UK are explained away as a reaction to the ‘Islamaphobia’ of the state. The language of UK government policy is similarly nervous about the term fundamentalism and has hung their entire policy on the strangely ambiguous term ‘radicalisation’. Counter-terrorism experts on the other hand focus on the distinction between ‘violent’ versus ‘non-violent extremism’. If we have no language to talk about this issue, then we have no basis for analysis or action, and it is this silence that we hope to challenge in this discussion. Our argument is structured into two parts. We begin by seeking to define the category of ‘religious fundamentalism’ and argue for its centrality as a means of understanding the politics of the present. We then ask ‘why now?’ Why is it now when it had been assumed by so many for so long that religion globally was a force in terminal decline in the face of the onward march of modernity, that we are now seeing this global fundamentalist conquest of power? We conclude by offering some perspectives for the future.

### **What is Fundamentalism?**

‘God Almighty created men and women different, with differing needs and roles [and] scripture declares that God has called the Father to be the spiritual leader in his family...The hope of America today is strong Christian families. Determine to make your family a fortress of spiritual and moral strength against the shifting tides of moral change’

Reverend Jerry Falwell (in Marty & Appleby: 1993:131)

‘Humanity today is living in a large brothel! One has only today to glance at its press, films, fashion shows, beauty contests, wine bars and broadcasting stations! Or observe the mad lust for naked flesh, provocative postures, and sick suggestive statements in literature, the arts and mass media!’

Sayid Qutb (in Ruthven, 2007:26)

In 1910 Lyman and Milton Stewart, after having made their fortune in oil, funded the production of a book entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth* and the conservative editors who put the book together presented a series of arguments about the critical importance of a return to Biblical fundamentals’. This was done through an assertion of the literal truth of the Bible, at the same time attacking Socialism, Modernism, Darwinian evolution, and the threat these posed to ‘family life’ (Various authors, 1910). The term ‘religious fundamentalism’ was born. In her book *The Battle for God* (2001) Karen Armstrong begins by asking whether a term originally developed within North American Protestantism in the early 20th century can be used to characterise the wide range of movements we now see within different faith and national contexts. Bruce Lawrence has argued in his 1987 book *Defenders of God: the Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* that while these movements exist within Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions, they can be collectively characterised as ‘fundamentalist’ on the basis of their common rejection of the legacy of Enlightenment reason and a corresponding belief in the ‘morally corrosive’ impact of modernity. He argues that the Enlightenment and modernity, rather than being a specifically Christian or Western experience, have impacted on Jews and Judaism within Europe and on Islam through the colonisation of Asia, Africa and the Middle East (Lawrence, 1987).

Chetan Bhatt in his study of two of the twentieth century’s classic fundamentalist movements within Hinduism and Islam – Hindutva and the Jamaat e Islami – has developed this argument further stating that it is

crucial 'not to separate historically the impact of modernity outside the West with the identified and claimed features of modernity in the West, but to consider both as a persisting and discontinuous set of global transformations' (1997:82). He takes the claim that Islam or Hinduism were 'pure formations, hermetically sealed from contamination from the West' as an instance of this interconnectedness, noting this claim is one made both by fundamentalists as well as by 'orientalist' conceptions of Western superiority. Bhatt argues that the very way these conceptions act as mirror images of each other – where an identical claim signifies positively in one conception but as sign of inferiority and backwardness in the latter - points to the way religious fundamentalism is itself a product of modernity (1997:79). Bhatt notes that while Hindutva and the Jamaat e Islami emerged from different faith traditions, both developed in India in the first half of the twentieth century and appealed in very similar ways to the 'fundamental truths' of the Vedas or the Qu'ran, rejecting secularism as 'Western'. Yet these claims have been constructed entirely through the thoroughly modern conceptions of 'race' and Nation. In 1938 Madhav Golwalker (1906-1973), second Supreme Leader of Hindutva paramilitary group the Rashtriya Swayanasevek Sangh (RSS), published a document entitled '*We, or our Nationhood defined*'. In remarkably similar terms to German National Socialism of which he was a great admirer, Golwalker proclaimed 'We will not seek to prove this axiomatic truth, that the Race is the body of the Nation, and that with its fall, the Nation ceases to exist' (in Bhatt, 1997:204). This combination of the ancient Vedic truths with a fascination with Nazism, of a 'theocratic concept of politics and civil society' with a 'racial concept of the nation' (Bhatt, 1997:205) is deeply illustrative of way religious fundamentalism occupies this curious double relationship with modernity; at once entirely a product of it, but seeking to reject it, all at the same time. While the context of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth* was again different, all these developments are illustrations of what Malise Ruthven calls 'family resemblances' between the forms of religious

fundamentalism (Ruthven, 2007:6). In understanding the essentially reactionary fundamentalist project and the way it arises out of religion, it is equally important to understand the way this is distinct from and often highly destructive of more mainstream historic forms of religious practice and belief, and we offer many instances of the way this happens in this discussion.

What do fundamentalist movements mean when they talk of the need to return to 'fundamental truths'? It is crucial to grasp that this is not about a return to a 'lost tradition' in a straightforward sense, not least because religious traditions historically are localised and very heterogeneous. As Yuval-Davis and Saghal have noted 'there is no such thing as 'strict adherence to the text' [as] all great religious scriptures include internal contradictions' (1992:4). It is for this reason that religious fundamentalists construct 'tradition' in a way that is highly selective, at the same time as dogmatically insisting that their reconstructions of text are 'sacred' and so unable to be questioned. The accounts offered are deeply reductive and simplistic, and often patently absurd - Bhatt offers the example of Hindu nationalists who demand 'the restoration of an ancient Hindu empire that never actually existed' (1987:91) - however the power these groups exercise through this is very real. A crucial feature of fundamentalism's essential authoritarianism lies in the way it makes a claim for the *absolute truth* of these highly selective religious discourses. In her outstanding account of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism *Your Fatwa Is Not Welcome Here* (2011), Karima Bennoune argues for the importance of the category of 'religious fundamentalism' precisely because of its capacity to describe a series of related developments 'across religious boundaries to contemporary movements within all the world's great religious traditions – not just Islam, but also Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism'. In similar terms to Bhatt, she characterises fundamentalist doctrine as operating by relentlessly denying 'the possibility of interpretation and reinterpretation even while its adherents engage in both' (2011:14-15).

In spite of the way fundamentalist movements claim to be recovering timeless sacred truths, both their ideology and methods are not atavistic, as demonstrated by the way religious dogma is promoted alongside an enthusiastic adoption of modern technologies in industry, communication or destructive weaponry. In 1989 Khurshid Ahmed of the Jammāt-i-Islāmi urged the 18<sup>th</sup> Islamic Foreign Minister's conference in Riyadh to 'project the true image of Islam through the latest technology available' (Bhatt, 1997:117). Shamsheer Singh, one of the organisers of the 2016 Sikh protest in Leamington talks of a generation seeking a 'deeper spiritual essence of Sikhism', which one might think that to be concerned with a backward looking or other worldly mysticism. But as Sukhwant Dhaliwal has noted, the basis of the protest involved the group filming their actions and then sharing these on social media, using this material 'to publicly shame families already pushing against deeply conservative proscriptions. The film footage shows protestors referring to interfaith marriage...as 'messed up', stating that 'Leamington is finished when we've got elders saying it's alright to marry white people, black people'. (Dhaliwal, 2016). This again illustrates the way fundamentalists seek to rewrite the diverse and contested nature of particular religious traditions and practice, presenting their 'single version of collective identity as the only true, authentic and valid one, [using this] to impose their power and authority over 'their' constituency' (Imam, Morgan & Yuval-Davis, 2004: x).

In her discussion of Sikh fundamentalism Dhaliwal refers to the many lectures of Jagraj Singh on YouTube, where he asserts that 'relationships or dating are not part of Sikhi, marriage is part of Sikhi' (Dhaliwal, 2016); relationships outside marriage are thus presented as acts of uncontrolled lust, as opposed to 'authentic' marriages between two Sikhs. These sorts of arguments point to a central and defining feature of religious fundamentalism; the attempt to control women's bodies and sexuality within a patriarchal family order. Marieme Helie-Lucas argues that while there are:

many forms and varieties of fundamentalism...one key element of their politics is the control of women. This is true of all religious fundamentalisms: we can see it with the Christian Right in the US promoting their views of 'morality' by assassinating medical personnel who perform abortions; it is true of Muslim Fundamentalists promoting gender apartheid in Iran, Sudan, Algeria, and Afghanistan; it is true of the Hindu BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and RSS promoting sati (Lucas 2015).

Patricia Madigan in her study of Fundamentalism within Islam and Catholicism argues that while 'many studies of 'fundamentalism' have rightly diagnosed it as a reactive movement against the forces of modernity, few have recognised its essentially patriarchal character' (2011:2). Madigan argues for an understanding of the 'intrinsically patriarchal character of fundamentalism' in which 'by selectively retrieving doctrines, beliefs and practices' from the past seeks 'to shape a religious identity that will then become the basis of a recreated 'neo-patriarchal' social and political order' (2011:21). Both the quotes from Jerry Falwell and Sayid Qutb at the beginning of this section demonstrate the way it is the sexualised female body that acts as the central signifier of the morally debased and corrupt nature of modernity, and hence a central feature of religious fundamentalism lies in the assertion of control over women's sexual and reproductive potential: 'Woman, as an embodiment of sexuality, is to be owned and jealously controlled' (Madigan, 2011:52). Alongside this fundamentalist movements assert rigid boundaries between male and female behaviour in all areas through control of women's dress and public behaviour while promoting amongst men a culture of 'exaggerated masculinism, manifested by rituals of male bonding and by highlighting marks of male gender' (Madigan, 2011:52). It follows from this that fundamentalist movements are universally homophobic and hostile to LGBT sexuality and movements, as this is seen to transgress the rigid gender distinctions they obsessively police as part of their belief in a religiously

sanctified neo-patriarchalism. Examples of this abound but one of recent note was Jerusalem's Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar who described LGBT people as an 'abomination cult', claiming that the Torah obligates them to be 'put to death' (Jerusalem online 17/11/16).

We have already noted the distinction that must be made between religious fundamentalism and traditional forms of conservative religious piety. While traditional conservative religious values remain problematic from a gender perspective, they have been also protective of certain traditional spaces for women as well as being capable of reform and change. The kidnapping of children by JAS/Boko Haram described at the start of this piece is justified 'in the name of Islam'; however the religious sanctification of kidnap, murder, rape and parricide was never proclaimed within traditional religious conservatism. The Iranian Koranic scholar and writer Navid Kermani has described the Saudi sponsorship of the puritanical ideology of Wahhabism that is behind so much contemporary Islamist politics as a travesty of the 'multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural Orient':

Sponsored with billions from the oil industry [this is] a school of thought that has been promoted for decades in mosques, in books and on television that declares all people from all other religions heretics, and reviles, terrorises, disparages and insults them...That such a religious fascism even became conceivable, that IS finds so many fighters and even more sympathisers... - that is not the beginning, but rather the end point of a long decline...of religious thought (2015:80-81)

Wahhabism is just one instance of the ways fundamentalist movements assert their power through disciplining, repudiating and expelling those more tolerant, pluralist and hybrid elements within their own religious tradition, thereby seeking to 'purify' it. It is for this reason that religious fundamentalists are often engaged in destroying traditional forms of religious practice and culture. In Mali, a country with syncretic religious and musical traditions developed over centuries, it is now the case that, since a



fundamentalist takeover, many of its most popular musicians are unable to perform in public. Eyadou Ag Leche of the group *Tinariwen* has described a situation where, since the Islamists took power in the north of their country, ‘young people have been stopped from listening to music and families have had their televisions smashed for watching music shows, but that music was still being played underground’ (Guardian, 15/1/2013). The introduction of blasphemy laws has been another way religious fundamentalists have influenced state policy as a means of projecting their own sectarian view of religion and persecuting religious minorities that have lived alongside religious majorities for centuries. The Asia Bibi case in Pakistan in 2009 is an example of this, where blasphemy laws were used to arrest and put on trial a young Christian farm worker following a village argument in which she was alleged to have made comments criticising the prophet Mohammed. While the evidence presented against her in the legal case was extremely weak, fundamentalist mobilisations around her trial created an atmosphere in which public officials dared not to throw the case out, and in 2010 a Pakistani court sentenced her to death. Two government ministers who took a stance against the absence of a fair trial and the injustice of the sentence - the Governor of Punjab Salmaan Taseer and Minority Affairs minister Shahbaz Bhatti – were subsequently assassinated by fundamentalists. Asia Bibi herself has remained in prison for the last 6 years as the case continues to be heard (Guardian 11/10/2016).



<http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/asia-bibis-unfair-trial/>

Fundamentalist violence against other religions other versions of the same religion are another part of the way fundamentalists seek to ‘purify’ religion, in the process destroying syncretic religious traditions that have developed over centuries by imposing fundamentalist versions of religion that are often entirely foreign. Marieme Helie-Lucas has noted this in relation to the so-called Islamic practice of Female Genital Mutilation. This was ‘historically limited to the sphere of influence of Ancient Egypt’, but was exported by fundamentalists to Sri Lanka, to Tunisia, where it was ‘previously unheard of’ and thence into ‘the Muslim enclave of Sanzak in Serbia’ (Helie-Lucas, 2015).

Fundamentalism is thus a modern political movement that develops out of religion, using it to gain or consolidate power, but which also represents a breach from many historic and mainstream forms of religion. It is found in all major religions throughout the world, sometimes holding state power, sometimes in opposition to it — and sometimes working within the confines of a secular state to control minority communities. Fundamentalism is not the same as religious observance, which must be seen a matter of individual choice, and it is crucial to understand the way fundamentalists gain power by attacking those universalist and pluralist conceptions of faith which also exist in all major religions. As we have

argued, control of women's minds and bodies is at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda and this is done through presenting them as upholders of the supposedly unchanging morals and traditions of the whole community. Women who refuse this role may risk being demonised, outcast from their community, subjected to physical violence or even killed. This paradigm also promotes authoritarian belief centring on rigidly defined gender roles where extreme rewards and punishments are meted out; rapture or houris in Paradise for the faithful or hellfire for transgressors and dissidents. These notions are not regarded as metaphors but as literal descriptions of the world, predictions of soon-to-happen events. But the faithful are enjoined to create an earthly utopia as well. In this sense we need to understand the rise of fundamentalist movements in the context of the collapse of secular utopias, particularly communism and the progressive nationalist movements that arose in the era of decolonisation.

### **Why Fundamentalism Now?**

'We are that generation that has plucked the fruits of Reason's pretensions to sovereignty...Reason idolises man; forgetfulness of God is the root of all social evil'

Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger (in Ruthven, 1994)

In a recent discussion of the changing relationship between religion and politics the writer and academic Gilbert Achcar noted that as a young man growing up in Beirut in the 1960s he was 'fully convinced that the progress of science and education would wipe out religion in the twenty first century'. Reflecting back on this from the present he describes as 'a sign of ideological regression of historic proportions', the fact that one of the freedoms 'most wanting and most threatened in the major parts of the world today is the actually the freedom *not* to worship any deity'. (2013:10-11). Indeed Achcar's youthfully optimistic belief about the decline of religion was not unusual, but was widespread across the political spectrum - including amongst religious groupings themselves, many of which

reflected throughout the twentieth century on the nature of their contemporary role in the face of the onward march of reason and scientific rationality. In 1917 the classical sociologist Max Weber developed the term 'disenchantment' to describe the way modern industrialism, the logical methods of science and the depersonalised relationships fuelled by growing bureaucratisation of society had permanently destroyed the basis of a sense of the 'sacred' which had once permeated everyday life (Weber, 2005). However it is important to note that rather than celebrating this as a triumph of rational modernity, Weber noted that the very success of science in demonstrating that 'one can, in principle, master all things by calculation' (2005:322) created a concurrent yearning for meaning and purpose beyond rationality. Is it the case then, as we now see the resurgence of fundamentalist movements, that we are seeing a kind of 'disenchantment in reverse'? This is a key question that we need to address if we are to understand the rise of fundamentalism at this particular moment in history. Gilles Kepel in his book on the re-emergence of religious fundamentalism argued that within the thinking of many leading religious thinkers, that around the mid-1970s:

. . . a new religious approach took shape, aimed no longer at adapting to secular values but by recovering a sacred foundation for the organization of society, by changing society if necessary. Expressed in a multitude of ways, this approach advocated moving on from a modernism that had failed, attributing its setbacks and dead ends to separation from God. The theme was no longer *aggornimento* [accommodation] but a second evangelization of Europe; the aim was no longer to modernize Islam but to 'Islamize modernity'. (Kepel, 2004: 2)

Kepel argued that a key feature of these arguments was the sense of 'crisis' in society characterised as a consequence of the godless nature of modernity. The Catholic archbishop of Paris Jean-Marie Lustiger captures this in the quote above, expressing the view that the major cause of the

social ills and moral degradation of society is the setting free of reason from faith. However for religious fundamentalist the solution to this is not a return to pre-modernity and in this sense they are not interested so much in 're-enchanting' the world; they are rather 'anti-modernist forms of modernity' (Singh & Cowden, 2011) that have an affinity with white supremacist forms of fascism and extreme forms of ethnic nationalism. While they often emerge in relation to specific and localised grievances, their ascendancy needs to be understood against the backdrop of two much wider historical processes. The first of these is the power vacuum created through the decline and collapse of secular visions of a better world, be those socialist, communist or nationalist. Secondly they represent a response and reaction to one of the most significant changes within capitalist modernity itself which is caused by the incorporation of women into the global labour market.

*Fundamentalism and the 'end of history'*

When it came to religion, the revolutions in Russia and China in the early and mid twentieth century were based on a conception of communism which, following Marx's work, saw itself as essentially an extension and development of the ideas of the Enlightenment. In 1905 Lenin, while insisting on the right to religious belief as a private affair, equally wrote of the need to 'translate and widely disseminate the literature of the eighteenth-century French Enlighteners and atheists', arguing that communists must always 'preach the scientific world-outlook' (1981:10-11). Mao Zedong was more hostile still to religion, seeing this as a central plank of the oppressive social order in China. Mao wrote of the four authorities of 'political, family, religious and masculine' power which acted as 'the embodiment of the whole feudal-patriarchal ideology and system, and are the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants.' (Selected Works, 1927). This approach was reflected not just in the development of powerful mass based Communist Parties, but also the ideas of Nasserism in Turkey, and the Ba'th and Arab socialism in the Middle East.

Sami Zubaida has argued that in this period that 'religion played, for the most part, a subordinate role in the definition of identities and conflicts, though it may have been a more potent factor at a popular level' (2015). It is also important to note that while the leaders of these movements were politically secular in their approach, neither did they oppose religious identities as such. As Partha Chatterjee has noted, many of nationalist movements sought to harness or control religion, presenting it as a kind of cultural essence of 'the people' and in this way allowing it to act as both an alternative to, but also mimicry of, a western model of nationalism (Chatterjee, 1993).

It is also important to note that while the nationalist and anticolonial movements in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia which emerged in the middle decades of the twentieth century were not necessarily or exclusively anti-religious, it is crucial to note that these anti-colonial struggles were conceived by their participants as emancipatory struggles. This is significant when it comes to understanding women's demands both within and in the aftermath of anti-colonial struggles. Indian women fought against the Raj but also fought local government and state elections throughout the 1920s-30s, and with the achievement of independence there was universal suffrage for the first time. The key focus of women's political organisation at this time concerned the reform of personal laws; that is laws governing issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, rights of widows and guardianship. While many important reforms were won through this activism, the implementation of these legal changes was constructed on a communal basis, hence the Hindu Code Bills passed in the 1950s meant that the Hindu majority were reformed, while for other religious groups this same process did not take place. This had the effect of reinforcing religious differences in a key area of law affecting women and as secular definitions of citizenship have weakened, this has been a key terrain in which fundamentalist groups have been able to argue for the reinforcement of the legal basis of religious distinctions.

Sami Zubaida has argued that with 'the collapse of Nasirism after the 1967 war with Israel and the evolution of the Ba'th in power into family dynasties in Iraq and Syria, as well as the weakening of the left, opened the field to ethnic and religious politics in the region. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 gave a powerful impetus to this sacralisation of politics' (2015). The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which had given significant economic support to a range of secular regimes in different parts of the world, was hugely significant in this process. Francis Fukayama proclaimed the 'end of history' as a wave of profoundly destabilizing economic globalization, neo-liberal economic policies and Structural Adjustment Programmes promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Bank swept the developing world (Westra, 2009). The combination of the collapse of communism and the destructive impact of globalisation was significant in developing world not just because of the collapse of a secular ideal, but also because for developing countries it massively reduced the capacity of national governments to manoeuvre between the two superpowers. It was this as much as anything that made it so much easier for the WTO, IMF and World Bank to gain so much control in this area.

Fundamentalists have been able to position themselves as the beneficiaries of the anger, disillusionment and 'anomie' caused by this, and part of the traction fundamentalism gained as a popular movement lies in the way it represents a protest against both 'Western ideas', which includes the imposition of neo-liberalism. Gilbert Achcar has argued that neo-liberal deregulation has brought about 'anomisation' in the developing world; an overwhelming level of change which has caused a 'retrenchment to basic identity markers' (Achcar, 2009) and fundamentalist movements have again positioned themselves to benefit from this. Madigan has made a similar point when she notes that in a world of constant change, fundamentalist religion satisfies a desire 'for moral certitude and belonging' (2011:42). It was in this way that political ideology has come to be re-shaped around

antagonistic cultural and civilizational perspectives – the ‘atheist West’ against the ‘true faith’ in Islamist and Hindutva forms of fundamentalism. This same process was mirrored within the West itself, exemplified by the huge influence of Samuel Huntington’s writings on ‘The Clash of Civilisations’ (1992). This sense that conflict was now about culture and ‘values’ was only reinforced following 9/11, the disastrous war of aggression against Iraq by US and UK and the subsequent ‘war on terror’.

As the politics of the Left were substantially weakened by neoliberal globalisation in the 1990s and the neo-conservative ‘Project for A New American Century’ was busily shaping George Bush’s foreign policy, western academia fell into the fervent embrace of postmodernist and postcolonial repudiations of the Enlightenment. As a body of work Postcolonialism was inspired by Edward Said’s hugely influential ‘Orientalism’, in which the knowledges by which the ‘West’ understood the ‘Orient’ were conceptualised as ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (1990:3). In place of Mao’s attack on the feudal-capitalist-patriarchal-religious social order, post-colonial theory railed against its ‘four thick ropes’ of the modernist-rational-individual-secularist order and the resulting silencing of the subaltern subject. Secularism and universalism and other forms of ‘western imposed’ politics were denounced in seminar rooms across the Western academy<sup>2</sup>. One of the most influential critics of Enlightenment reason was Michel Foucault, and despite his huge popularity and influence, the problems with where this took him politically was demonstrated in a series of trips he undertook to Iran on the verge of the Khomeini’s Islamic revolution in 1979. Writing in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1978 Foucault waxed eloquent about the ‘political spirituality’ of ‘the movement that aims to give a permanent role in political life to the traditional structures of Islamic society’ (Foucault, 1978). One can only say that it was fortunate for him that he visited prior to rather than after Khomeini’s murderous institutionalisation of those ‘traditional structures’. But rather than an isolated piece of poor judgement, this incident was



entirely of a piece with the way postmodernism and postcolonialism opened the gates to a wave of academic work by academics based in the West in which essentialised 'other-identity' claims were revered<sup>3</sup>.

Saba Mahmood's 2004 book *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* on the Islamist women's movements in Egypt was emblematic of this shift. Mahmood began the book describing her journey from a feminist politics of the 'secular-left' to her 'realisation' that as 'the language of Islam has come to apprehend the aspirations of so many people around the Muslim world... [We] can no longer arrogantly assume that secular forms of life...necessarily exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world' (2004: xi). Judith Butler and Foucault offered her the theoretical materials for an argument in which Islamist women's movements were uncritically idealised. Mahmood wrote of the way in which the 'rationalist, self-authorising, transcendental subject presupposed by Enlightenment thought in general' (2004:13) had prevented her from realising that the women who joined Islamist movements were not acting out of a spirit of 'deplorable passivity and docility' but were rather exercising 'a form of agency', and that it would be wrong to 'treat as natural and inimitable only those desires that ensure the emergence of feminist politics' (2004:15). Indeed there was no doubt that these were women were exercising political agency, but to what end? What is entirely absent throughout this book was any discussion of the nature of the Islamist political agenda and the impact of these 'forms of agency' had in the wider polity. What were the values which informed this agency and what practices within the politics of gender resulted from that? Our objection is not to religious forms of agency as such, but surely the key question concerns the kind of political project being promoted here. Indeed as other commentators less entranced with Islamic feminism have noted, these political movements developed in close parallel with the highly patriarchal Islamist groupings run by men who had brought Wahhabi fundamentalism

to Egypt from the Gulf states where they had been working (Madigan, 2011:45).

Mahmood's book additionally fails to even consider the impact of the 'politics of piety' on secular feminism in Egypt. Writing of parallel developments within Pakistani feminism Afiya Sherbano Zia noted the way Islamic feminists there gained credibility by claiming to be 'reinterpreting religious texts in a modern, indigenous, culturally relevant way rather than an 'imposed' western feminist discourse (2009:38). However the result of this was that:

...by accommodating the faith-based approach that attempted to look for 'moderate' alternatives within Islam and insisting on situating the debate on the women's question within Islamic tradition and history, such reclamation projects squeezed out and delegitimised the secular feminist approach to redefine women's rights outside the religious framework' (2009:35)

Islamic feminist discourse based its credibility on the claim that it was 'empowering' women within religious institutions. While they may well have achieved this objective, the result was a form of politics which rejected any 'political confrontation with men, money, mullahs or the military state' (2009:44). The terrain on which central questions of women's rights and equality were being fought had effectively been theocratized with secular voices effectively de-legitimised. The romance of western based academics like Saba Mahmood with 'Islamic tradition' thus played a vital role in the eclipse of secular feminism, further entrenching fundamentalist religious identity and discourse, and failing to grasp what Bhatt has described as:

. . . the concealment of political interests, groups and parties through discourses of authenticity, discrimination and victimhood which normalise what are otherwise quite mendacious political ambitions. (2006: 102)

*The Family, Fundamentalism and the global labour market*

Fundamentalism promises to restore the family, to put the nation on course that aligns it with a divine purpose, and to establish a social order in which life can be lived morally, meaningfully and in accord with divine will.

Helen Hardacre (in Madigan, 2011:39)



Evangelical Demonstration in Columbia, 2016.

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-37560320>

When discussing the emergence of religious fundamentalism above we noted an obsessive focus on questions of ‘honour’ and ‘personal morality’ with regard to women, demonstrating the way women’s deportment, dress and behaviour had become in effect a communal symbol which needed to be rigidly policed. In this section we want to consider why this terrain of establishing of moral order around ‘the family’ is so important to fundamentalist movements. This discussion builds on the points we have already made about the significance of neoliberal economics in destroying forms of life which existed in a state of relative stability for generations through the imposition of new capitalist social relations. In research looking at the impact of this for women in developing countries undertaken by the International Labour Organisation, Sher Verick has noted that this kind of economic development:

...has involved two related transitions: the movement of workers from agriculture to manufacturing (and more recently services) and the migration of people from rural to urban areas. These transitions were associated with rising levels of education, declining fertility rates, and shifts in other socio-economic drivers of labour force participation, with specific implications for the role of women, especially in the labour market. Female labour supply is, therefore, both a driver and an outcome of development (Verick, 2014).

As neoliberal globalisation has massively expanded the amount of workers involved in production for the global market, proletarianisation of traditional peasantries has taken place on a huge scale across the developing world. As Verick notes, this is accompanied by increasing involvement of women in wage labour outside the home. While this pattern varies hugely across different regions, we want to argue that these general trends are crucial for understanding the terrain on which fundamentalist movements are operating, the emotional resonance their arguments have, as well as their pre-occupation with circumscribing women's emergent personal freedoms. The movement from the country to the city described in the report above one is of profound and hugely destabilising social change. While large numbers of women previously undertook wage labour within the home, as they are drawn into the global labour market in urban settings the forms of power exercised in traditional rural patriarchal family structures are changed. Social constraints weaken in the new setting, and this enables women to work outside the home and thereby gain access to wages and higher levels of personal finances. As both women and men leave the home to work for wages, the nature of the difference between male and female roles is diminished and opportunities for women to gain greater autonomy emerge. While men in the family may desire their female partners to work in order to increase family income and opportunities for their children, they also lose the traditional forms of power they previously possessed through that process.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentalists interpolate these

experiences of change and loss through their call for a return to a divinely sanctioned moral order in which men have power and authority in the home. Helen Hardacre has characterised the fundamentalist focus on gender with the family at the centre as the basis of the fundamentalist programme of 'radical patriarchy' (in Madigan, 48-49), but it is crucial to understand the way this operates not just ideologically, but through real relations at the level of class and gender. While the fundamentalist appeal to men is obvious here, it is important to understand, particularly apropos Saba Mahmood's work, the way this also appeals to women. Hardacre notes that the loss of kinship networks is a key part of huge experiences of change experienced, and the loss for women can be greater for women than men. She notes that women are 'powerfully attracted by fundamentalist interpersonal networks that invoke the language of kinship and in which religion itself is portrayed as 'a family'' (in Madigan, 2011:41). While this understanding is valuable, it is important not to invoke the power of fundamentalist religion as inevitable here, as there are different responses which are possible faced with these difficulties. Fundamentalism, unlike trade unionism, socialism or communism, is not concerned with improving working conditions, job security or indeed challenging class relations at any level for these new members of the global dispossessed. Its appeal resides within the poverty of existing structures, where what is required is a 'sacredly ordained' order where men enforce women's subjugation. Daniel Bensaid has been one of few Marxists to grasp that it was the Left's failure to thoroughly understand the changing nature of class relations that gave fundamentalists the opportunity to occupy territory which had once belonged to the Left. As he noted 'the hasty 'farewells to the proletariat' are not just the expression of a risky sociological analysis. They also contribute to a political and moral debacle. On the ruins of class solidarity what flourish are identitarian panics, the herd instinct, myths of origins, sects and tribes' (2015:207). Fundamentalist neo-patriarchy in this sense is the price paid for the absence of a politics of class solidarity.

**Conclusion: Reclaiming Secular Space**

‘My dream is to be able to live in a country where I can say everything in public without people trying to kill me’

Atheist Blogger – Bangladesh (‘Islam’s Non-Believers’ 2016)

What we have sought to delineate in this discussion is the crucial importance of the term ‘religious fundamentalism’ as an analytical category which allows us to link together a series of related developments taking place across and within major world religions. Women in particular are in the firing line when it comes the introduction of these measures as control of women’s minds and bodies are central to the neo-patriarchal order that fundamentalists group seek to construct. We have sought to outline the way fundamentalist movements are entirely a product of modernity and that their appeal is not simply to people’s ignorance or backwardness but rather operates on a concrete material level. This concerns a range of related factors; the destabilising impact of neoliberal globalisation and the destruction of social bonds which results from that, the retrenchment of state based social provision, and the decline of socialist, social democratic and communist political parties who had historically fought for the interests and rights of the working class and poor. Now occupying a significant degree of this terrain, fundamentalists groups and parties have demonstrated their capacity to operate both within the state, as an adjunct to the state, but also in opposition to the state, whether in the form of institutionalised opposition parties and movements, as well as in paramilitary organisations.

In seeking to understand and characterise the conquest of secular space by religious fundamentalism, our intention is not to imply that this is unable to be resisted. Indeed the work of writers like Karima Bennoune (2013) demonstrates the global nature of resistance which is taking place to religious fundamentalism. Despite the enormous growth of the various forms of fundamentalism since the 1980s in particular, it is essential to

envisage and articulate a different life from the non-future offered by neoliberal capitalism on one hand and fundamentalism on the other. The basely punitive nature of fundamentalism puritanism and the hateful violence of its authoritarianism mean that these movements inherently generate resistance. But this is a resistance that has to be built in different ways. At the level of ideas we have argued it is absolutely essential that people pull themselves out of the quagmire of postmodernist cultural relativism that has been so helpful in legitimising fundamentalism and preventing the articulation of that alternative future. But first and foremost this alternative will be built at the directly practical and organisational level, as part of anti-fundamentalist initiatives in support of women's rights, the rights of religious and sexual minorities, as well as the right of people to exit religion altogether.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We want to distinguish here between religious institutions offering support to poor communities as an aspect of charitable work and this same process as part of a concerted strategy used by fundamentalists. Whilst in some cases these activities can be clearly distinguished, in others this can be a difficult line to draw, such as where religious charitable involvement requires adherence to regressive mores which can slide over into fundamentalism. At the same time it is crucial to acknowledge that in many crisis zones in the world, religious institutions do provide goods and services that are much needed, and in the absence of functioning state support, this can be the only thing on offer.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note views on the Left at this time were not uncritically supportive of the Enlightenment. Indeed one of the most important works which sought to address these came from the Frankfurt School marxists Adorno and Horkheimer. Their work 'Dialectic of Enlightenment', originally published in 1944, argues that while 'social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought' (1997:xiii) equally it is wrong to assume that Enlightenment reason would unequivocally and inevitably usher in social progress and emancipation. The rise of Nazi antisemitism is central to their analysis and showed that virulent forms of hatred of 'the other' could co-exist with versions of Reason. They particularly saw the dangers of an omnipotent view of 'science' whose truth came to be seen as entirely disconnected from society. Unfortunately these powerfully insightful understandings of the Enlightenment from the within the Left have been almost entirely passed over within postmodern and postcolonial writings, which have rejected the Enlightenment *tout court*.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed as the work of Afary and Anderson has demonstrated, Foucault himself was challenged on exactly this issue by 'Atoussa H, an Iranian feminist living in France. In a letter published in *Le Novel Observateur* on 6/11/78 she wrote 'I am profoundly upset by the untroubled attitude of French leftists toward the possibility of an 'Islamic government' that might replace the bloody tyranny of the Shah...After twenty five years of silence and oppression, do the Iranian people have no other choice between Savak and religious fanaticism?...Today, unveiled women are often insulted and young men do not hide the fact that, in the regime they wish for, women should behave or else be punished' (in Afary and Anderson, 2010:209). Foucault responded suggesting that Atoussia H's approach was 'intolerable', attacking her for 'merging together all the respects, all the forms, and all the potentialities of Islam within a single expression of contempt, for the sake of rejecting them entirely under the thousand year old reproach of 'fanaticism'' (Afary & Anderson:210). One can only comment how prophetic this exchange was, both in terms of the arrogance of Foucault's refusal to listen to the concerns raised by Atoussia H., which have been entirely vindicated, but also what has happened subsequently in terms of way women criticising Islamic fundamentalism are so frequently dismissed as 'Islamaphobic' (see Bennoune 2013)

<sup>4</sup> The research of Ekeoba et al (2016) offers evidence in the Nigerian context men of men being generally positive about their wives and female partners working outside the home, but only as long as this does not alter power relations in the home.

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# Indigenous and other ways (Denkzettel)

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## Some Contextual Stories

I had a long psychoanalysis when I was a young woman. The relationship was a warm, collaborative inquiry but I did not succumb to the threat that making non-mainstream gender normative relationship choices would affect my long term mental health. I remained a lesbian and felt well.

One afternoon, during this period of therapy and while training as a social worker, I was entertaining myself in the psychoanalytic section of Swiss Cottage library when I came across a book by Marion Kaplan on the history of the Judische Frauenbund (Jewish Women's Society) in early twentieth century Germany. I learned that Anna O, the 'subject' of the famous late nineteenth century case study by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer was, in fact, an extraordinary political activist, Bertha Pappenheim who challenged fundamentalist narratives as they were played out in everyday life within early twentieth century German society, within Jewish society. Bertha Pappenheim and her colleagues led the development of extensive national resources for unmarried mothers and unemployed women.

In 1989, with a colleague, I started The Pink Practice, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer therapy project in the UK. It was a form of activism – to make something available, visible, so people who were LGBTQI could see a therapist secure in the knowledge that only theory would be deconstructed as part of the therapy - not people's sexual or gender identity. Systemic social constructionism was an important theoretical and philosophical ally. It pulled the rug out from under gender normative development theories. We used it to show how power in



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society and in professional relationships is played out through linguistic and institutionalised rules and structures. As community activists, we are ready to support the subversion of dominant narratives if they are not in a person's or a community's best interest. "Good practice" means being in a state of readiness to develop new and transgressive practices if a different kind of talk or action is needed that has yet to be professionally sanctioned.

In this piece of writing, I string together some *Denkzettel*, thought-notes, a term created by Pappenheim. These are episodes, memories, stories I have heard and found. I am interested in not just *what* we know, but *how* we know, and what gets passed on across time, place and generations. And *who* picks this up – because not everyone picks up everything. But there is, for me, this string, a string of pearls and pebbles, grit and thorns, perfectly strung together as if for me, perhaps by me. I don't know. So, I share these *Denkzettel* with you, dear reader, and trust you will know what to do with them in your world.

---

### **Indigenous and other ways (Denkzettel)**

People sometimes think  
that *indigenous*  
refers to being,  
to biology,  
to inherent knowledges,  
and not  
to the more fluid practices  
of becoming,



looking after that  
which is precious  
historical  
vulnerable to eradication.

\* \* \*

Many things come to mind.

Firstly,  
when people ask me what  
being Jewish  
means to me,  
a thousand images,  
a thousand feelings  
flash before my eyes,  
mostly untellable, unsayable, uncommunicable,  
all  
positioning me  
an imagined  
left or right  
of the asker.

In my mind's eye,  
I am holding the small  
square  
black and white photo  
(greyscale actually)  
of Edith Klatchko, my mother's cousin  
and her daughter - Féchen  
aged five  
between her mother and her mother's boyfriend  
all holding hands  
for the photographer  
on a wide,  
wide street  
in Riga.  
1938.

I see the Negev.  
(I have never been there.  
I cannot go).  
And stories of places,  
people,  
sites,  
tribes

and tribalism,  
turning points that made their way into history  
creating narrative foundation stones  
for education  
for survival  
and ways of knowing -  
long since critiqued by me  
and others.  
Many others,  
too numerous to honour in this moment -  
this nanosecond of an unfolding life  
beyond my body -  
or yours...

I see a moment in Swiss Cottage Library  
when, in the psychoanalytic section, my hand reached up  
and took down  
the biography  
of the real "Anna O"  
- Bertha Pappenheim.  
When I realised  
who she was  
who she really was

I sat down on a library bench  
Read till the library shut,  
amazed, shocked  
angry, relieved to realise that  
Anna O  
the famous case study  
was a work of fiction -  
that the description of her  
said more  
about the describers  
than she who was  
being described.  
Storytellers, biographers for theory  
resembling nothing  
of the truth of a life lived  
ethically  
proudly  
courageously  
knowingly.

This woman is where I come from  
whom I have followed.

She is, was  
a pioneer  
a social worker  
a thorn in the side  
a truth teller.  
She spoke out  
at conferences.  
She did not lie.  
She told problematic truths  
as theatre.  
She told the male Jewish authorities the fucking truth  
about white slavery  
the abduction of poor white women  
of poor white Jewish women.  
And the men  
were scared.  
Scared  
of what was happening around them  
to the community,  
the threat of Nazis trafficking Jews to their deaths.  
Yet Bold and Brave and in their face  
She, Bertha Pappenheim,  
(for this name needs saying

as often as we can  
to douse the fictionalised Anna O.  
Those professional theories  
live on to keep other women down)  
She, Bertha Pappenheim,  
pointed to, evidenced,  
the oppression of women  
of communities;  
she pointed  
to lies told,  
to the systems that support them;  
she pointed  
to the men  
whom she was addressing  
who, behind her back, said  
“Back to the doctor!  
Back to Breuer, to Freud!  
to whoever will get her and her uppity  
friends  
out of our hair!  
We have a job to do.”  
But the holocaust came anyway.  
Despite their best efforts.

And I am here  
speaking my truths  
because *some* of my family didn't die then,  
they didn't perish then.  
Not all of them anyway.  
They tried to get away.  
They tried every which way.  
In fact, the eleventh hour came and went,  
And they got out.  
Just.

And how did they get out?  
Because Tante Lulu,  
[A family friend who got out earlier  
from Berlin  
to Bradford,  
from a city built on sand  
to a city built on Millstone Grit  
- cities I know well in this life -]  
because Tante Lulu  
wrote  
letters.  
She wrote letters.

She wrote letters at regular intervals  
to the Jewish Board of Deputies.  
She wrote the facts.  
She emphasised the time frame.  
She kept writing.  
And after several months  
- time dangerously spent -  
my mother aged 11,  
her 13 year old brother  
and my grandparents came  
to Bradford  
to run a hostel  
for unaccompanied minors,  
refugees,  
teenagers who had said goodbye to their parents  
and grandparents,  
and siblings too,  
all knowing  
deep down  
it was  
forever.  
And so it was.



\* \* \*

In a folded nineteen sixties newspaper cutting  
I read last year,  
a Telegraph and Argus interview,  
Jewish Chronicle maybe,  
with Tante Lulu,  
she casually reported that she trained as a young woman  
in social work  
with Bertha Pappenheim...  
Tante Lulu trained with Bertha Pappenheim...

My family was saved by the learning of women that  
persistence  
is what you do.  
You never give up.  
You don't hide  
your Jewishness.  
You don't hide  
your humanity.  
You don't sidestep  
your commitment.  
This I learned

and I already knew.

\* \* \*

Indigenous knowing  
is not about biology,  
it is about history  
or herstory;  
it is about learning from those  
who walked the walk  
who trod paths  
sometimes in one direction only  
sometimes not even walked,  
taken  
there  
out of sight  
disappeared...  
We know those facts, those figures  
but  
what  
did  
they  
know

that we  
choose  
to forget?  
What did  
they hope  
we would remember  
and *act on*?  
They believe in us  
they  
the children across the world,  
they  
the people of all genders  
in whatever countries  
they whose languages  
have been eradicated  
whose tongues cut out  
whose bodies assaulted  
whose lives terminated  
secretly  
publicly.  
  
Indigenous knowledge  
is not just about knowing

it is not about surviving

it is about

living

with a critical awareness

of what has gone before

what is going on

what will happen.

We act

because of our indigenous knowing.

We try to prevent

because of our indigenous knowing.

This knowing

is not in our genes,

it is in our conscience,

in our courage

not to protect old ways

or restricted customs

but human rights

safety

freedoms

possibilities

to right power imbalances

to correct unfairness

to challenge stereotypes  
and laws created to constrain and restrain  
the best of human energies.

Indigenous knowing is not about creating silos for population groups.

Blood  
flows.  
It runs  
wild through/  
beyond the contours  
of human life  
into confluences  
of great  
majestic even  
scary rivers,  
the small feeding into the large  
shaping the landscape  
cutting it  
into left and right banks  
and the confusion of tribalised  
territories.  
The essence of ourselves -  
our tributaries

made us so,  
separated us  
with the land.  
And the short-term history  
eats our long-term memory  
so when we are told to count the grain in our back yard,  
sometimes we count;  
and when we are taught to sharpen the tips of our weapons,  
sometimes we reach for our knives.

Someone here asks  
“Who are ‘we’ paleface?”  
And they are right  
to ask;  
they are right  
to challenge  
the lumped-together-ness  
of all.  
And yet are we not also an ‘all’,  
a collective,  
with responsibility for each other?

**Gail Simon** is a practitioner-researcher, dialogical writer and installation activist. She is editor of *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* and part of the Måfå Research Group which hosts dialogical installations on the themes of transgression, welcoming and belonging. Gail uses stanza form in some of her writings which are intended as performance. She leads the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire.

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# (Un)Modifying India: Nationalism, Sexual Violence and the Politics of Hindutva<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The postcolonial Indian state has since its inception used sexual violence to keep resurgent rebellions in check within its formal territory, and has for long provided the means of the production of sexual violence to dominant sections of society. In this essay I suggest that with the rise of the Hindu right to political power at key levels of states and the centre over the last three decades, a new social and political dynamic has been unleashed. Sexual violence has come to constitute public and private lives in unprecedented ways. These include a radical realignment of public and private spheres as well as the production of a rejuvenated masculinist state and society seeking to resignify tradition and modernity within the framework of Hindutva or Hindu supremacy. While this force signals a political defeat for liberal and secular feminism at some level, it also opens up new opportunities to reimagine the vocabularies of freedom and rights against the new political order.*

*Keywords: Hindutva, Sexual Violence, Narendra Modi, Nationalism, Postcolonial State*

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The final image from Mahasweta Devi's short story "Douloti the Bountiful" (1995) registers a double movement that is at the very heart of the gendered constitution of the nation in India today. The image is that of a woman lying sprawled across a map of India, her body ravaged by venereal disease. The body is that of Douloti, a tribal woman who has been enslaved into the sex-trade.<sup>2</sup> The image represents a form of gendered excess, mediated through what Gayatri Spivak (1989-90) refers to as 'the unaccommodated female

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body' (126) that in today's increasingly charged and polarised political vocabulary in India would be seen as "anti-national", but without which the nation and its boundary-making power cannot be imagined or instituted in the first place. The story that narrates the relentless exploitation of bonded sexual labour in a still feudal but independent India reaches its climax in this scene which takes place during the annual ritual of independence day in which school children are taught to draw the map of the nation, as part of their geography and civics lesson in citizenship and patriotism. In this image, the nation is the strained container, as it were, of the spread-eagled body of the tribal woman sold into prostitution, and at the same time, her figure consumes the entirety of the space of the nation, leaving no room for the ceremony of patriotic love to go on as usual. Because with Douloti's diseased body spread on it, not only is there no room for the flagpole on which the national flag is to be hoisted, there is the transmogrification of the pure, illuminated beauty of the iconic Mother India who serves as the emblematic figure of the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation), into that of a diseased prostitute.

This last image from Devi's story is an excessive, over-determined, even melodramatic image that encapsulates the current political moment in India in which the definition of who belongs to the nation, who loves it and celebrates it, is becoming narrower than ever. If the right-wing Hindu supremacist forces read this story, if they are capable of reading this story, Mahasweta Devi would be declared an anti-national writer for having dared to imagine this scene of the nation's body sullied by the putrefied and exploited body of a tribal woman.<sup>3</sup> Because what throws Devi's love for the nation in doubt is that she reveals such a love in the service of nationalism to be a profoundly gendered and violent formation. As a writer who moulds the story's climax as one in which Douloti dies on the map of India on a day marked out for its celebration, Devi reveals the gendered fragility of the very idea of love for the nation, inseparable as it is from the force of sexual violence.

Sexual violence as the means to impose a masculinist, dominant caste, communal and nationalist version of the nation in contemporary India has manifold forms and possesses historical continuity even as we witness an intensification of it *now*. As we saw in the stark image discussed above, of the tribal woman who has been relentlessly sexually exchanged, sexual violence accompanies both the very act of making a map of the nation, but also that of instituting the national economy that even in a globalising India thrives on the bonded and sexualised labour of its poorest, most marginalised citizens. Thus, sexual violence also shapes a range of identities related to the ideology of nationalism, such as religion, caste and class, that determine questions of belonging and rights in the nation and to the land, just as sexual violence, or the ever-present threat of it, places women in subservient positions within sexual as well as non-sexual relationships.

Further, the forms of identity markers such as caste, religion, region and class, while typically expressed in terms that transcend history and social change, are in fact subject to intense shifting pressures, often very violent in their accumulative drive, from the forces of neo-liberal capitalism as well as attendant transformations in the political economy of the country today. These are typically manifested as urbanization, industrialisation and modernization, among other processes, that play a structuring role in the ways in which women's subservient position is maintained and reproduced in ways that are violently embodied.

In this analysis, I embrace a broad but distinct definition of sexual violence. Mainstream definitions of sexual violence focus on bodily harm and encompass sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape on a spectrum of degrees of violence and cast women as victims in a misogynist and patriarchal society. Nivedita Menon (2012) points to the disproportionate focus on rape when it comes to sexual violence as well as to the important difference in the ways in which 'patriarchal forces' see rape as 'evil because it is a crime against the honour of the family', a fate worse than death, and feminists who see rape

as ‘a crime against the autonomy and bodily integrity of a woman’ (113). She goes on to further query the ways in which the ‘impact and maybe even the sexual violence itself, flow from the discourse which constructs ‘sex’, ‘sexual violence’ and ‘sexuality’ as the deepest aspects of one’s “real” and “private” self” such that sexual violence is construed as a ‘violation of the sense of wholeness...one’s belief in one’s unique selfhood’ (141).

I seek to extend this analysis in order to think about sexual violence, precisely because it is imbricated in notions of wholeness (Menon refers to this as a ‘mystification of sexuality’), as an integral part of the ideological project of nationalist, patriarchal, dominant caste and capitalist subjugation of women and sexual minorities. It is only with the force of sexual violence that these projects are maintained and continually reproduced. On this reading, sexual violence is not limited to a spectacular physical act but is wound up in discourses and institutions of power. This would enable us to question the hegemonic understanding of sexual violence as the worst kind of violence and instead locate it within an understanding of the processes by which gender difference (couched as threat) is used to further specific political and ideological agendas.

Following from this, there are three aspects in particular that I want to consider in this essay—a) sexual violence as part of the state project of controlling and disciplining rebellious populations and territories and as a weapon of war; b) as a means of political and social assertion, as a mode of maintaining caste, communal and class power, and as part of the dominant national imaginary of the place of women in society through regulating public and private divisions; and c) as a means of structuring family power, intimacy and sexuality and the patriarchal order that determines the remit of each, including controlling women’s bodies and reproductive choices.<sup>4</sup>

### **The State of Violence**

It is of course well known that in times of war, rape has been used as a potent and highly sexualized weapon of war to demoralize opponents by assaulting women's honour.<sup>5</sup> But armies of nation states have also turned sexual violence as a weapon not just against an enemy beyond the borders, but as a weapon against their own citizens who are seen as dissenters or traitors. In India, too, the state has used sexual violence to discipline, contain and shame those that it sees as anti-national or not national enough. Uma Chakravarti (1982) discusses custodial rape as a specific form of sexual violence on the part of the various agencies of the state whose perpetrators include 'forest officials, army personnel, and especially...policemen'. The gang-rape of over fifty women in the villages of Kunan-Poshpora in Kashmir is widely considered to be the largest case of state-led mass sexual violence in independent India. On February 23, 1991, about 125 Indian soldiers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Rajputana Rifles, under pretext of searching the area for militants, evacuated the men of the villages and then proceeded to rape women. As Ayesha Pervez (2015) puts it: 'The intent was not only to terrorise and traumatise the people under assault — they are often accused of harbouring militants — but also of sending out a message of retribution to the Kashmir resistance movement.' Likewise, the sexual violence perpetrated in areas such as India's north-eastern states where the Armed Forces Special Act (since 1958) is at work demonstrates that any challenge to state power is met with a huge amount of force, including sexual violence. The rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi in 2004 by a member of Assam Rifles led to the Manipuri women's nude protest that was carried out under the banner of "Come Indian Army, Rape Us".<sup>6</sup>

Even as we may think of Kashmir and India's "border" states such as the north-eastern states like Manipur that are on the absolute and literal margins of the nation, other minorities within the nation—Muslim women, tribal and dalit women have been routinely targeted by state violence. The case of Soni Sori—a tribal schoolteacher in Bastar in central India suspected to be a Maoist—is chilling testimony to the ways in which the state deploys sexual violence against minorities. She was arrested in

2011 and tortured and sexually assaulted in custody, providing one of the most egregious instances of recent times where a police state used brutal means to subdue a tribal woman seen as a threat to the “law and order” of society and nation. Another example is that of Bhanwari Devi, the dalit (oppressed class) health worker who was gang-raped by upper caste men in 1992 as punishment for trying to implement the government’s law against child marriage in her village (see Geeta Pandey, 2017). These instances demonstrate a manifold dimension to the ways in which the state directly exercises sexual violence—to police its borders, to discipline internal threat to its hegemony, to support and enhance the hegemonic power of dominant caste men and men of the religious majority, as well as, as Chakravarti (1982) and Kavita Krishnan (2013) have argued, to control those women who are at the forefront of movements against exploitative landlords and corporate land grab, such that rape has become a weapon against people resisting primitive accumulation (see also Madhok and Rai, 2012, for the violence entailed in neoliberal “agency-in-development” for women like Bhanwari Devi). The gruesome murders and the gang-rapes of two dalit women in Khairlanji, a village less than a thousand kilometres from Mumbai, by upper caste men on September 29, 2006, seem to have been precipitated by a land dispute. The murdered and raped Bhotmanges were a land-owning dalit family who were resisting giving up their land for road construction. Several reports implicate local BJP politicians in the murders and the rapes (Buckwalter, 2006). Writing in the early 1980s, Chakravarti (1982) had pointed to how ‘the State and the ruling elites have increasingly resorted to the use of violence as a means of systematic repression of the growing articulation of the demands of the people both in rural and in urban India.’ In this, rape becomes a crucial tactic through which class conflicts are settled via feudal patriarchal notions of women as men’s property.

In recent years, feminist activists have pointed out that while “national

conscience” was mobilised to procure justice for Jyoti Singh, the young woman whose gang-rape in New Delhi on December 16, 2012 led to massive protests and demonstrations in every part of the country, there is a deafening national silence on rapes committed in the peripheries of the nation state and on political minorities and cultural dissidents (see Daniyal, 2017).

### **UnCivil Society**

As political theorists have argued, there is a significant tension in defining civil society as either the bourgeois social space of law-abiding citizens who come together as equals, standing above community in a public sphere free of coercion, or a more communitarian sense in which civil society represents a shared identity among its members and performs a mediating function between the state and the private spheres. Such a communitarian view brings into the remit of civil society religious institutions and caste associations.

Without going into a comprehensive overview of this literature, for the purposes of this essay I will take civil society to mean the contested and shifting space between the state and family, between public and private, between law and tradition, between community and the self. This contested, messy arena is where we witness an intensifying generalized sexual violence in contemporary Indian society—whether it is sexual harassment in the workplace, including violence against domestic workers or against social workers like Bhanwari Devi, the physical insecurity faced by call-centre and mall workers and other women workers making their way to and from work, and a general sexualisation of office and other spaces of work.

Although some may consider them pre-capitalist remnants within a modernizing society, Khap panchayats are an interesting phenomenon that defies established understandings of civil society (see Baxi, Rai and Sardar Ali, 2007). These are caste and clan-based village associations that carry out functions of maintaining the social order and gendered propriety among its members, and seem to have gained significant traction since the Hindu right has come to power in the centre in spite of widespread negative publicity. In

recent years, Khaps have become infamous for going after young people who fall in love outside of patriarchal caste norms, as in the “honour killing” case of Manoj and Babli in the state of Haryana in 2007, who were murdered for having flouted clan norms.<sup>7</sup> Less murderous pronouncements have included a ban on the use of mobile phones and social media by girls under eighteen by Basauli khap panchayat near Agra in Uttar Pradesh, as modern technology is seen to have a corrupting influence on girls.<sup>8</sup> In its implicit support of these khaps, for both electoral and ideological reasons, the Hindu right once again betrays its commitment to caste and religious affiliations over secular legal frameworks that guarantee equality to both men and women. Thus, the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s campaign towards realizing the goal of a “digital India” is shot through with gender discrimination and sexual oppression in which women’s access to digital gadgets and virtual space is constantly policed and subjected to community control.

But while khap panchayats have an older history of patriarchal and coercive regulation of community, one could argue that a khap mentality seems to have become widely pervasive wherein community-supported male leaders take the law into their own hands in the name of maintaining social order, for keeping women safe, and safeguarding public morality. There have also been reports in the rise of what have come to be called “honour killings” where family members are directly implicated in the torture and murder of young people daring to fall in love and marry someone of another caste.<sup>9</sup> A widespread sense of vigilantism is now socially endorsed as youth participate in self-policing and disciplining young people, especially women, whose private affairs may be crossing the lines of caste, class and religion. These Hindu women, especially when engaged in relationships with Muslim men, are seen as their dupes. Muslim men are seen to be prosecuting a “love jihad”, a phrase used to indicate that Hindu women are under threat from Muslim men who use romantic love as a ploy to convert innocent Hindu women to Islam.

But if religion, caste and clan are seen as key arenas of social struggles, another important discursive site where these battles to protect the Hindu



women are going on, through very violent means, is the widespread deployment of a generalized Indian “culture” (whose coordinates are Hindu in totality) that is firmly located in the East and opposed to the West, even as the Hindu right embraces neoliberal economic policy and foreign direct investment. Women wearing jeans or talking on mobile phones have become figures of threat as they represent a modernity seen as fundamentally at odds with Indian tradition.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Hindutva vigilante outfit Sri Ram Sene (Ram’s army) in 2009 attacked women in a pub in Mangalore for violating Indian values and being influenced by Western norms: ‘for consuming alcohol, dressing indecently, and mixing with youths of another faith.’<sup>11</sup> The same year, Ram Sene members threatened celebrations of Valentine’s Day, intimidating couples seen in public.

Even more indicative of how sexual violence is used to keep women in check is not just the attempts by vigilante groups such as Ram Sene policing and harassing women and threatening them with physical violence, are the routine pronouncements from politicians and the judiciary commenting on women crossing the line of decency by venturing out alone at night or wearing immodest clothes. In a widely influential campaign against Nestle’s Maggi noodles, many Hindu right politicians conflated issues of public health with the shortcomings of modern motherhood such that mothers who feed their children instant noodles are viewed as pursuing selfish interests like a career or self-care or are too lazy to bother with giving their children traditional Indian food like ‘paratha’ and ‘halwa’.<sup>12</sup> On a less frivolous note, Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS chief, announced that rapes occurred in India, not Bharat (the Hinduised name for India), implying that Bharat and India, one rural, traditional, conservative, respectful of women and authentic, the other urban, Westernised and inauthentic, were in fact two different nations and that rape was an urban phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Bhagwat’s comments belied the countless instances of rapes of dalit and tribal women in India’s villages, and reinforced retrograde tradition as the saviour of women. When conservative elements, especially in the Hindu right, do acknowledge the problem of rape, the blame

for the violation is often placed on the woman herself. Thus, Ram Jethmalani, the lawyer for Asaram Bapu, a godman (and one-time associate of the Indian Prime Minister Modi) who has been charged with the rape of a minor girl, argued that the girl Bapu is accused of having assaulted suffered from a 'chronic disease' that leads a woman to be attracted to men.<sup>14</sup>

Sexual violence is indeed seen as related to increasing social divides between urban and rural spaces, but also across class divides, from a range of different political perspectives. In the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi gang-rape that garnered international coverage, the left-wing feminist activist Kavita Krishnan drew sharp and accurate attention to the ways in which the media was sensationalizing the case since the perpetrators were migrants from rural and backward states such as Bihar and UP, and that sections of the ruling class, police, and the corporate media had made a deliberate attempt to profile the poor and migrant labour as the fountainhead of crime. For in reality, of course, sexual violence was hardly the monopoly of poor, alienated urban migrants.

In a different but related vein, neo-liberal capitalism is often presented as the root cause for increasing sexual violence. In a Channel 4 interview soon after the December 2012 rape, the writer Arundhati Roy spoke about 'the widening gap between the rich and the poor' and went on to suggest the hyper 'conspicuous consumption' of India's globalizing elites that is producing 'an anger and a psychosis' for which 'women at the top, at the middle and the bottom are going to pay the price', particularly young urban women and dalit women (Banerjee, 2013). Taking Roy's words as an instance, Sreenanti Banerjee (2013) points out how left and right discourses can converge unexpectedly, as in this case where Roy is seemingly describing the degradations of global capitalism, with more conservative and even reactionary views that view modernity and urbanization as a threat to women. Both unwittingly provide an alibi for the 'psychotic' rage of the marginalized, and fail to address the question of how and why gender becomes the means through which this rage is expressed. Such seemingly progressive views as Roy's also participate in positioning middle class women as inauthentic, an

approach that shares concerns in a rather startling manner with right-wing ideologues. As Banerjee writes, it is important for ‘the intellectual Left’ to be ‘more critical and tentative about its critique of conspicuous consumption and the homogenization of its effects’, so as ‘to keep its theoretical distance from an atavistic nativist criticism of consumer culture of the Hindu Right or even the nationalist political project for that matter.’

In the December 2012 gang-rape case to which Roy is responding, the victim of the rape was named “nirbhaya” or the fearless one, and was quickly appropriated as an icon of the heroic woman of a modern and globalizing India. Although her class and social background was working class, she was studying to become a professional and was raped on an evening when she was on an outing to watch a film at a mall with a male friend. For the middle classes leading the protests in Delhi, she was a respectable woman enjoying the freedoms associated with globalisation, and she deserved protection. Thus, even as the protests used the language of feminist emancipation, they remained within the ambit of a conservative social ideology that sees rape as the ultimate degradation of a woman. This was expressed well by Sushma Swaraj, then a BJP Member of Parliament and who is currently India’s Minister of External Affairs, for whom a raped woman was a ‘zinda laash’, a live corpse, suggesting that to be raped is to have a fate worse than death. The massive public protests after the rape did lead to calls for gender sensitization, especially among the police force, as well as the inclusion of gender studies in educational curricula, repeal of rape laws and increased security for women in public places, but the space where the rape was being protested was itself not free from violence, as calls for death penalty, castration and brutal physical revenge that would match the barbarism of the rape itself became loud and clear. So that even as words like patriarchy and misogyny entered public debate—on television sets, living rooms and in Parliament--the language of violence saturated and framed the discussion. Thus even as the Justice Verma Commission’s recommendations that were produced in the aftermath of the December rape case marked a step forward in legislating

against sexual violence, overall civil society witnessed an increased surveillance of women, with protection for middle class women as a major priority.

### **Public Intimacies**

Hindutva's ideologues have for long peddled the idea of *Vasudeva kutumbakan*, an ancient Hindu concept literally translated from the Sanskrit as "the world is one family". But this notion of one family for the Hindu right is based on a clear sense of a dominant caste Hindu man as the patriarch of the world family. In this view, those not subscribing to ideas of Hindu supremacy are merely lost sons and daughters. Another related phrase made popular by the Hindu right is "ghar wapasi" or "homecoming" that involves a process in which errant members of the family (those who have converted to other religions, but also wayward women who may have married outside their caste and religion) are welcomed back into the folds of the Hindu home, considered to be the cradle of world's civilisations.

There is a constitutive contradiction in this Hindutva version of there being a universal public sphere of co-religionists as the intimate sphere of sexuality, selfhood and family relationships is nonetheless subsumed within the larger interests of the *kutumb* or the family as the central unit of the Hindu nation, which is the universal sphere for the Hindu right. In the Hindutva version of nationalism, women have to love the nation not as equal, consensual partners but as sacrificing and subservient citizens. The Hindu right has no doubt also promoted in recent years a number of women foot-soldiers known as *sadhvis* (nuns), the best known being *Sadhvi Ritambhara* and *Sadhvi Pragya*, who epitomise the notion of the powerful and aggressive Hindu woman who calls upon Hindu men to not shy away from the use of violence to subjugate the Muslim "other". But a *sadhvi* has nevertheless sacrificed (through renunciation) her sexuality and familial bearings in the service of the Hindu nation (Bacchetta, 1996). Paola Bacchetta (1996) writes of how the *Rashtriya Sevika Samiti*, the women's wing of the RSS, constructs its history in opposition to Indian left and liberal women's movements gaining ground in

the 1930s. She cites an undated (but post-1978) publication in English in which a preoccupation with women's struggles for 'equal rights and economic freedom' is seen as producing women who would be 'non-committed to love, sacrifice, service', thereby contributing to the 'disintegration of family (sic), the primary and most important unit of imparting good *samskaras*' (values) (130-131). On such a view, the fate of women, family and nation is interlinked, such that any violation of the nation's sacred geography by an outsider is a violation of the nation's women themselves.

We see evidence of the saturation of this view in the ubiquitous terms and phrases used for women who may be strangers—respecting a woman means giving her a familial title of mother, aunt or sister. It is this deeply conservative notion of the centrality of the family in society that leads to instances where rapists are often pressured to marry their victims, in the hopes of erasing the trauma and taboo of rape. Or, when rapes of sex-workers are not deemed to be rapes and marital rape fails to get recognition as rape.<sup>15</sup> The same khaps that advocate avenging the loss of honour of Hindu, upper-caste women even when they participate in consensual relationships with dalit or Muslim men, opportunistically engage in public relations campaigns such as "beti bachao" launched by Narendra Modi. For it is the honour of daughters that needs to be salvaged from Muslims, a view widely advocated during and after the Muzzafarnagar riots by BJP politicians, including by Amit Shah, the president of the BJP. As Krishnan (2014) puts it, 'invariably, profiling men of the 'other' community as a danger to the daughter and to one's honour, goes hand-in-hand with coercion and violence against women of one's own community.' At the same time, any violation of Muslim women is justified vengeance for restoring the honour of the Hindu community. As such, sexual violence is one of the key modes by which communal violence is carried out in India (see Kannabiran, 1996).

Along these lines, a recent judgment has declared that single individuals living together will now be considered as married couples, as there is no space in Hindutva's understanding of sexual relations outside of marriage. It is

therefore no surprise that the Hindu right remains committed to a homophobic position and has over the years mobilized public support to oppose the abrogation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which designates same-sex relations as ‘unnatural’ and homosexuality as a ‘genetic disorder’.<sup>16</sup>

### **Unmodifying India**

Working towards a conclusion I want to suggest that sexual violence as a long-practised strategy of the Indian state to control dissident territories and subjects, and as structuring both civil and private sexual relationships, has obtained political legitimacy as the Hindu right has seized power in the centre, especially with prime minister Narendra Modi at its helm from 2014. While there had been a previous substantial spell of the right-wing nationalist party, the BJP, at the centre from 1999-2004 under the patriarch-poet and Hindutva’s soft-faced prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Modi’s brand of an overtly masculinist Hindutva was being sharpened in the laboratory of the state of Gujarat where he was chief minister from 2001-2014. I suggest that with Modi’s ascension to power, a new social and political dynamic, triggered by the rising force of Hindutva and a right-wing populist government, has been unleashed.

Of course it can be rightly argued that sexual violence as a determining feature of a hierarchical society such as India, where caste, class, religion and other differences mix with toxic colonial legacies of sexualised social divisions, precedes the coming to power of Modi.<sup>17</sup> After all, the postcolonial Indian state has used sexual violence since its inception to keep in check resurgent rebellions within its formal territory, and that it has long provided the means of the production of violence to dominant sections of society. However, one can begin by looking at Modi’s own highly masculinist public discourse emphasizing his manliness (a common trope of his election campaign leading up to his victory in 2014 was his “56-inch chest”!), but also in the unleashing of a masculinised public vocabulary that seeks to talk over feminist and other

emancipatory voices as effete and deracinated.<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly then, Modi has often expressed his disdain for the concerns of the social justice and feminist movements, claiming, for instance, that malnutrition among women was caused by women wanting to maintain their figures rather than due to material inequalities!<sup>19</sup>

This view of gender inequality has been effected not only at the level of self-presentation and saturation of public discourse, especially of the media, with often direct use of violent masculinist and sexualized imagery, but also at the level of law and institutions (see Aijaz Ahmad, 2016). Thus a key feature of sexual politics in the era of Modi, and the consequent political ascendance and consolidation of the Hindu right, has been the repeated invocation of the *Manusmriti*, the ancient Sanskrit legal text that underwrites some of the most conservative and patriarchal aspects of Hindu “law” and was used in the British colonial period to form the basis of Hindu personal law. The Hindu right has a long history of attempting to install the *Manusmriti* as a challenge to the Indian Constitution, which it sees as secular and therefore not suited to the requirements of India’s majority Hindu citizens. But what had been an older demand first made in 1950 by the RSS which called for Manu’s law to be made the law of the land has now gained new currency as Hindu right politicians routinely invoke the text as the arbiter of all of Indian society.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, sexual violence has come to constitute public and private lives in unprecedented ways that include a radical realignment of public and private spheres as well as the production of a rejuvenated masculinist state and society seeking to re-signify tradition and modernity within the framework of Hindutva. But a reading of the consolidation of the legitimacy and social power of sexual violence has to be accompanied by theorising the place of sexual violence under new conditions of neoliberal globalization and rising fascism in public life, conditions that I would argue have been exacerbated since the coming to power of Modi at the nation’s centre.

While this force signals a political defeat for liberal and secular feminism at some level, it also opens up new opportunities to reimagine the vocabularies of freedom and rights against the new political order. This interestingly comes up against the backdrop of new gains that have been made in recent years by the women's movement in terms of legal advancement in the arena of laws concerning rape, domestic labour, sex work, sexual harassment in the workplace, and new rights for sexual minorities.

### **Modified Politics**

There are now fresh challenges faced by women's rights movements and other progressive activists in light of the renewed strength of the Hindu right under Modi, in not just the political arena where there is greater legitimacy now accorded to communal and exclusivist politics even as there is the increasing privatization and constriction of public resources and places, but also in private spaces of intimacy and relationships, that has a debilitating effect on women's rights and claims to citizenship.

Interestingly, Modi has gained the support of a few outspoken women "intellectuals" from the media such as Tavleen Singh, who has recently shifted allegiance from Modi but was a vociferous supporter during the 2014 elections, and Madhu Kishwar, who has carved out a crucial space for herself over the last three decades as the voice of nativist, traditional feminism.<sup>21</sup> This follows in the long tradition of the Hindu right's use of outspoken and fiery women leaders, always subservient to the male leadership but articulating support for Hindu nationalism based on women's participation (see Paola Baochetta, 1996). Kishwar's series of articles in *Manushi* (a political women's magazine that she established in the late 1970s) under the title of *Modinama* (Chronicles of Modi) have provided strong defences of Modi, from where she has been attacking progressive secular intellectuals and feminists as well as the liberal media for vilifying Modi for his role in the pogrom against Muslims under his watch as the chief minister of Gujarat in 2002. She has vociferously praised Modi's "Gujarat model of development", a shorthand for neoliberal



economic policy. In recent months, she has come out in support of the dress code imposed on young women by right-wing social vigilantes, claiming that all social groups are subject to dress codes and that women need to be aware of how they come across in the public sphere.

I would further argue that sexual violence in India under Modi's rule is a constitutive part of the overall political project of Hindutva. In its use of sexual violence, the Hindu right project draws upon earlier genocidal projects and their use of rape in riots (India United Against Fascism, 2013). Of course, the historical record presents us with facts that underscore the widespread instances of rape during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and then again in Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971. But riots engineered by the Hindu right have evidenced the use of rape as a potent weapon, starting from 'the meticulously planned spectacle' of mass rapes in Surat in 1992 in which video tapes of Hindu men raping Muslim women were widely circulated; then the Gujarat pogroms of 2002 where rape was widely deployed as an instrument of revenge and torture (as in the gang-rape of Bilkis Bano) and the anti-Christian pogroms in Orissa in 2007-2008 that included the gang-rape of a nun, Sister Meena, as well as the more recent Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 'where a fabricated incident of sexual assault on a Hindu girl was the pretext for carrying out a hideous "revenge" on the bodies of helpless Muslim women and girls' (India United Against Fascism, 2013). The role of right-wing Hindu women in the killings and rapes of Muslims has also been a consistent and unique feature of the Hindu right's violent mobilizations, the most notable example being that of Maya Kodnani, a doctor by training and Modi's Minister of State for Women and Child Development during the 2002 pogroms. In 2012, she was sentenced to 28 years in prison for her role in orchestrating the Naroda-Patiya massacre in which 97 Muslims (including 36 women and 35 children) were dismembered and murdered. Kodnani had cut her political teeth as an activist in Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, the women's wing of the RSS.

### **Coda**

What the essay has argued throughout is that there has been a generalisation of sexual violence in postcolonial India, and that increasingly, as the Hindu right consolidates its political power, it is no longer an aberration. I want to close the essay by turning to another short story by Devi called “Draupadi” (Spivak, 1981) that brings together the various strands of argument explored in this essay. “Draupadi” genders the issue of resistance against the widespread experience of state repression by India’s exploited tribal populations. Dopdi (the indigenized name of the central character, Draupadi being the Sanskrit name) and her husband are Naxalite militants on the run.<sup>22</sup> Dopdi’s husband has died in the forest, and the paramilitary forces deployed to suffocate the insurgency, are lying in wait for Dopdi who they expect will come to claim her husband’s body and that they will be able to capture her then. In time, they succeed in their mission, and her capture is accompanied by a gang rape by the forces and state officials.

Devi’s story provides an imaginative rendering of the story of Draupadi, a key female figure in the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata* that narrates the story of the war between kinsmen, between the righteous Pandava brothers and their evil cousins the Kauravas. The Kauravas at first challenge the Pandavas to a game of dice in which the Pandavas end up losing their kingdom. When that is lost, they are spurred on by their rivals to stake their wife Draupadi in the game. When they lose her as well, the Kauravas begin to disrobe her in order to wreak total vengeance on their opponents. But since she is a devotee of the god Krishna to whom she prays fervently in the moment of her public shaming, she is saved. The more the Kauravas pull her sari, the longer it grows, and the disrobing is a failure. Draupadi’s honour remains intact, even as her husbands and their evil cousins are exposed and demeaned in their act of staking Draupadi’s honour for material and political gain.

In Devi’s story, the classical Draupadi is transformed into the tribal Dopdi whose abjected body (raped, tortured) transforms into a resistant force. Her body speaks through its wounds, its cuts, bruises, and the blood-soaked pubic

hair. When the head of the paramilitary force arrives to witness the fruit of his capture, he asks for Dopdi to be brought out of her hut, an act he thinks will finally tame and shame this dangerous rebel. In the climactic scene in the story, Dopdi emerges from the hut where she has been raped all night and stands stark naked in the daylight. The soldiers expect that her nakedness will shame her. As a gesture of consideration, the chief asks her to cover herself, but Dopdi refuses. She stands there, her body brutalized all over, her pubic hair matted with blood, refusing to cover herself and looks straight into his eye. The Senanayak (the officer) has no option but to avert his gaze, for it is the masculinised state that is exposed in that moment for its deployment of sexual violence as a means of control—it is he who is shamed.

There are of course many reasons why this story is so powerful, but chief among them is for the ways in which it mobilises myth to tell a story of contemporary rape and the brutalization of tribal and dalit women in India today. The story resonates so powerfully because sexual violence in India has become both very spectacular in its mediatization, and totally routine, as daily newspaper pages would testify, even as rapes of tribal women such as Dopdi go largely unreported.<sup>23</sup> I began by speculating that the recently deceased Mahasweta Devi, one of postcolonial India's pre-eminent writers, may be considered anti-national by the Hindu right in today's political climate. That speculation turned out to have more than a grain of truth. On September 21, 2016, members of the ABVP, the youth wing of the BJP, attacked the Central University of Haryana in Mahendragarh for letting its staff and students perform a play based on Devi's short story *Draupadi*. They violently asserted that the play was anti-national, as it depicted Indian soldiers in a bad light. They filed a police complaint and demanded that all those involved should be booked for sedition. The performance had been organized by English and foreign languages department to commemorate Devi's life who died in July 2016. It is a travesty that a 1971 story of the rape of a tribal woman still threatens the Hindu right establishment today. After all, there is a deep red line connecting the ravaged body of Dopdi to that of Soni Sori.

### **Freedom without Fear**

Given the perceived ubiquity of sexual violence as a threat and its actual use as a weapon of control by the state and by reactionary religious formations, it is no surprise that several women's movements that have emerged recently in India have focused on combatting sexual violence through reclaiming public and private spaces. The crucial re-articulation effected by these movements, as opposed to earlier moments, consists of a definite move away from what was previously framed as a call for *safe spaces* for women, safe from violence and violation. Now the demand is expressed as the need for spaces *without fear*, spaces free from fear, as in the slogan "bekhauf azadi", a *fearless freedom*, a call made by the progressive women's movement in the aftermath of the December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012 rape. This is no longer a call merely for separate and safe spaces for women in trains and buses, or in cities and towns for better street lighting and cctv cameras, but a call for a space of freedom from the very gendered ideology of safety. Similarly, the movement "pinjra tod" ("break the cage") of women in university hostels who are subject to strict regulations of mobility through curfews and other modes of control is not just an evocation of the earlier slogan of breaking the prison chains, but of emerging from the pinjra/cage without fear and without feelings of insecurity and threat. Other campaigns along these lines that have spread to many big and small cities in India in the last few years have been the Slutwalk movement (held in various Indian cities in 2011), the Pink Chaddi campaign (the Pink Panty campaign, against the attack on women in pubs and spaces considered "immoral" and thus out of bounds for "decent" women) and the Why Loiter movement. Inspired by the work of Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade and Samira Khan (2011), the Why Loiter movement boldly seeks to unsettle the notion that women in public spaces need to move about with an aim in mind. Instead, the Why Loiter movement is a call to reclaim the city for pleasure, not safety.<sup>24</sup> There is here a clear move from safety to rights, and although class issues are sometimes elided in it, it remains to be seen whether movements such as these can have a wider impact against the pervasiveness of sexual violence in

the context of the growing power of the Hindu right and other forms of religious fundamentalism. All of these forces fear and loathe a woman out on her own or with other women, resisting the state, resisting family and society and most of all, asserting freedom without fear in spaces deemed to be out of bounds for her.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hindutva refers to the majoritarian political ideology based on the presumed superiority of Hinduism, and involves implicit and explicit claims for the institution of Hinduism as the national religion in India. It is thus distinct from Hinduism, which is the religion of the majority of people in India. Throughout this essay I will use a number of acronyms that refer to a family of right-wing Hindutva political groups that are known as the “Sangh parivar” (the Sangh family). These consist of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the ideological precursor of the main electoral party of the Hindu right; the BJP (the Bhartiya Janata Party), the main electoral party currently in power at the centre; and its student-wing, the ABVP (the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad).

<sup>2</sup> India has about 85 million people (a little more than 8 percent of the total population) who come under the category of “tribes”, a term popularly used to designate the country’s indigenous populations. In many rural areas, tribals are “bonded” to work for landlords and moneylenders until they repay loans at exorbitant interest rates. These loans and debts often pass on from one generation to another, as the structure of the bond makes repayment an impossibility. In this story, Douloti is abducted and sold into prostitution by a dominant caste man, purportedly in order that she can repay her family’s debt.

<sup>3</sup> But more of that in the conclusion, as recent events have precisely led to such a manipulative mis-reading of Devi’s excoriating literary vision, a mis-reading that suffocates creative and academic freedoms.

<sup>4</sup> Kavita Krishnan (2013) writes: “Sexual violence cannot be attributed simply to some men behaving in ‘anti-social’ or ‘inhuman’ ways: it has everything to do with the way society is structured: i.e., the way in which our society organizes production and accordingly structures social relationships. Once we understand this, we can also recognize that society *can* be structured differently, in ways that do not require – or benefit from – the subordination of women or of any section of society.”



<sup>5</sup> For a global perspective on this, see the collection of essays in Moghadam (1994) as well as Jayawardena and De Alwis (1996), Victoria Sanford et. al (2016) and Amy Barrow and Joy L. Chia (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Indian soldiers, incidentally, are not under the purview of ordinary criminal law.

<sup>7</sup> “Manoj-Babli honour killing case”, *Dailybhaskar.com* November 25, 2014 <http://daily.bhaskar.com/news/CHD-manoj-babli-honour-killing-in-haryana-4819122-NOR.html> (last accessed November 17, 2016)

<sup>8</sup> Arvind Chauhan, “Panchayat bans mobile phones among girls”. *The Times of India* February 19, 2016. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/agra/Panchayat-bans-mobile-phones-among-girls/articleshow/51060339.cms> (last accessed on 20 November 2016)

<sup>9</sup> “India’s list of shame”, *Firstpost* November 20, 2014. <http://www.firstpost.com/india/indias-list-of-shame-bhavna-yadav-nitish-katara-and-other-honour-killing-victims-1812129.html> (last accessed November 17, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Anurag Singh, “No cellphones for unmarried girls, no jeans for women: BJP MP”, *The Times of India*, June 11, 2013 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/No-cellphones-for-unmarried-girls-no-jeans-for-women-BJP-MP/articleshow/20529791.cms> (last accessed November 17, 2016)

<sup>11</sup> “Girls assaulted at Mangalore pub”, *The Times of India City*, January 26, 2009. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mangaluru/Girls-assaulted-at-Mangalore-pub/articleshow/4029791.cms> (last accessed November 17, 2016)

<sup>12</sup> BJP MLA Uma Thakur was one such public figure who proclaimed that mothers who fed their children instant noodles are simply mothers who are lazy, i.e., not good mothers. See “‘Lazy’ mothers to blame for rise in Maggi sales: BJP MLA” *Press Trust of India*, June 7, 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/lazy-mothers-to-blame-for-rise-in-maggi-sale-bjp-mla/> (last accessed 15 November 2016)

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<sup>14</sup> Ajay Parmar, “Girl has disease that draws her to men: Asaram lawyer” *The Times of India* September 17, 2013 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Girl-has-disease-that-draws-her-to-men-Asarams-lawyer/articleshow/22638001.cms> (last accessed on 15 November 2013)

<sup>15</sup> “Sex workers remain in the twilight area of legal policies and legislation in India, wherein the silence of the law on the identities of sex workers has resulted in more violence in both public spaces, by law enforcement officials, and private spaces, by clients, pimps and partners.” Daya Bhattacharya (2016)

<sup>16</sup> “BJP will not support ‘unnatural’ homosexuality: Rajnath Singh”, *Firstpost*, December 15, 2013. <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/bjp-will-not-support-unnatural-homosexuality-rajnath-singh-1286933.html> (last accessed 16 November 2016)

<sup>17</sup> For a political economic reading of gendered violence in India, see Desai (2016).

<sup>18</sup> See Sanjay Srivastava (2015).

<sup>19</sup> “Narendra Modi tells US daily: Gujarat’s malnutrition due to figure-conscious girls”. *The Times of India* August 29, 2012. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Narendra-Modi-tells-US-daily->

[Gujarats-malnutrition-due-to-figure-conscious-girls/articleshow/15948509.cms](#)  
(last accessed October 25, 2016)

<sup>20</sup> The feminist legal activist Flavia Agnes (2001) has called the Manusmriti a “legal fiction”. Amongst the many infamous passages in the text, there are these: Woman is an embodiment of the worst desires, hatred, deceit, jealousy and bad character. Women should never be given freedom. (Manu IX. 17 and V. 47, 147). And this: Killing of a woman, a Shudra (untouchable) or an atheist is not sinful. (Manu IX. 17 and V. 47, 147)

<sup>21</sup> I have deliberately placed quotation marks around the term feminist for Kishwar. Starting with her essay “Why I do not call myself a feminist” (1990), Kishwar has carved out a space for herself as a conservative and nativist intellectual working on women and social justice issues.

<sup>22</sup> The Naxalite movement was a Maoist-inspired militant movement comprising of landless rural workers, tribals and other most exploited sections of the population and predominantly led by metropolitan and small-town intelligentsia. It broke out as a movement first in the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal (hence its name) in 1967, against the oppression of the state, police, money-lenders and landlords and a still prevailing dominant feudal order. The Naxalite movement of the late 1960s found many sympathisers among urban elites—students, intellectuals, writers and journalists, although the movement was crushed brutally in the 1970s.

<sup>23</sup> This story has to be read in the context of the Naxalite (Maoist) movement in India that began in the late 1960s and continues to be powerful today, leading India’s ruling elites to consider it to be India’s biggest security threat. Devi’s story allows readers to historically link the 19<sup>th</sup> century Santhal rebellion of tribals that has been marginal to the story of Indian nationalism, with the ongoing insurgency against feudal landlords, moneylenders, police, state, and increasingly global capital in the form of mining companies that are seeking to displace tribals. With the widespread resurgence in the last two decades, for many the staying power of the Maoists is seen as a concrete example of the failure of Indian democracy, of the state’s representation of all Indians as well as to provide development to marginalized areas, for tribals continue to be among India’s poorest citizens.

<sup>24</sup> Mayank Jain, “Indian women are loitering to make their cities safer” Scroll.in Friday, December 18, 2014 <http://scroll.in/article/695586/indian-women-are-loitering-to-make-their-cities-safer> (last accessed 18 November 2016)

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## A Poem About Not Writing Poems

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Address

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These days I write nothing  
except my eyes, why share  
my drugs of angst or absolute  
godlessness when the price,  
they have said, will have to be  
paid in blood, why speak of meat  
or beef, when the aftertaste of talk  
Is not just a threat of televised gangrape,  
but a village gathering to slaughter a man,  
again, why force fit my words to capture  
the state, its terror, this state of terror  
when friends who planned to read marx  
had prison cells waiting for them, so why  
risk, why run for dear life, why rage at all?

“What cannot be said must be suppressed.”

“Why show the scar on your thigh to strangers?”—

Lessons I once learnt in my bedroom  
are lessons for life.

So, in lamp black, I only write my eyes  
in the ritual way some Tamil women  
draw a kolam each day, rice flour  
out sparkling the early morning sun,



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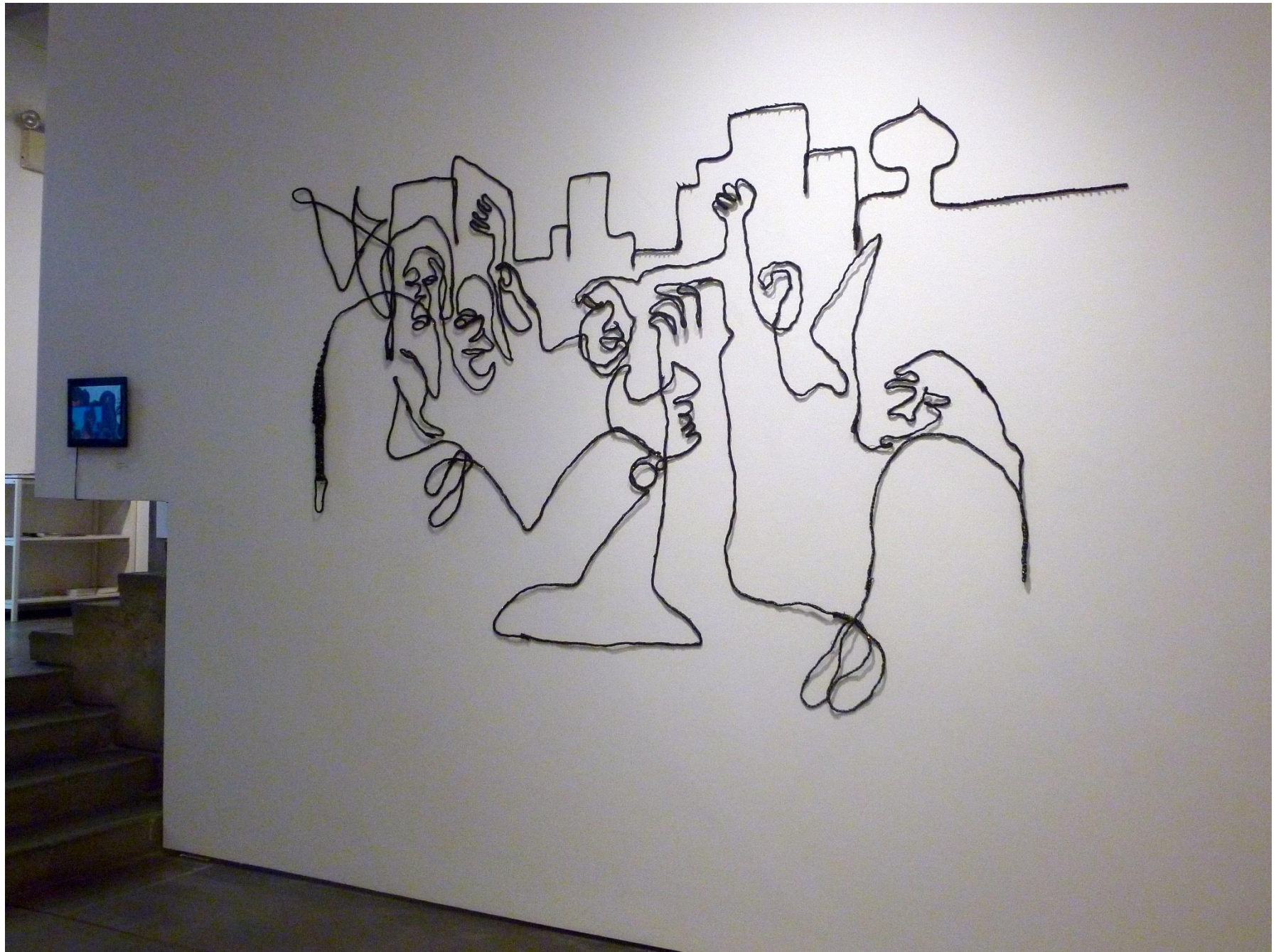
rigid dots anchoring snaking lines, all discipline  
a deception to hide the wildness, all symmetry  
an excuse for keeping count.

Watch a woman's hands  
dance an intricate design,  
learn that it's her desire  
that she is pouring out  
on her doorstep. Like her,  
this woman in the mirror  
is a woman who pretends  
to know her place. Each  
night, she washes her eyes,  
unwraps her word-wounds,  
takes them to bed. At daybreak  
she applies a fresh dressing.

**Meena Kandasamy** is a poet, fiction writer, translator and activist who lives in Chennai and London. She has published two collections of poetry, *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy*, and the critically acclaimed novel *The Gypsy Goddess*. Her newly published novel, *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (Atlantic Books, May 2017), explores the theme of domestic violence and marital rape.

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# Does revolutionary politics reconfigure Islamist<sup>1</sup> women's agency organizationally? The case of the Muslim Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (1928-2013)

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## Abstract

*For the first time in eighty years, one of the oldest and most important religious movements striving to establish an Islamic state, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt reached the apex of political power between 2011-2013, after decades of containment and sometimes repression. Against this backdrop this paper explores how the dramatic power reconfigurations associated with the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and its aftermath impacted on the agency of the Muslim Sisters belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood both internally within the organization and in terms of their public roles. The paper is based on empirical data collected between 2007-2012 and complemented with secondary literature both in Arabic and English. The paper aims to make a contribution to understanding the extent to which political empowerment of women and men in Islamist movements affects internal gender hierarchies through a historicized and contextualized approach.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim Sisters, Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt, Islamic women, agency*

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## Introduction

Despite the rich scholarship in English on the Muslim Brotherhood, there is a paucity of research exclusively focused on the Muslim Sisters. The Muslim Sisters however, have historically played a central role in the

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growth of the Muslim Brothers in terms of community outreach, recruitment and mobilization. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the very survival of the Muslim Brothers rested on the role of the Muslim Sisters in preventing the movement from complete obliteration in the 1950s and 1960s and then again in providing the resilience, resistance and resourcefulness when the movement faced a systematic crackdown from the government in 2013 onwards. The political successes of the Muslim Brothers in particular in the elections of 2005 and 2011 have been attributed to the mass mobilization of the women's agency of the Muslim Brothers.

This paper seeks to examine the agency of the Muslim Sisters in a contextualized and historicized manner with a particular focus on the question of whether the reconfiguration of power dynamics generated by the Egyptian revolution of 2011 influenced the gender hierarchy within the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement up to 2013. While a related topic, due to space limitations, the paper does not discuss the gender policies championed by the Muslim Brotherhood or women's own ideological standpoints on the themes of gender equality.

The paper is organized as follows: following this introduction which discusses the definitional and methodological approach, its limitations as well as writer's own positionality and standpoint; the second part discusses the conceptual contestations around the Muslim Sisters in relation to both authoritarianism and piety movements. These will be revisited in the conclusion. The second part historicizes the Muslim Sisters and their organizational positioning. The third part discusses the agency of the Muslim Sisters in and out of the movement between 2012-2013.

### **Navigating definitional complexity and methodological dilemmas**

It may be worthwhile to commence with a definition of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest religious movement with a vision to institutionalize Islamic governance (Shariah, Islamic canonical law)]



through a modern state system. Hassan el Banna the founder who established the movement in 1928 provided the most comprehensive, holistic definition of the Muslim Brothers:

A Salafi<sup>2</sup> call (da'wa ): because they call for returning Islam to its purist meaning from God's Book and the Sunnah of his Prophet

A Sunni way (tariqa): because they take it upon themselves to work according to the pure Sunna in all things especially in beliefs, 'badat, whenever they find a way for that

A Sufi truth: because they know the essence of goodness is purity of soul and purity of heart and persistence in work [.....]

A political entity: because they call for the reform of internal government, and the revision of the Islamic Ummah<sup>3</sup>'s relations with other nations [...]

A sports group: because they care about their bodies and believe that a strong believer is better than a weak one [.....]

A scientific, cultural solidarity: because Islam makes the quest for knowledge a fareeda(ordinance from God) for every Muslim man and woman and because the Muslim Brotherhood clubs are in reality schools for education and enculturation and institutes for pedagogy for the body, mind and spirit.

A commercial company [...]

A social idea: because they are concerned with the ills of Islamic society and they try to reach ways of remedying and healing the Ummah from them

(Amin 2006).

This all-encompassing nature of the movement as envisaged by Hassan el Banna reflects the thinking, planning, organizing around every array of political, economic and social life that represents the contemporary Muslim Brotherhood. However, a holistic vision does not mean a

homogeneous entity. The Muslim Brotherhood, being a large and complex movement, is one that comprises a number of ideological standpoints, along the spectrum of a reformist agenda on one end of the spectrum (for example in the person of Essam el Erian) to a Salafi agenda on the other (Mohamed el Khateeb, the former Mufti of the movement). It is also one of a number of struggles, first between the Old Guard, who represent the rule of the gerontocracy and the younger generations who have been on the fringes of the decision-making apparatus within the movement. While the Muslim Brotherhood has at its inception had strong links with the Wahabi-Salafi ideology<sup>4</sup>, there has also been a steady process of the Salafization<sup>5</sup> of the Brotherhood occurring over the past fifty years, and which has been accentuated by the migration to Gulf countries (Tammam 2010, Abdel-Latif 2008).

The Muslim Brotherhood highly sophisticated institutional pyramidal structure has survived and evolved over more than 80 years, with clear lines of command and division of labour. At the top of the pyramid is the Supreme Guide, the leader, and under him the Guidance Bureau, 'the power house of the movement'. The Shura Council elect members of the Guidance Bureau. Organizationally, the country is divided into administrative offices which plan and implement the work of the Brothers<sup>6</sup>.

The Muslim Brothers is also a highly dynamic movement that has affiliate movements worldwide, extending from Gaza to Jordan to Pakistan to Turkey to Indonesia. Its international base is in the UK. When examining the positioning of the Muslim Sisters in the Muslim Brotherhood, it would be highly limiting to adopt an institutional approach that does not examine the broader political, economic and social context in which the movement engages. The period in question (2011-2013) was politically highly volatile, and how members interpreted the opportunities and challenges facing them and the movement varied. Accordingly, the empirical research sought to capture the multivocality of the Muslim Brotherhood through

interviews with a wide array of individuals across age, gender, ideological orientation, position within the movement/party. Two interviews were also held with members who have defected from the Brothers post-2011. A number of interviews were conducted in 2006 and more interviews were undertaken in 2012<sup>7</sup>, the latter being an exceptionally opportune moment to interview Muslim Brothers and Sisters because they were at the historic apex of their power. Where deemed appropriate, the interviews have been anonymised to protect their identities.

The interviews were complemented with an analysis of autobiographies of Muslim Sisters, of a historical as well as contemporary nature, of loyalists as well as defectors. These autobiographies were critically important because the narratives revealed a great deal about the power dynamics within the movement. The autobiography of Zeinab el Ghazali the spiritual Godmother of the Muslim Sisters is perhaps the most renowned, however other autobiographies consulted include that of Fatma Abd el Hady, a teacher who joined the Brothers in 1942, and became one of the 12 committee members that revived Muslim Sisters division in the 1940s. It also draws on autobiographies of defectors such as Intesar Abdel Moneim's account (2011).

As the Muslim Brotherhood are prolific in their writings, the research drew on scholarship written by members themselves<sup>8</sup>. Much credit is due to Gomaa Amin, a long standing member of the Guidance Bureau and the Muslim Brother's historian par excellence who compiled the writings of Hassan el Banna and the Brothers from the time of their inception to present day. The Ikhwanweb was particularly useful for presenting the official position on unfolding events and issues. This was complemented with primary and secondary literature review.

The absence of academic literature on the Muslim Sisters is on account of a number of movement-and context- specific factors. First, when the Muslim Brothers sought to assume a role in the political life of Egypt, it was members of the political bureau of the movement that were placed in

the limelight and they all happened to be men. Second, the Muslim Brothers lived many decades under controlled tolerance subject to periods of imprisonment and repression and hence they sought to spare women members becoming security targets. Third, as will be discussed below, because the Muslim Sisters are subsumed under the Muslim Brothers, the latter have served as their gatekeepers and have therefore kept a tight lid on who has access to insider knowledge on the agential and organizational dynamics. Finally, the Muslim Sisters are conscious that the Muslim Brothers have been under attack in parts of academia and the media for their position on women's equality and this has undeniably put them in a defensive position.

Another element of the methodology is the researcher's own positionality and standpoint, both of which affect the research (England 1994). I am an Egyptian who is an insider insofar as I have been a participant observer in many feminist circles since 1996. However, I am simultaneously an outsider insofar as I have been peripheral to the central decision-making core within Egyptian feminism and do not have 'insider' status to the Muslim Sisters, not least because I do not politically belong to the movement. In order to address this latter limitation, I relied on first-hand accounts, narratives and autobiographies as much as possible, in order to avoid the objectification of the movement. On standpoint, as a feminist, I have consciously avoided an 'appraisal approach' towards the Muslim Sisters, guided by a 'checklist' on where they stand on different issues. Nonetheless, power relations are key to my understanding of feminism and have been central to this enquiry. In practice, this has meant examining ways in which agency has been enhanced or circumscribed in a historicized, contextualized manner.

### **The Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood: what shapes agency?**

The concept of agency is 'typically used to characterise individuals as autonomous, purposive and creative actors, capable of choice' (Lister 2003:38). The term is particularly useful as a concept for engaging with the

trajectories of the Muslim Sisters on several grounds. Firstly, there is a wide body of scholarship that has critiqued the way in which scholarship on women in the Middle East has been orientalist, especially with respect to Islam (see for example Cooke 2001, Mahmoud 2012, Abu-Lughod 2010, Ahmed 1992 among many others). The word 'agency' is used here in a descriptive rather than normative, allowing for the exploration of how people act as agents through a broad myriad of expressions and forms. It is intended to explore ways in which individuals respond to changes in their own perceptions of themselves and their contexts in relation to their roles within the Muslim Brotherhood. Notwithstanding that the word agency has been associated in the literature with the individual human agent, it should not be confused with individualist. In her discussion of citizenship in the Arab world, Suad Joseph highlights the importance of engaging with agency in terms of the 'connective self', one that is not construed in western individualistic terms. She argues that 'Connective persons do not experience boundary, autonomy, separateness as their primary defining features. Rather, they focus on relatedness.' (2002:25). Understanding the agency of the Muslim Sisters in terms of connective selves allows for a relational approach that recognizes the fluidity and dynamism informing their perceptions and choices and the women and men they engage with more broadly in society.

As the concept of agency is conceived in terms of 'achieving goals that people happen to value' (Drydyk 2013:251), the emphasis is on the subject's own terms, rather than weighed against someone else's. Feminist scholarship has pointed to the absence of women's voices in much of mainstream literature on social change precisely because of the negation of women's individual and collective subjectivities (Lister 2003). Moreover, a copious body of scholarship on women who identify with Islamist movements and/or political thought, including that of the Muslim Sisters have highlighted the Western bias in the interpretive frameworks with which their role, ideology and status are projected (Fernea 1985,

Cooke 2001, Karam 1998, 2002, Mahmoud 2012, El Mahdi 2010, Osman 2003, Maumoon 2007, Abdel Latif (2008) Abdel Latif and Ottaway 2007).

Hence, in the concept of agency, there is scope for reclaiming women's voice and recognizing the terms of engagement upon which agents enact their choices. This is again highly relevant for the study of the Muslim Sisterhood as one expression of women's agency in the Middle East, since its conjecture is that women are active agents, not passive objects of the movement's vision and mission.

However, a recognition of women as active agents does not assume they operate in a vacuum. The analytical value of the concept of agency would be deeply compromised if it is not examined in a dialectical relationship to structure. Put simply, 'human agents, whether individuals or collectivities, have power or are powerful within structural limits, which enable and constrain their power' (Haywards and Luke 2008:12). The interface between agency and structure has been a source of deep contestation in scholarship- where does agency start and structure begin? However, two dimensions of this dynamic relationship are particularly important here. First, the exercise of agency does not exclusively determine outcomes, since structural factors such as power dynamics of an organization 'will affect the outcome no matter what the preference of the actors are' (Dowding 23). Moreover, agents' choices, preferences and roles are also deeply shaped by 'deep structure' (Dowding 23). Deep structure 'not only provides incentives for agents to act in certain manners given their objectives, they create these objectives for them' (ibid). This points to the importance of adopting an approach that while, cognizant of individual agency, is informed by an awareness that the choices of an agent are deeply influenced by the subtle norms, values and worldviews of the environment in which they are and were embedded. This offers another level of analytical insights to be drawn from the study of the Muslim Sisters, namely the deep structures informing both the individual agent's family, community, Muslim Brotherhood organizational affiliation

and the norms of the broader Egyptian context at that particular historical moment.

Moreover, while examining the agency of the Muslim Sisters, it would be methodologically spurious to assume that there is a clear pathway between their purposive choices and the broader agency of the Muslim Brothers on at least two accounts. First, not all the Muslim Sisters may necessarily choose to exercise their agency through action (since inaction is a possibility). Second, there are often unintended consequences of one's agency, due to the agency of others as well as a constellation of structural factors. Haywards and Lukes note that 'agents can have power that they never exercise, and they can have power the effects of which they do not intend.' A broad view of agency is essential in order not to attribute outcomes exclusively to the actions of a set of individuals when the context is more complex (Haywards and Lukes 2008:7). Hence, caution is needed to avoid simplistic attribution of the Muslim Sisters' agency to broader movement choices without taking into account a wide array of other determinants.

One way in which the agency of the Muslim Sisters has been explored is through what Omayma Abdel Latif described as their activism under Mubarak. Writing in 2008, Abdel Latif (2008) argued that the Muslim Sisters were conscious that they were denied leadership positions within the movement and that they could play a greater role beyond that of foot soldiers in elections. Abdel Latif (2008) argued that the Muslim Sisters' ability to reform the MB to allow for greater participation in decision-making and direction was undermined by the contingencies of the struggle against the security state. Abdel Latif argued that 'a more democratic political environment, no doubt, boosts the fortunes of Brothers who favour women's activism. But as long as repressive policies continue against the movement, the balance will tilt in favour of the more conservative elements, who want to restrict women's activism and role because of the risk of a security crackdown' (Abdel Latif 2008: 12). Abdel

Latif's argument is premised on the justifications that the Muslim Brotherhood leadership consistently provided in defense of its position not to have women in high decision-making positions, namely, protecting them from the ruthlessness of the regime. Abdel Latif's hypothesis (2008) is that once the shackles of authoritarian rule are removed, the Muslim Sisters will have the freedom to demand their rights, and press for full inclusion in the hierarchy of the movement, giving hardliners little excuse to contest their claims. While Egypt did not become a democratic regime in 2011, the security apparatus of the Mubarak regime was brought down (at least temporarily) and Islamist movements were able to enjoy full unrestricted freedom to engage in politics. With this reconfigured political order post-2011, it became possible- as is undertaken in the second part of this paper- to explore, first, whether the Muslim Sisters challenged their position within the Muslim Brotherhood and second, whether this translated into greater participation in central decision-making.

The post-Mubarak political context also set the stage for interrogating Saba Mahmoud's critique of feminist conceptions of agency as being 'primarily in terms of resistance to the regularizing impetus of structures of normativity' (Mahmoud 2012: 13). Saba's ethnographic study on women's participation in the mosque movement between 1995-1997 leads her to reconstitute the concept of agency to pinpoint that norms are not a social imposition, or a feature of structure, rather for a frequenter of the mosque movement, 'the very substance of her intimate, valorized interiority'. There is an ambivalence as to whether Mahmoud is referring to the contemporary Muslim Sisters or not in her ethnography. On the one hand, she traces the emergence of the mosque movement to some key figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Key among them is Hassan el Banna who harnessed the power of da'wa [prosletization, call to God] through mosques to counter the in his view the unsatisfactory religious education extended formally by the 'ulama. On the emergence of women's agency as da'ayat in mosques, Mahmoud traces the



emergence of this phenomenon as well as the growth of women's participation in all-women learning circles in the mosque to the spiritual godmother of the Muslim Brotherhood, Zeinab el Ghazali. On the other hand, Mahmoud notes that 'only a very few of the mosque groups are affiliated with the Muslim Brothers' (2012: 71). Even for a seasoned ethnographer, it would have been very difficult to decipher the percentage of mosques who are Muslim Brotherhood affiliated because the movement and its members would have done every effort to conceal their identity on account of their vulnerability to constant security apparatus' harassment. Hence the extent to which da'ayat or their followers have Muslim Brotherhood sympathies (along the different tiers identified above) would be very difficult to determine in a few Cairene mosques, let alone across the country. However, assuming that Mahmoud's account were to apply to the Muslim Sisters, the question of whether the norms first are 'not simply a social imposition' and the extent to which they are not the object of resistance when the context of the mosque movement radically changes need to be interrogated. This is attempted in the discussion of the agility of agency in the highly fluid context of post-Mubarak Egypt.

### **The historical trajectory of the Muslim Sisters**

The history of the organizational positioning of the Muslim Sisters within the Muslim Brotherhood hierarchy is central to understanding the structural constraints to the emergence of an autonomous Muslim Sisterhood movement. Women members of the Muslim Brotherhood were organizationally envisaged to serve as the helping hand of the Brotherhood and never as a parallel women-led movement. Shortly following Hassan el Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Ismailiya in 1928, he established a club, a mosque, a school for boys followed in 1932 by a school for girls named '*Umahat al Mo'meneen*' (the mothers of believers). The school was designated with teaching the wives, daughters and relatives of the Muslim Brotherhood members, combining Islamic

teaching with subjects that are seen to be pertinent to women's domestic role (Khayal and El Gohary 1993:231-232). The female staff entrusted with teaching the students were given the title of 'the Muslim Sisters group' [ferqah] (ibid. 1993: 232). Hassan el Banna envisioned a role for the Muslim Sisters that would extend beyond the classroom and encompass da'wa among women in the households of Muslim Brotherhood members and society more widely. Makarem el Deiry notes that he first began to give six women weekly lessons then identified 120 female university graduates and highly cultured women to provide them with a year's training on doctrinal and daily life matters (El Deiry 325-326).

Hassan el Banna drew internal by-laws for the organizational structure of the group in which he established modes of communication between the leader of the Sisters Division and the Brotherhood leadership to be through a trusted male Muslim Brother. According to Gom'a Amin, the Muslim Sisters reached the apex of their activism in Cairo between 1943-1945. During the 1940s, the Muslim Sisters were engaged in religious education, da'wa, charity, and fund-raising and were encouraged to establish their own women's non-profit associations. While the curriculum for members of the Muslim Brothers offered intense training in Islamic doctrine as well as political apprenticeship, the curriculum of the Muslim Sisters was heavily informed by the gender roles that the movement wished them to play as mothers and wives, and in public, religious outreach with women.

As the activities of the Sisters grew, an (all-male) implementing committee was formed in 1944 to regulate the work and included a small number of women assuming leadership roles. We only have one version of what led Hassan el Banna to decide to prohibit women's leadership in the cadre of the Muslim Brotherhood, that of Gom'a Amin. He said there was a leadership dispute between a number of women which led to not only the removal of all women from leadership positions but the containment of the Muslim Sisters' position within the organization structure.

Unlike other parts of the Muslim Brotherhood, like the student tanzem for example, the new Muslim Sisters division had no positions, committees, taskforces, or any other organizational mechanism for delegating responsibilities and authorities. This heavy centralization, containment and prohibition of women's leadership is what led Zeinab el Ghazali, according to one leading Muslim Sister, Fatma Abd el Hady, to reject leading the Muslim Sisters when offered the position by Hassan el Banna. El Banna refused to delineate a role and place for the Muslim Sisters as equal and equivalent to the Muslim Brothers and empathetically insisted that the Muslim Sisters are part of the Muslim Brothers (Abd el Hady 2011: 23, Cooke 2001: 88).

It is only many years later in 1948 that El Ghazali declared her allegiance to El Banna and in 1965, Zeinab el Ghazali formally joined the Muslim Brothers. Yet even then, she did not bring her own women's organization under the fold of the Muslim Brothers. Rather her activism was part of the special division led by Sayed Qutb's to engage in armed resistance against the Nasserite regime. She was tried by the Nasserite regime for being a member of the special unit accused of planning to overthrow the regime and was subjected to the most inhumane forms of torture while imprisoned (Al-Ghazali 1999). She was to re-emerge later as the spiritual mentor of the Muslim Sisters in the 1970s and is venerated as a role model among the Muslim Sisters to this day.

In the absence of a tanzem for women, the Muslim Sisters have been governed (with the exception of the first few years) by male leadership, have more limited opportunity for leadership training in comparison to men, and no voting power over the members who represent the movement (not to mention they cannot be leaders themselves).

In terms of initiation into the movement, there are parallel pathways which are deeply gendered. Girls join *al zahrawat* (roses) while boys join *al ashbal* (cubs). While girls are equipped for their roles as future mothers and wives and for outreach among women, boys are equipped for

leadership though the training received changed dramatically after 2011 (see below). If a person wants to join the Muslim Brotherhood as an adult, they have to go through a number of phases. First there is the '*mohebeen*', those who believe or are sympathetic to the movement's message but are not organizationally affiliated. Then there are *al moua'yed*, the supporters, whom the movement draws on for action, then *al moltazem*, those who have a deeper commitment to the cause, then the worker '*amel*' who consistently strives to strengthen the movement and the *moujahed* – s/he who strives in jihad, i.e. is prepared to suffer for the movement. Internally those that achieve the status of *moujahed* have more weight than those on lower tiers and hence, women's acquisition of that status is extraordinarily important.

In 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood was dissolved, and so was the Muslim Sisters as part of it. The next two decades saw an intense crackdown from President Nasser on the Muslim Brotherhood, with members of the movement being imprisoned and tortured (some of them Muslim Sisters), going underground, or fleeing overseas. The Sisters played a central role to the survival of the movement and the coping strategies of individuals and families. The Sisterhood rose to the task of distributing food to the malnourished Brothers in prison as well as being the lines of communication through which important messages and information was relayed. They collected money and distributed it to the female headed households of the Brothers who were in prison or who had fled to Saudi Arabia and other countries. Abdo Dessouki, a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood's account of the history of the Muslim Sisters' provides a profile of leading figures of the Muslim Sisters. One of the common threads is that all the selected figures were those who had endured Nasser's crackdown and are celebrated for their sacrificial spirit in support of their imprisoned family members, the movement and their families (Dessouki 2011).

Once Sadat assumed power in 1970, he sought to obliterate the influence of the leftist and Nasserite forces in Egypt by empowering the Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood. An entente was established between Omar el Telmesany, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and Sadat which saw the rebirth of the movement, and though its formal status remained illegal, in practice was given the freedom to thrive and flourish. Under Sadat's economic liberalization policies, the role of faith-based organizations in providing services grew, and the Muslim Brothers played a central role in it. During this period, the Muslim Sisters became active once again in public life through the movement's many welfare associations, mosques and university campus outreach.

Under Mubarak, relations between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood faced periods of understanding and fallouts. During the first two decades of Mubarak's rule, the MB continued to thrive as a tolerated but illegal entity, participating in elections but under the watchful eye (and often arresting clutch) of the security apparatus. In 2000, for the first time, the Brotherhood nominated one candidate Jehan al Hallafawy who ran in the electoral district of Al Raml in Alexandria. Al Hallafawy's husband, Ibrahim el Za'farany was considered from the reformist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and was at one point one of the members of the Guidance Bureau. He strongly supported his wife's candidature and ran himself for office before. Al Hallafawy was a strong people mobilizer and battled to the end, though she was subject to extensive security harassment and lost the electoral battle on account of suspected voter rigging. However, it is important to note that she and her husband left the Muslim Brotherhood and formed their own party after the Egyptian revolution of 2011 (see below).

The year 2005 is considered a defining moment as the government relaxed its security constraints on the movement's activities. (Anani 2007:239-231) and the Brotherhood gained 88 seats in the 444 seat

parliament, running as independents using the Brotherhood's slogan Islam is the Solution. They acquired the largest representation in parliament they had ever gained. During the 2005 elections female supporters and members of the MB defied the state security harassment and the thugs hired by the ruling National Democratic party in order to reach the polls and vote for the MB. In 2005, the Brotherhood fielded one candidate, Makarem el Deiry, a professor at al Azhar university, born in 1950 (whose husband was killed by the regime in 1965). El Deiry was fielded in the middle class district of Madinet Nasr, and did well in the elections, scoring 6,000 votes, qualifying her to the second rounds of elections but losing to a ruling party candidate (Mohamed el Sallab). The fact that only one woman out of many candidates was fielded is not unique to the MB, other political parties did not do far much better, including the progressive leftist Tagammu party. The last elections held under Mubarak's tenure was considered so heavily engineered by the security apparatus and its legitimacy was so disputed that the Muslim Brotherhood pulled out of the electoral race straight after the second round. They had initially fielded three women under the quota seats but had withdrawn from the elections. The elections were considered one of the main drivers of the formation of a counter-coalition against the regime (Tadros 2012).

### **Post-Mubarak political ascendency of the Brothers: selective spaces of the Muslim Sisters' political empowerment**

When a number of youth movements and some political parties called upon the Egyptian people to join the protests that were planned for January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guidance bureau had decided against joining the political forces in calling upon its members to join. Yet as with some young male members of the movement, young female members joined independently. One young woman recalls that she decided to join the protests and she was warned by a senior Muslim Sister that there was no takleef [order] from the Guidance Bureau and she went down anyway. This is the day that she identified as the beginning of the

end of her relationship with the Brothers. Most of the Muslim Sisters joined the rest of the movement in the public squares from the 28<sup>th</sup> January 2011 when there was a formal delegation from the Supreme Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood to participate. In interviews, female and male members of the Muslim Brothers said that in addition to participating as Egyptian women in the uprising, the Muslim Sisters played two critical roles: first, as part of the medical team that attended to the injured and assaulted, and second, preparing and distributing food to the masses camped in Tahrir Square. Some of the Muslim Sisters had participated in a number of other protests such as against the war on Iraq or in defense of the Palestinians, but for many Muslim Sisters interviewed, the revolution was when women's voices were amplified. However, the Egyptian revolution also created a space for young people of different political orientations to interact, and as some of the younger Muslim Sister interviewees shared, the myths about the political other and in the process, many of the myths about the 'political other' were dispelled. Some of the younger Muslim Sisters shared that in the aftermath of experiencing such a historically tectonic event (the revolution), they expected that the Muslim Brotherhood would also experience a major overhaul in its organizational structure from within.

Shortly after the Egyptian revolution on the 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> April 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood held its first Shura Council meeting openly. It was a golden opportunity to elect women members to the Shura Council, in view of the fact that there were no longer security harassments, however, this did not materialize. Some of the female members of the Muslim Brotherhood began to openly call for leadership positions within the movement. At a MB youth meeting in April 2011 attended by around 1,500 youth, the issues around the movement's organizational structures were raised, including the necessity of establishing an organizational structure – a tanzeem- for the Sisters of the Brotherhood. Shortly after, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 2011, a conference specifically under the theme 'Women from the

revolution to renaissance'. This high level conference was attended by the Supreme Guide, Bad'ie, Khayrat al Shatter, the deputy Guide, members of the Guidance Bureau, key actors and some 2,500 sisters. Bad'ie praised the role played by women in the revolution as activists, mothers, sisters and wives of the protestors and started by paying tribute to the mothers of martyrs. The recommendations spoke of enhancing women's political representation in syndicates, political parties and activism through NGOs, and raising women's awareness of the conspiracies aimed at undermining the family (presumably international actors plus local feminist organizations). One key concession, recounted by an interviewee, was that they allowed the Muslim Sisters for the first time ever to assume leadership positions in the administrative units across the country, first in 6th October City, Alexandria and Fayoum (interviews, 2012). However, for female members of the Muslim Brotherhood who expected a more substantial shake up in the organizational hierarchy, they found themselves with one of two options: adapt or exit.

With the promulgation of a new electoral law in 2011, for the first time in its history, the Muslim Brotherhood was allowed to establish its own political party and therefore become formally a legitimate political contender on the Egyptian scene. The establishment of the Freedom and Justice party created many opportunities for women in the Muslim Brotherhood to become politically involved, as founders, leaders and as members on several committees.

The political agency of women of Islamist affiliation including the Muslim Brotherhood flourished. They had extensive and expansive skills in outreach and constituency building established through years of welfare provision through charitable organisations and through building bridges with women in universities and educational institutes as well as religious education in mosques (Wickham 2003).

A number of interviewees with current and defected members of the Muslim Brotherhood cited the mosque as a central site for the



mobilization of the masses. One Muslim Sister said it was unfortunate that they had to resort to slogans which press people to vote for the FJP (or yes in the constitutional referendum of 2011, see Hamzawy 2013) if they wished to defend Islam, but faced with El Nour Salafi party, they felt there was no other option if they were to secure voters' support. It is interesting that E. who defected from the Muslim Brotherhood said that for voters and expanded outreach, the mohebeen counted as the most important tier because their numbers are so large. A lot of the mohebeen were from the mosque movements. The intention here is not necessarily to suggest that the piety movement members concealed their political affinities (although for some that cannot be negated as a possibility). Rather it is to suggest that women mosque frequenters' vision of Islamic ethics and piety may have found the Muslim Brotherhood's message of engaging in direct political action to defend Islam appealing. This is particularly so if these messages are being conveyed by respected Muslim Sisters that have been active in the mosques for several decades. In short, the politicization of the mosque space through the mobilization of Muslim Brotherhood supporters questions the notion that piety movements engage in a different kind of politics (Mahmoud 2012). Flexible politicization is possible under particular contextual dynamics and this perhaps requires a revisiting of the notion that mosque movements exclusively engage in a kind of politics around ethics and piety as suggested by Mahmoud.

Between February 2011 to June 2013, Egypt witnessed two constitutional referendums (March 2011 and December 2012), a parliamentary and a presidential election (December 2011 and June 2012 respectively). The mobilization of women and families by the Muslim Sisters was central to the successive victories that the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed in these elections. As one interviewee noted, every woman played a role in the outreach: housewives would go down to the markets, the public transport, their neighbours spreading the word about our party, girls as young as 15 who would go down to the shops and speak

to the people, discuss their electoral platform and win them on their side. Women would move from one electoral district to another participating in the events that were being held for public engagement, sometimes leaving home early in the morning and returning by midnight. It is also important to note that the exigencies of the political moment, one where the Muslim Brotherhood needed the full participation and mobilization of its female members in order to encourage people to vote for them meant that the doctrine of prioritizing domesticity over public roles was not one that interviewees felt prevailed during that period. In fact this was a time in which the Muslim Sisters were travelling frequently, campaigning out of the house until late with relaxed curfew and rules on gender mixing. It is of no surprise that in many interviews with women members of the Muslim Brotherhood they cited women's political freedom to exercise their agency, uninhibited by the security apparatus as the most important change in women's lives post-Mubarak.

While the Freedom and Justice party fielded 79 candidates in the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections, the majority were not at the head of the proportional lists – as with the majority of other political parties whose placement of women in winnable positions was woefully low (See Tadros 2013). Only four Muslim Sisters made it to parliament. The overall percentage of women in Egypt's first post-Mubarak parliament (with a majority Islamist representation) was at 2.2% shamefully low.

The highly organized, co-ordinated and motivated manner of working of the FJP was in striking contrast to many of the other parties who were still struggling to build a constituency base and identify effective outreach methods. However, this was also a context in which several leading Muslim Brotherhood members such as Abdel Moniem Abou el Fotouh and Ibrahim el Zaafarany officially left the Muslim Brotherhood to establish their own political parties. For young women who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood but participated in the January 2011 revolution and who grew increasingly disenfranchised with the movement's expectation of

obedience, there was no option to internally reform the movement because the majority's primary allegiance was to the leaders. Hence, women had two options, either to comply or to exit, and some did defect by joining other political parties, ones that had not existed prior to the Egyptian revolution.

Once President Morsi won the presidential elections in June 2012, a handful of prominent older women belonging to the movement as well as sympathisers were given some positions in the constituent assembly delegated with writing the constitution, as well as in advisory positions to the President. For example, Omayma Kamel was appointed a member of the constituent Assembly delegated with the responsibility of drawing up the constitution, and a presidential aide to President Morsi and was put forward as a parliamentary candidate (though she did not make it) (Tadros 2016). Likewise Dr Hoda Ghaneya headed the women's committee of the Freedom and Justice Party, was an MP in parliament and a member of the constituent assembly (Tawfik 2013). Pakinam el Sharkawy, a professor of political science at Cairo University who was not officially a member of the Brotherhood but was a sympathiser also assumed several roles in the Morsi administration. She was an aide to President Morsi, headed the Egyptian delegation to the 57th Commission on the Status of Women in 2013, and was appointed head of the National Council for Justice and Equality<sup>9</sup>. It seems it was a purposeful policy on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood to allow a select number of women to occupy positions of leadership within the Freedom and Justice party and government but not within the actual movement. In an interview with the Freedom and Justice party's flagship newspaper, Hoda Ghaneya was asked about the accusations waged against the FJP and Muslim Brotherhood for marginalizing the role of women (Tawfik 2013). Ghaneya denied such allegations pointing to the role of women [in the MB] in mobilizing against Mubarak's authoritarian regime, their participation in politics and service delivery. 'The talk about the marginalization of the role of women inside

the party and Brotherhood is unfounded and society is witness to that. How can women be excluded when some of us are former MPs and members of the constituent assembly that is delegated with the writing of Egypt's constitution after the revolution and some of us became members of the Shura Council. Where is exclusion then? Having noted that all such positions are in the external political sphere and none within the Muslim Brotherhood the journalist proceeded to ask about whether women in the foreseeable future may become members of the Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood. She replied by rejecting the idea that women's participation in the Guidance Bureau is related to their exclusion, emphasizing that women are active in the social and political life. When she was asked whether the by-laws may change to allow women to become members of the Guidance Bureau', she replied: 'This is left to the process of development and change within the Muslim Brotherhood.' And reverted to talking about women in the FJP. The interview is highly revealing in that leading women in the Muslim Brotherhood recognize that the pathway for political leadership is through the FJP while the organizational structure and hierarchy remains by and large resistant to change.

**Conclusion: Revisiting the regime-movement-gender hierarchy debate within Islamist movements**

This paper examined how political context influenced the sites for exercising agency for the Muslim Sisters as well as how in turn they shaped and influenced their own pathways of influence within and outside the movement. In so doing, the concept of agency as framed by Mahmoud (2012) in the exploration of the mosque movements of Egypt has proven to be too static. What may have appeared as an expression of agency through the spiritual realm during Mubarak's era assumed an overtly political form of agency thereafter. Agency is highly dynamic and its politicization flexible, and the mosque movement became a powerful repertoire for the overt and direct mobilization of a political constituency.

Moreover, the paper specifically interrogated the extent to which openness of the political system influenced the MB's own acquiescence to women assuming positions of power within the movement. The main argument of this paper is that political context hugely influences the sites and pathways for women to assume leadership- however, outside the hierarchy of the organization. The deeply constraining political environment was used as a rationale to circumscribe the assumption of political leadership positions in public life and to postpone the question of internal reform to the gender hierarchy within the movement.

The paper disputed Abdel Latif's (2008) and Abdel Latif and Ottaway (2007)'s hypothesis that the gender hierarchy within the Muslim Brotherhood would become more inclusive of women in leadership positions if they were not repressed by authoritarian rule. It argued that the opening of political space post-Mubarak allowed the Muslim Sisters to thrive and assume leadership positions through the Freedom and Justice party and civil society. However, this did not transform into opportunities for leadership within the Muslim Brotherhood. This was not through lack of claims-making on the part of activist women. From the interviews it became clear some of the Muslim Sisters did press for their own organizational entity, voting rights and representation in the central decision-making structures such as the Shura Council and Guidance Bureau.

For women and men who pressed for reforms, there were two options, akin to what Albert Hirschman described in his seminal work 'Exit, voice and Loyalty' (1970) whereby faced with conflict within one's organization, one has two options, either to exit or to voice, i.e. articulate the grievance and seek to remedy it. When one operates in a closed organization and there is a strong sense of loyalty, the inclination is to voice grievances rather than exit. As there was limited room for manoeuvring, some exited or were expelled from the Muslim Brotherhood. E. left on the 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2016 and one of the contributing factors (though not the only

one) was her frustration at the inertia in recognizing the Muslim Sisters. She and another [male] defector said they were outraged that while in Gaza (a context under occupation and deeply patriarchal), Hamas had established an autonomous kayan 'entity' for women, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt still did not have their own structure.

However, the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement remained immune to any tinkering with its system. This was not on account of the absence of claims-making by the Muslim Sisters, many campaigned and pressed for the creation of a tanzim, for voting rights and for positions in the Shura council and Guidance Bureau. The resistance to reforming the structure was on account of the increased empowerment of the Old Guard, not as predicted by Abdel Latif (2008), their containment when political repression relaxed. As the movement sought to remain intact, those Sisters that could not conform had no choice but to exit.

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's major contribution to religious thought through prolific scholarship, it has retained among some of its leaders and rank and file an affiliation to Salafi thought. This has inhibited the prospects of the emergence of a cohort of Muslim Sisters who are an authoritative source of religious teaching for the Brothers. Women can play a role prosletizing to other women, but ultimately matters of religious teaching are kept to men's leadership. Moreover, from the interviews and accounts undertaken in 2012, it seems that the mosques were key sites for the mobilization of the Muslim Sisters of voters and supporters. This questions the possibility of flexible politicization of the women who frequent the mosques as part of the piety movement. It is perhaps timely to reconsider whether the agential commitment to a kind of politics around ethics and piety is always the case when political opportunity and circumstances alter with regime type.

Since 2013, the Muslim Sisters have played a leading role in raising awareness internationally of the predicament of the Muslim Brotherhood, and internally, have engaged in extensive advocacy and resistance. Just as

they did during the wave of repression in the 1950s-1960s under Nasser, the Muslim Sisters have risen to the task of providing care and support for the families whose members are imprisoned, gone into exile or suffering. It remains to be seen whether the significance of the agency of the Muslim Sisters under these difficult political conditions will put pressure in the long run on the Guidance Bureau to reconsider its gendered organizational hierarchy.

The current period (2013-2016) is one in which the Muslim Brotherhood, including the Sisters as part of the movement have been subjected to a systematic, extreme and ruthless crackdown. Against this backdrop, the question of whether a women's *tanzeem* will be established will be put aside as the survival of the movement is prioritized. If the Old Guard has been weakened by the crackdown, then undoubtedly the younger generations may push in future for greater reform. Factors that may influence the position of the Muslim Sisters organizationally include how their sacrifices (and jihad) translate into recognition within the movement, the authority and composition of the male members of the Guidance Bureau and the ideological predisposition of the voting members of the Muslim Brotherhood. If the latter come from the rank and file who have been Salafized, this will not bid well for the women. On the other hand, for women who have assumed political leadership positions within the party, this may, with time, translate into pressure for internal reform of the movement. Perhaps the weakening of the Guidance Bureau will also have a reverse impact on the movement: strengthening the reformists within.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, *Islamic* refers to what draws on Islam the religion, while *Islamist* is specifically used to describe those who support a political movement, force or party that aspires to power with a view of the instatement of a system of governance drawing on Shariah, while the term *Muslim* is referred to any person who follows Islam the faith irrespective of whether they support an Islamist party or not

<sup>2</sup> The word Salafi here is refers to Salafi political thought premised on the political thought of Ibn Hanbal who formed one of the four schools in Islamic jurisprudence and the highly conservative Imam Ibn Taymeya, both are considered main sources of Salafi thinking.

<sup>3</sup> A people, nation, or race. The word occurs approximately forty times in the Quran. Ummah is a term for a group of people associated with certain ties such as language, history, sex, and/or religion. The nation is considered a larger entity than the state. In Arabic and Islamic culture, the nation is a gathering of people with one religion (Islam)

<sup>4</sup> Wahabi ideology emanates from the political thought of Mohammed Abd Ibn el Wahab (1703-1791) in Saudi Arabia to revive the tradition of returning to the fundamentals of Islam.

<sup>5</sup> The Salafis believe in Al Salaf al Saleh, which refers to the righteous path being that lived and prescribed by the Prophet and his companions only in the first century of Muslim society (Abasi 2002, Bakr 2011, Othman 1981). Salafis reject all forms of ijtehad (revisionist interpretation of the text). An authoritative source on Salafism, Dr Mustapha Helmy defines Salafism as underpinned by three foundations. The first is to follow Al Salaf el Salah (the Prophet and his companions). The second is to reject modern tafsir (interpretation). The third is to follow the ways of thinking mentioned in the Koran and reject philosophic, logic and other ways of thinking Helmy (1976: 35-46)

<sup>6</sup> For a most authoritative description of the Muslim Brotherhood's organizational hierarchy, see Mitchell (1969)

<sup>7</sup> The interviews of 2006 were undertaken by the author [details to be added after peer review to protect anonymity] while interviews undertaken in 2012 were done by Egyptian journalist Robeir el Fares.

<sup>8</sup> Also see Muslim Brotherhood, 2005, 2006, undated for position statements on their vision of the status and role of women and gender organization of social and politics

<sup>9</sup> The council 'was formed in November 2011 by the government of then-prime minister Essam Sharaf. It was mandated with promoting the ideals of justice and equality, disseminating a culture of citizenship and furthering the principle of equality regardless of race, religion or gender' Ahram Online 2013

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## #THISPOEMWILLPROVOKEYOU

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This poem is not a Hindu.

This poem is eager to offend.

This poem is shallow and distorted.

This poem is a non-serious representation of Hinduism.

This poem is a haphazard presentation.

This poem is riddled.

This poem is a heresy.

This poem is a factual inaccuracy.

This poem has missionary zeal.

This poem has a hidden agenda.

This poem denigrates Hindus.

This poem shows them in poor light.

This poem concentrates on the negative aspects of Hinduism.

This poem concentrates on the evil practices of Hinduism.

This poem asserts its moral right to use objectionable words for Gods.

This poem celebrates Krishna's freedom to perch on a naked woman.

This poem flames with the fires of a woman hungry of sex.

This poem supplies sexual connotations.

This poem puts the phallus back into the picture.

This poem makes the shiva lingam the male sexual organ.

This poem does not make the above-mentioned organ erect.

This poem prides itself in its perverse mindset.

This poem shows malice to Hinduism for Untouchability and misogyny.

This poem declares the absence of a Hindu canon.



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This poem declares itself the Hindu canon.  
This poem follows the monkey.  
This poem worships the horse.  
This poem supersedes the Vedas and the supreme scriptures.  
This poem does not culture the jungle.  
This poem jungles the culture.  
This poem storms into temples with tanks.  
This poem stands corrected: the RSS is BJP's mother.  
This poem is not vulnerable.  
This poem is Section 153-A proof.  
This poem is also idiot-proof.  
This poem quotes Dr.Ambedkar.  
This poem considers Ramayana a hetero-normative novel.  
This poem breaches Section 295A of the Indian Penile Code.  
This poem is pure and total blasphemy.  
This poem is a voyeur.  
This poem gossips about the sex between Sita and Laxman.  
This poem is a witness to the rape of Shurpanaka.  
This poem smears Rama for his suspicious mind.  
This poem was once forced into suttee.  
This poem is now taking her revenge.  
This poem is addicted to eating beef.  
This poem knows the castes of all the thirty-three million Hindu Gods.  
This poem got court summons for switching the castes of Gods.  
This poem once dated Karna who was sure he was no test-tube baby.  
This poem is not curious about who-was-the-father.  
This poem is horizontally flipped.  
This poem is a plagiarised version.  
This poem is selectively chosen.

This poem is running paternity tests on Hindutva.

This poem saw Godse (of the RSS) kill Gandhi.

This poem is not afraid of being imprisoned.

This poem does not comply to client demands.

This poem is pornographic.

This poem will not tender an unconditional apology.

This poem will not be Penguin'd.

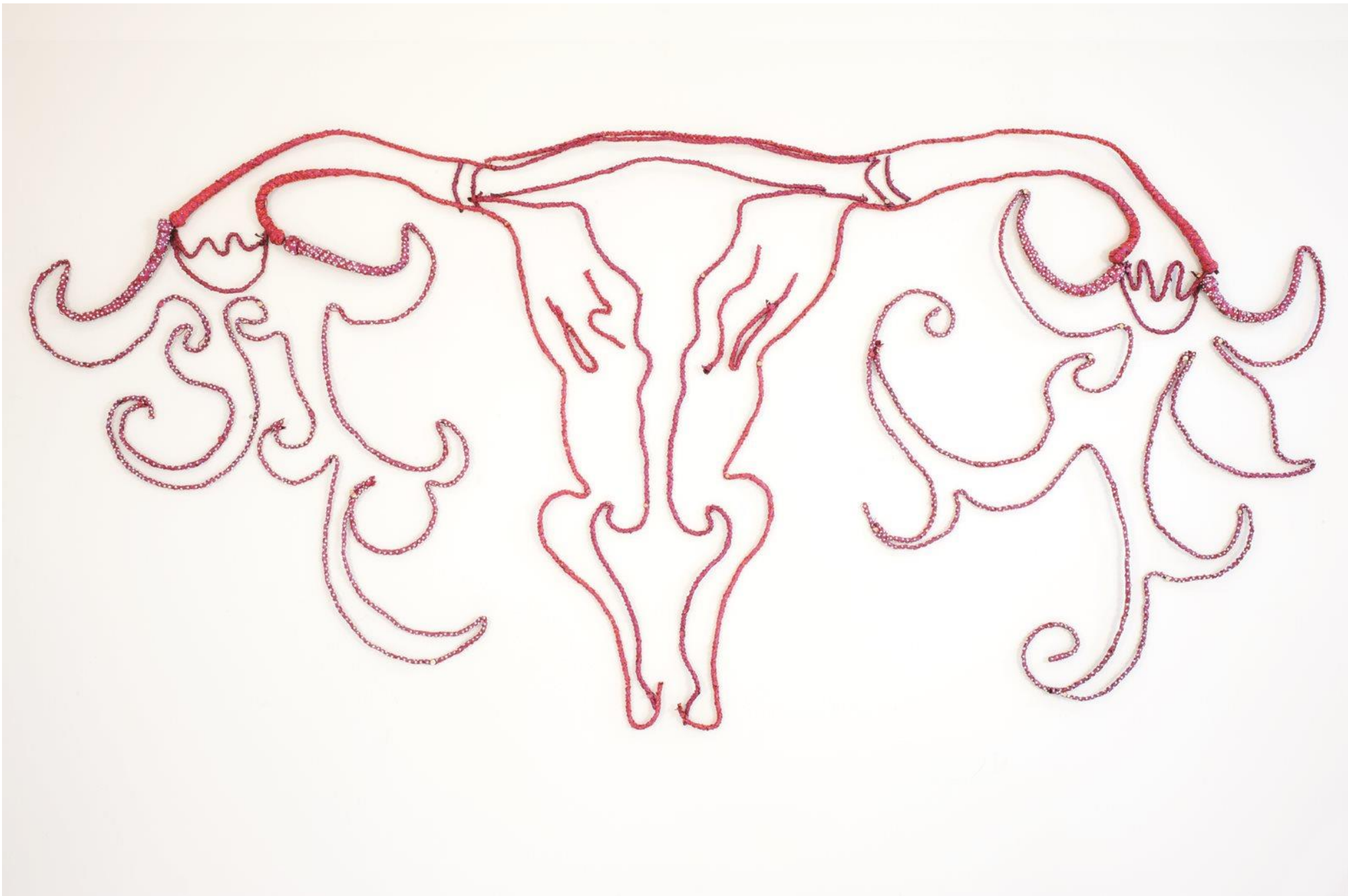
This poem will not be pulped.

**Meena Kandasamy** is a poet, fiction writer, translator and activist who lives in Chennai and London. She has published two collections of poetry, *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy*, and the critically acclaimed novel *The Gypsy Goddess*. Her newly published novel, *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (Atlantic Books, May 2017), explores the theme of domestic violence and marital rape.

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# Christian Fundamentalists in the UK: Moral Swords of Justice or Moral Crusaders?

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## Abstract

*This article considers two streams of Christian Right mobilisation in the UK – the Christian Peoples Alliance and the Conservative Christian Fellowship – in the context of neoliberalism and resurgent communitarianism. The article notes their roles as moral swords of justice in challenging a lack of local democracy, the weight of multi-national corporations, racism and hostility towards migrants. Conversely this article also shows how that same morality underlines an assault on women’s reproductive rights and enables the perpetuation of Christian supremacy and anti-Muslim sentiment within the context of a national turn to communitarianism and a discourse about British values and cohesion. The article concludes by highlighting the conditions within which these Christian Right organisations garner political space and legitimacy, the registers they utilise to make their claims and the specific aspects of their interventions and ideology that make them fundamentalist formations.*

*Keywords: Abortion, Christian Peoples Alliance, Communitarianism, Conservative Christian Fellowship, Newham, Olympic Mega Mosque, Queen’s Market*

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## Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> draws the reader’s attention to two main streams of Christian fundamentalist mobilisation in the UK – the Christian Peoples Alliance (CPA) and the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF) – both of which rely on the exponential growth of evangelical Christian organisations in Britain. In this article, I make several points about the character and strategies of

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Christian fundamentalist mobilisations, within a national context of neoliberal governance and resurgent communitarianism. Firstly, I note that the CPA managed to gain popular support and local political traction because of their vociferous challenge to an undemocratic local council and the incursion of large corporations in the east London borough of Newham. They did so by attaching themselves to a class-based critique of regeneration. This is a prime example of the way that religious organisations position themselves, as do their academic allies, as ‘moral swords of justice’. However, by highlighting the CPA and CCF’s assault on reproductive rights, I argue that this ‘moral sword of justice’ is double-edged; moral conviction quickly turns to a patriarchal defence of the family and aggressive anti-abortion campaigning. The CPA’s local campaign against the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) is contextualised with a discussion of the CCF’s attempts to discredit BPAS at a national level. I argue that a number of new tactics are being deployed by Christian fundamentalists which include the instrumentalisation of women’s rights and particularly ethnic minority women’s concerns. In the final section, I draw attention to the paradoxical place of ‘race’ for Christian Right organisations in the UK - their pronouncements against racism and in defence of immigration are tempered and trumped by an underlying Christian supremacy that most frequently surfaces in criticisms of Europe, secularism and human rights. Moreover, I argue that Islam poses a specific problem for these organisations as their proclaimed support for religious diversity descends into anxiety whenever they see the Christian character of the nation being undermined, in this case by the growing visibility and assertiveness of Muslim organisations. The final section also notes another set of tactics – the Christian Right’s mobilisation of liberal concerns about extremism, cohesion and women’s rights. This article concludes by acknowledging the conditions of possibility or the contextual issues that enable Christian fundamentalists to thrive but also the modalities of identification, the distinct problems with their ideology and their interventions.

### **Neoliberalism and Religious Communitarianism**

The events discussed within this article need to be understood in the context of several decades of neoliberalism, of a resurgent communitarianism in the UK, and the legitimacy afforded to religious groups (irrespective of their political orientation) as bodies that are pivotal to the renewal of social relations. This is important for understanding the gaps that Christian Right organisations step into and the registers they utilise to justify their interventions and demands.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Dhaliwal, 2012) the revival of communitarianism in UK public policy began with the reconstruction of the Labour Party as New Labour under Tony Blair. Communitarianism was New Labour's tool for reinvigorating the voluntary sector and social provision without extending welfare provision as they looked to govern people through "communities of allegiance" and "etho-politics", a new moral vocabulary for public policy emphasising peoples' behaviour and values as the cause of problems and the basis for change (Rose, 1999). The individual became a moral being rather than social as within social democracy or rational as within neoliberal economic philosophy (Rose, 1999). Moreover, as Cowden and Singh (2017) point out, despite the seeming conflict between neoliberalism and communitarianism – between the individual and the communal – these 'doctrines share crucially significant ground'. They are both 'ideologically anti-statist in the sense that they regard state intervention and state welfare as having "failed"' and secondly, they both expect individuals to assume responsibility for the social problems that impact their lives (Cowden and Singh, 2017).

The term communitarianism needs to be distinguished from the sense of 'community' deployed by civil society organisations to assert a strong collective response to injustices and inequalities, a solidarity politics associated with collective civil action calling the state to account, such as anti-racist organisations referring to the 'Black community'.

Communitarianism is steeped in a conservative discourse about one or more of the following - moral degeneration, social disorder, the rise of individualism and the decline of traditional associations namely church attendance or trade union membership (see for instance Etzioni, 1995; Putnam, 2001). As a synthesis of neoliberal economic and social policy, communitarianism reflects a 'concern with 'community', 'values' and questions about the nature of social bonds' (Cowden and Singh, 2017). As with all other forms of communitarian discourse, there is a harking back to a supposedly better age, usually before the establishment of the welfare state, a time where people supposedly did things for themselves and local populations were more cohesive. Often this romanticisation of 'community' is tied in with nationalist sentiment ('Great' Britain). As Cowden and Singh (2017) point out, communitarianism thus presents itself as an alternative to both a state dominated Fabian social democracy on one hand and classical liberal-individualist conceptions of society on the other.

There has been a surprising level of continuity between New Labour, the subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments and the reinvention of the Labour Party under Ed Miliband. The views of key thinkers – Anthony Giddens (1998), Philip Blond (2010) and Maurice Glasman (2010) respectively – that welfarism has had 'perverse consequences' by creating cultures of dependency and political apathy has influenced all three. Blond and Glasman went further by projecting the state as bureaucratic; their work is emblematic of the attack on rights-bearing individuals accused of perpetuating cultures of neoliberalism and arguments calling for the strengthening of longstanding institutions – namely marriage, the family, and religious organisations – on the presumption that these offer stability and social bonds required to counter the impact of neoliberalism. This new wave of communitarianism carries a subtext – women have become too powerful and this is one of the reasons that social relationships have disintegrated. Feminism is projected as individualistic and middle class and therefore an easy fit with

neoliberalism. Calls for strengthening marriage and the family (the 'Broken Britain' scenario) through financial incentives have also been made by members of the CCF who have attempted to influence Conservative Party policy through the Centre for Social Justice.

Religion and religious groups have occupied a central place in this new-found interest in communitarianism. Both Tony Blair and David Cameron referred to religion as an important moral framework<sup>2</sup> and academics have positioned religious groups as sources of social glue that can renew the social bonds damaged by neoliberalism. Moreover, a range of academics have hailed the role of religious organisations in 'a new politics of morality' intended to counteract market philosophy (see Sandel, 2009) and as 'moral swords of justice' against state bureaucracy and large corporations (Glasman, 2010). Indeed, religious groups have been actively positioning themselves as radical voices instigating a 'revival' of civil society, in defining new social relations and as effective counter-movements against the brute reality of capitalism (see Deneulin et al, undated). As the discussion below demonstrates, there may be some truth to this with religious groups stepping into spaces vacated by the Left and the dismantling of civil society but their 'moral swords of justice' are double-edged and patriarchal as the same morality underlies an attack on women's reproductive rights. While some religious organisations avoid questions of gender, sexuality and reproductive rights (see my discussion of Citizens UK in Dhaliwal, 2012), the fundamentalist organisations discussed in this article are neo-patriarchal formations for whom the control of women's bodies and sexuality are central concerns (see Cowden and Sahgal in this Issue).

Conversely, since 9/11, this turn to values, morality and communitarianism has become intertwined with arguments about the 'binding moral force of British values', a discourse that has replaced rights-based social justice responses to racism and inequality (Cowden and Singh, 2017). Muslims have been subject to 'conditional or earned citizenship' and while religious conviction has been bolstered, religiosity among

Muslims has become evidence of how these communities are 'insufficiently British' (Cowden and Singh, 2017). Where ethnic minorities are concerned, these developments have always been cross-cut by an additional imperative - that of 'the civilising mission' (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The place of gender as a standard of governance within this 'civilising mission' is not new (see Spivak, 1985) but several feminists have pointed to its revival post 9/11 as part of a new wave of 'civilisational discourse' (Brown, 2008). Within academia, there is widespread consensus that, at a discursive level at least, gender is an important feature of the moral discourses of community, cohesion and Britishness (for instance see Fekete, 2006).

The following sections reflect the national resurgence of communitarianism as a register for Christian fundamentalist critiques of the state, the market, but also the context within which they feel justified and emboldened by a discourse on 'British values' and government re-iterations that the UK is a Christian country. However, a large part of this article also narrates the story of the east London borough of Newham which reproduced but also contravened Blair's New Labour project. Newham's Labour Party wholeheartedly embraced Blair's neo liberal governance and his preference for a strong centralised command structure, but they did not embrace New Labour (or subsequent government's) faith agendas or communitarianism. The Newham Labour Group are avowedly secular and as part of their implementation of a strong local state, they have been vehemently opposed to a diverse and thriving civil society, including to the resurgence of faith based initiatives (some of which were funded by New Labour). In this context, religious communitarianism is even more likely to present as counter-hegemonic.

### **Resurrecting the Role of Christ in Politics**

The CPA was established in 1999 and was born out of the Movement for Christian Democracy which itself had been established by three cross-party Christian MPs including David Alton who is best known for his opposition to abortion and euthanasia. Their founding document, the

Mayflower Declaration, sets out the organisation's worldview. It is clear from this that ideologically the CPA combines centrist views on the economy, a concern with poverty and disadvantage, support for state welfare provision, communitarian autonomy for some institutions (namely the church and the family), and fundamentalist views on the family, reproduction and sexuality.

The Mayflower Declaration (CPA, 2013) describes the CPA's view of justice as 'ultimately founded in the character of God and its content given by divine law'; they 'regard all life as subject to the rule of Christ' and expressly oppose the 'destruction of the unborn'. Moreover, there are repeated attacks on secularism. Alan Craig, the previous Leader of the CPA and the first CPA councillor to be elected in the UK, noted their continuity with Christian Democratic parties across Europe as based on a shared reaction against anti-clericalism and what he described as 'the corrosive and aggressive secularisation of society and especially of public life'.<sup>3</sup> The CPA assert the 'righteous' role of Christianity in the public sphere:

The Christian basis of our nation is under attack as never before both from secularists and from false religion. We endeavour above all to be authentically Christian in our approach rather than merely different from other political programmes. We will never be ashamed of being Christians and wearing crosses and praying in public.

[CPA, 2013: 13]

Assertions about the role of the state in protecting and providing for the poor, the elderly and the frail and the need to rein in market forces, materialism and objectification are matched by equally strong assertions about the limits of state regulation and a defence of communitarianism, particularly the 'god given' authority of the church and the family (see CPA, 2013: 4). Moreover, the CPA pride themselves on working through Christian values to bring morality back into politics and position themselves against an era of relativism. They frequently assert their commitment to a moral politics of truth and their 2014 Manifesto is



entitled 'Standing for the Truth' and page 2 explains what this means:

The Christian Peoples Alliances' vision for our nation arises from the conviction that the Creator knows best how His creation is ordered. Truth exists and so does a set of objective, moral norms that can guide all human society in the pursuit of true peace, justice, charity and the opportunity for each individual to fulfil their human potential. It is for this reason that a party which seeks to ground itself on Gospel values and the example of Jesus Christ is necessary for our nation.

At the very top of their list of 'moral concerns' is 'the sanctity of life' (from conception to death) and their opposition to abortion.

However, aspects of the CPA's politics can lead progressive emancipatory groups to believe that the CPA are potential allies in struggles against inequality and injustice at times when their vicious assault on reproductive rights and their claim to Christian supremacy is obscured from view.

#### **David versus Goliath: Christian advocates for local people?**

In 2002, the CPA managed to gain an electoral foothold in the London borough of Newham. The significance of this victory cannot be underplayed in a borough where opposition to the Labour Party has been muted and Labour councillors have enjoyed an easy dominance occupying upwards of 54 of the council's 60 seats since 1982.

Arguably, this could suggest a strong mandate in Newham for the local Labour group. However, those interviewed for my doctoral research painted an undemocratic picture of Newham Labour, especially noting low voter turnout, redundant branches, a lack of accountability and transparency, a lack of grassroots activism, voter apathy and high levels of frustration over the absence of an effective Opposition (see Dhaliwal, 2012). Newham Labour Group's electoral monopoly has only been interrupted by two parties - the CPA and the Respect Party - both of which relied on religious identities as vote banks, bringing religion to the fore as a feature of electoral opposition and democratic critique. The CPA's

electoral gains are connected to the growing number of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the south of the borough.

However, in 2010, all three CPA councillors lost their seats; the CPA claimed that this was more about the entrenchment of Labour Party support against a Conservative threat than the unpopularity of their policies among Newham's residents. But it's also possible that the local Labour Party's revival of its Christian Socialist Movement outmanoeuvred the CPA and managed to capture the same vote banks. When he resigned as the leader of the CPA in 2012, Craig joined the UK Independence Party. This is more than simple political opportunism; the discussion below about Christian supremacy and the 'Olympic Mega Mosque' should make clear the basis for such an alignment of interests.

Greg Smith (2002) argues that Alan Craig's electoral success in Newham emerged from his involvement in a local tenants' and residents' association and a critique of estate renewal schemes. However, it was two specific campaigns – opposition to the regeneration of Queen's Market and opposition to the construction of a 'super casino' – that seem to have delivered respect for the CPA in the eyes of local civil society activists and positioned them at the forefront of a critical voice against Newham Council's collusion with large corporations.

Queen's Market is a one-hundred-year-old sheltered grocery and clothes market in east London. In 2003, Newham Council proposed to engage St Modwen's developers to regenerate the area. Over seven years, a community-led campaign by the Friends of Queen's Market successfully highlighted a huge number of shortcomings of the redevelopment proposals. The Council were accused of secrecy, lack of consultation and lack of democracy – even in the face of 2600 planning objections and an inquiry led by The East London Community Organisation (TELCO). Newham's Mayor appeared defiant and continued to push his plans while other Labour councillors remained silent. The Friends of Queen's Market foregrounded the intersection of 'race' and class – the market was depicted as an important site of multicultural conviviality and working-

class heritage and the campaign noted the potential race equality impacts of redevelopment plans.<sup>4</sup> Linked to this were economic and food issues – Asda would offer a narrow range of produce and be more expensive than the cheaper and more diverse being sold at Queen’s Market. In a poor and ethnically mixed area this was particularly significant for mobilising local people. Additional arguments were made about the environment and the Council were also criticised for plans to replace a social housing project for elderly Asians with luxury flats.<sup>5</sup>

The campaign to save Queen’s Market became a significant episode for galvanising local civil society and consolidating a sense of community. The CPA appear to have gained legitimacy from their association with it. When I interviewed Alan Craig, he emphasised the Party's commitment to social justice and protecting the poor without reference to Christianity. Indeed, the CPA’s statement on Queen’s Market argued that it stands against ‘the values-free managerialism’ of the local Labour party and with:

...the marginalised and speaks up for community and family-oriented values. Unlike the Mayor, we would never bulldoze an invaluable and diverse community asset like Queen’s Market in favour of a ruthless grasping Walmart Asda.<sup>6</sup>

This statement reflects Craig’s counter-positioning of ‘values free’ secular politics, bureaucracy and the market against ‘strong values’ faith-based politics.

Two years later, Tony Blair heralded plans to support the development of ‘Super Casinos’ in England. Newham was selected as one of the key sites. Newham’s Labour Party were quick to support the proposals and they eventually awarded a contract to Aspers to develop a large casino in Stratford. This became the country’s first super casino to open in 2011. The Council are convinced that they won the economic argument - Aspers now employs 600 people, 329 of who are Newham residents<sup>7</sup>, Aspers paid Newham Council an initial £5million for the contract and has since been paying them £1 million a year,<sup>8</sup> which the

Council claims has been used to fund community organisations and to create jobs.<sup>9</sup>

Opposition to the plans were muted. When it came to the council vote on the plans for the Casino, all Labour councillors voted in favour except for the Christian Socialists within the Newham Labour Group who abstained on grounds of conscience. Alan Craig emphasised the CPA's commitment to open, transparent government and opposed gambling on the grounds that it could be seen as a 'ticket out of poverty' (Newham is one of the most deprived areas in England).<sup>10</sup> In fact the Casino Advisory Panel's report (undated) had explored some of these concerns but concluded that alleged links between poverty and gambling were contentious and opening a casino presented no additional risk of addiction to the 110 betting shops already in the area as well as bingo halls and access to online gambling.<sup>11</sup> However, Craig was also making moral arguments against gambling which are reiterated in the CPA Manifestos.

Alan Craig's energy for Saving Queen's Market and his David versus Goliath like stand against Newham's Super Casino could be deemed anti-capitalist activism. The CPA may have been an important moral antidote to the lack of state accountability and New Labour's pandering to large corporations. They may well have used the symbolic weight of religion to wield a moral sword of justice to defend the interests of local people against the interests of big business. However, their sense of morality carries proscriptions on behaviour (sex, drinking, smoking, gambling, dress codes) and a desire to police women's reproductive rights. In equal measure, Alan Craig railed against sex outside of marriage and abortion and he alleged that teenagers are getting pregnant to secure housing. The next section shines a spotlight on the way that the same moral sword of justice compromises and attacks women's rights.

### **The Christian Right Assault on Reproductive Rights**

In 2011, Alan Craig's cutting edge critique of the impact of regeneration on local people descended into an assault on women's reproductive rights as he joined a multifaith picket outside the Newham offices of the British

Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) in Stratford. Importantly, Craig deployed the same arguments against BPAS that he had voiced against Newham Council, St Modwen's developers and Aspers Casino. In his view, BPAS was:

Becoming a large money spinning business. This centre is commercial opportunism to take advantage of Westfield Stratford City and the Olympics. BPAS have an interest in doing as many abortions as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Craig joined forces with the Society for the Protection of the Unborn (SPUC) to gather signatures from Newham residents for a petition directed at One Housing, the owners of the BPAS premises. The petition claimed a lack of transparency and proper consultation during the Council's planning process and attempted to scaremonger residents by claiming that BPAS was disposing of human remains in local bins.

In common with other Christian fundamentalists, they claim that life begins at conception and there are repeated references to the right of the 'unborn child'. Their founding document declares that '(w)ithout the right to life, all other rights and laws are rendered meaningless' (CPA, 2013, pg. ii). Abortion is startlingly referred to as one example of international 'cultures of death' and this is coupled with the claim that '(o)ver 7 million unborn children have lost their lives to abortion since the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act' (see CPA Manifesto for 2015, pages 8-9). These 'cultures of death' include assisted reproductive technologies, embryology research and euthanasia or assisted dying.

Moreover, as is now common among a range of fundamentalist groups, the CPA's anti-abortion rhetoric is pinned to an anxiety about declining demography and the possibility that their group will be replaced by outsiders. In one of their many shocking statements on abortion, the CPA claim a connection between abortion and immigration:

CPA members will wake up this country to the reality of the demographic consequences of an anti-life culture. With birth-rates falling dangerously below replacement levels, we now face major

economic and social problems associated with an ageing population. The issue of live birth-rate in turn has implications for the question of migration. States which kill their unborn and do not support marriage and family life, are having to replace this missing workforce through liberalising the numbers of people they admit, with inevitable issues relating to integration.

[CPA, 2016: 12]

The CPA's pro-life position is located within a wider patriarchal discourse about the family as a 'Biblical and fundamental institution'. They oppose same sex relationships and reserve marriage for heterosexual couples. The current leader of the CPA, Sid Cordle, played a leading role in the campaign against the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. They are opposed to sex outside of marriage and they propose financial incentives for couples to enter and remain married as well as a financial incentive to encourage mothers to remain at home until the child is aged 5. There is absolutely no recognition of the costs of family life and marriage to women, nor of the incidence of domestic violence and the problems that women experience when trying to exit abusive relationships. As Cowden and Sahgal (in this Issue) have explained, 'the construction of a neo-patriarchal order' is a defining feature of fundamentalist organisations. Yet the CPA's opposition to abortion is framed as a defence of the rights of women. In their 2016 Manifesto, they state the following:

Abortion leads to increased exploitation of women, not their 'liberation'. Abortion violates the dignity and integrity of women. It leaves a trail of anger, guilt, resentment, depression and loss of self-respect.

[CPA, 2016: 11].

The CPA reiterate their commitment to a repeal of the 1967 Abortion Act, withdrawal of state funding to abortion providers and the institution of pro-life pregnancy advisory services. They advocate state funding for housing and welfare services for pregnant women on the assumption that women undergoing abortion only do so when faced with difficult material

circumstances.

Fortunately, when it came to the multifaith picket in Newham, BPAS could mobilise considerable support from residents. However, my doctoral research noted that among Newham's councillors and civil society activists, it was the Labour Party's Christian Socialist Movement that spoke out most clearly against the CPA's homophobia and anti-abortion position. Among civil society activists, there appeared to be more discomfort with the CPA's position on the construction of a Tablighi Jamaat mosque than their opposition to abortion and same sex relationships.

According to BPAS, three pickets of their Stratford premises took place during 2011. Two of these were led by SPUC who claimed to have the support of local Evangelical, Catholic and Muslim organisations. A third demonstration was led by Abort 67, which is linked to the Wokingham Evangelical church. It is important to understand the significance of these local interventions in the context of a resurgence in anti-abortion activism in the UK. This has been particularly aggressive and intimidating and included the following tactics: challenges to women as they attempt to enter the clinics; covert filming that undermines women's medical anonymity; the use of placards displaying photographs of bloodied and dismembered fetuses; and distribution of lies about the impact of abortion on women's health including allegations about the incidence of cancer (see Biddlecombe, 2016; Ellis, 2016). Because of the intensity and frequency of these demonstrations, abortion providers appealed to the police for a 'buffer zone' between the clinics and the protestors.

Moreover, a new wave of anti-abortion activism is now embedded within the Conservative Party courtesy of the influence of the CCF. The CCF was founded in 1990 by a group of students at Exeter University including Tim Montgomerie. The CCF is now a major reason for the incorporation of committed Christians into the Conservative Party and several gained the support of evangelical church networks to oust secularist, pro-choice, pro-euthanasia MPs.<sup>13</sup>

This Christian lobby within the Conservative Party found new voice

between 1997 and 2003, when electoral support was waning (Cook, 2010). Along with Phillipa Stroud and the MP Ian Duncan Smith, Montgomerie founded the Centre for Social Justice, a right wing think tank that has influenced many Conservative Party policies. Montgomerie claims that his listening campaign revealed church concerns revolve around poverty, debt and drugs rather than sexuality and reproduction. Yet, in the last ten years, reproductive rights have been at the top of the agenda of at least two CCF members – Nadine Dorries MP for mid-Bedfordshire and Fiona Bruce MP for Congleton.

Since her election in 2005, Nadine Dorries has relentlessly campaigned for a change to abortion time limits, she has vociferously criticised BPAS and Marie Stopes International and promoted faith-based interventions. In 2006, Dorries introduced a Termination of Pregnancy Ten Minute Rule Bill which sought to reduce the abortion time limit from 24 to 21 weeks and to introduce a ten-day cooling off period between the time that a woman requests an abortion and the procedure is performed.<sup>14</sup> The Bill was rejected.

In 2008, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill brought the Christian lobby in the UK to the forefront of national politics as the Vatican and the Catholic Church called on parishioners to lobby their MPs to vote against the Bill (Murphy, 2008). The Christian and pro-life lobby attempted to use this Bill to push for reductions in the abortion time limit from 24 weeks to as little as 13 weeks. Nadine Dorries, tabled an amendment to restrict abortion time limits from 24 weeks to 20 weeks. The current Prime Minister Theresa May voted in favour of Dorries' amendment but fortunately there was overwhelming opposition to any change in abortion time limits.

In 2011, Dorries tried again to impact reproductive rights, this time by proposing an amendment to the Health and Social Care Bill. Her amendment argued for a reduction in abortion time limits and demanded that abortion providers be prevented from delivering pre-abortion counselling because of an alleged vested interest in encouraging women



to choose abortion. Fortunately, none of these interventions have been successful. However, Dorries succeeded in getting the Health Minister to open a discussion about pregnancy counselling services and recently the government awarded the anti-abortion group Life £250,000 to provide counselling services.

BPAS claim that Nadine Dorries' interventions are linked to the import of a new wave of US Evangelical activism into Britain. There is considerable evidence to support this claim. Dorries has been funded by the Christian Legal Centre, which has represented several Christian claims of religious discrimination and is allied to the right-wing American group, the Alliance Defense Fund (Hundal, 2010). Moreover, Andrea Williams, a member of the Lawyers Christian Fellowship, drafted the amendment that Dorries championed in 2008 (Modell, 2008; Hundal 2010). Williams has also been funded by the Alliance Defense Fund (Hundal, 2010) and Dorries has referred to receiving support from 'an army of interns' (Hundal, 2010), which Modell (2008) argues is part of a new Christian Right strategy to push their agenda through sympathetic Christian MPs and simultaneously 'build a new generation of committed Christian politicians'.

There are multiple similarities between the framing of Nadine Dorries' arguments and Alan Craig's interventions. They both claim that abortion providers such as BPAS and Marie Stopes International are led by a financial interest in performing abortions. These groups are compared to corrupt profit-driven companies even though both are not-for-profit charities. Unlike Craig, however, Dorries claims to be pro-choice rather than anti-abortion though others have argued that this is more of a pragmatic strategy to gain support in parliament. Both Craig and Dorries recite the false claims peddled by anti-abortion groups about the links between abortion, cancer and mental health problems. Both claim that women are being exploited, abused and traumatised by the 'abortion industry' and they claim to be on the side of women's rights. Importantly, this claim to women's rights chimes with Ellis' (2016) finding on the tactics of American anti-abortionists. According to Ellis (2016), Mark Crutcher

produced a document in 1992 entitled *Firestorm: A Guerrilla Strategy for Pro-life America* in which he argued that in contexts where a repeal of abortion legislation is unlikely other strategies need to be considered. He specifically advocated reframing anti-abortion arguments as concerns about women. This gave rise to the co-terminus claim by anti-abortionists that they are both pro-women and pro-life.

In November 2014, another member of the Conservative Christian Fellowship, Fiona Bruce MP, also the Chair of the All Party Pro-Life/Anti-Abortion Group, introduced a Ten-Minute Bill proposing “(t) hat leave be given to bring in a Bill to clarify the law relating to abortion on the basis of sex-selection; and for connected purposes” (as quoted by Lee, 2017). There was overwhelming support for further discussion (181 in favour and only 1 opposed) and Bruce could have proceeded. Instead, in February 2015, she decided to re-articulate this as an amendment to the Serious Crime Bill and proposed to criminalise abortion on the grounds of sex selection. As Purewal and Eklund (2017) point out, the amendment on sex selective abortion ‘exemplified how a public health issue could become quickly incorporated into a crime discourse as a means of furthering the neoliberal state’s shrinking role in terms of service provision (e.g. through pregnancy and post-natal support services), meanwhile heightening its penal role’.

Bruce’s amendment was supported by a broad alliance of Asian women’s organisations and ethnic minority fundamentalist organisations who argued that women are under pressure to abort female foetuses because of a cultural preference for sons. They depicted this as a form of violence against women and girls. One activist referred to this as ‘womb terrorism’ (as quoted by Purewal and Eklund, 2017). In defence of her amendment, Bruce declared that sex selective abortion is ‘the first and most fundamental form of violence against women and girls’ (as quoted in Lee, 2017) particularly mobilising the terms ‘gendercide’ and ‘honour killings’. Fortunately, the amendment was successfully opposed by other Asian women’s organisations, academics, abortion providers, and medical

staff who argued that women would end up being harmed and potentially pushed into backstreet abortions. Moreover, the pro-choice lobby raised alarm bells about the push to make the term “unborn child” a part of UK law as this would give the foetus rights, potentially undermining and criminalising all abortion. They also highlighted the lack of clear evidence regarding the incidence of sex selective abortion in the UK and the potential for racial profiling in the provision of abortion services (Purewal and Eklund, 2017). They pushed against criminalisation and in favour of state investment in VAWG services to tackle the issue. Bruce’s amendment was defeated (201 for and 292 against) but the House did agree to commit the UK Government to assess the evidence on this issue.

Importantly for this essay, Bruce’s campaign employed tactics that chime with the other interventions discussed in this section. Doctors and abortion providers were depicted as unethical, greedy and driven by money (Lee, 2017). Moreover, it demonstrated the Christian Right’s ability to instrumentalise Asian women’s struggles for their own anti-abortion agenda and to position themselves as the moral vanguard of equality and non-discrimination, specifically carrying the mantle for oppressed women within minority communities. No doubt this claim bears echoes of centuries of white saviour discourse.

### **Christian Supremacy and its Racial Registers**

Despite the claims of Christian Right activists that they carry the mantle for ethnic minority women’s rights, ‘race’ occupies a paradoxical place within Christian fundamentalist mobilisations. The CPA and CCF are based on support from ethnically diverse evangelical church networks (Brown, 2010). The first leader of the Christian People’s Alliance was Ram Gidoomal, an Asian business man. Gidoomal ran as the CPA candidate in the first race for the London Mayor in 2000 and again in 2004. He managed to gain almost 100,000 votes, beating the Green candidate on first preference votes (White, 2004). Reasons given for Gidoomal’s popularity include ethnic minority church goers disappointed with the lack of other ethnic minority candidates and anger over the Iraq War (White, 2004). In

fact, when Alan Craig was elected in Canning Town in 2002, many believed that this was also about his vocal opposition to the Iraq War, which the CPA had declared to be 'illegal, unwise and immoral' (The Church Times, 2009) in a context where opposition to the Iraq War was suppressed by the Newham Labour Party (Dhaliwal, 2012). Moreover, an immigrant himself, Gidoomal set the tone for the CPA's support of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Indeed, there are plenty of signs that the CPA is keen on diversity and often their Manifestos read like liberal left positions against racism and a defence of immigration based on Christian values of hospitality and a common humanity (see Bretherton, 2010 for more on this line of argument).

However, there are also limits to their Christian hospitality towards migrants. They opposed an amnesty for undocumented migrants (led in most part by other Christian organisations) and their compassionate approach to immigration is restricted by three other interests - a strong commitment to law and order, anxiety about an enlarged welfare state, and a sense of Christian supremacy. Often these concerns fold in to an argument that bears markers of the assimilationist turn in liberal politics within the UK, echoing crude claims about causal links between immigration, social disintegration and a crisis in the white majority sense of belonging (such as made by David Goodhart, 2004 and Eric Kaufman, 2017). DeHanas and Pieri (2011) have rightly pointed out that, since 9/11, these perceived threats associated with ethnic diversity are often articulated as spatial threats focusing on the construction of Muslim places of worship as the Islamisation of the public sphere. This is discussed further below.

Much of the new 'faiths literature' in the UK applauds the Christian philanthropic contribution to migrants struggling at the margins of welfare state provision (for instance, see Bretherton, 2010 and Furbey, 2012) but there is little, if any, comment on the specific ways in which Christian Right organisations are utilising the predominant discourse on community

cohesion, terrorism and Britishness to salvage and strengthen a Christian character for the UK.

CPA documents recognise religious diversity and claim to believe in the equal representation of minority religions in the UK. They espouse a multifaith defence of all religiosity in the public sphere and they assume an affinity with other religions based on presumed opposition to secularism (and occasionally also human rights). However, they also expect an Establishment position for the Church of England (see CPA, 2013, p. 4) and there are multiple statements on restoring the Christian heritage of the UK (see CPA, 2013 Manifesto). Assertions about the Christian character of the UK and Europe are intertwined with a critique of Europe (disappointment that the EU constitution does not seek to protect Europe's Christian heritage), an attack on secularism and human rights. Their 2014 Manifesto alleges that this Christian heritage has been compromised by government and judicial support for same sex marriage and they berate the imposition of a European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation (ECTR) as this will likely impact faith schools and religious organisations. Indeed, they unequivocally defend faith schools, particularly Christian schools (including the teaching of Intelligent Design otherwise known as Creationism) but not Muslim schools. Women's rights and opposition to terrorism are instrumentalised in their differential treatment of Muslim schools:

Schools with another faith ethos such as Muslim schools need to be treated differently from Christian schools and be the subject of a review. Taken into account has to be support for violence, attitude towards women and attitude towards those of other faiths if their people wish to convert. Indoctrination should never be allowed to operate in British schools.

[CPA, 2016 Manifesto, p. 16]

The Christian Right's emphasis on Christian heritage is intertwined with anti-Muslim sentiment - Andrew Brown (2010) argues that the CCF harbour 'considerable suspicion of Muslims and of Islam. These people do

not want a "faith-based" society: they want a Christian one'. I would argue that this is also true of the CPA. The CPA's 2015 Manifesto states the following:

It is the fashion to separate "moderate Islam" from "radical Islam". However there has been no proper analysis of where the one is separated from the other. For this reason, we say as follows - We want a full debate on the place of Islam in society which will include very important questions about promotion of violence against people because of their faith, attitude to women and attitude to people who want to leave Islam.

[CPA, 2015: p. 17]

Alan Craig's interventions on the construction of a Tablighi Jamaat mosque in Stratford, east London must be viewed in light of this partial defence of rights, a sense of Christian superiority, a commitment to god's law as espoused by Christianity and their differential racialisation of Islam.

In 1996 the Tablighi Jamaat purchased land from Newham Council to the tune of £1.6 million (DeHanas and Pieri, 2011). They opened a makeshift mosque, in lieu of planning permission. For around twenty years the site saw approximately 2500 worshippers per week. But in 2006, the site became the centre of national public controversy as the right-wing press claimed that the group were planning to develop a state of the art mosque complex, intended to become the largest mosque in Europe and hosting up to 70,000 worshippers.<sup>15</sup> The eventual application was only for a capacity of 12,000 capacity (10,000 spaces for men and a separate 2000 spaces for women), a school and a conference centre. A normative multiculturalist practice granting planning permission to diverse places of worship was knocked sideways by the affective impact of claims about the scale of this project as compared to Christian sites across the UK (DeHanas and Pieri, 2011). Growing disquiet about the development led the group to scale back its plans. These proposals were rejected by Newham Council in 2012 on the basis of concerns about traffic, poor planning and design.<sup>16</sup> Following a series of appeals by the Trust, the government's Planning

Inspector convened a public inquiry in June 2014 and the Department for Communities and Local Government subsequently rejected all three appeals on the basis that the site could more productively be used to construct housing and because the proposal did not meet local and London wide regeneration objectives. Interestingly, these local and central state decisions did not refer to the controversial nature of the Tablighi Jamaat sect, concerns that the expected £100 million cost of the plan would be funded by Saudi Wahhabis, and allegations of links to terrorism.

Importantly, Alan Craig was at the forefront of a highly visible public campaign against the Tablighi Jamaat's proposals. He established a website entitled 'Mega Mosque No Thanks' and gained significant media attention, so much so that the press appeared to adopt his alarmist renaming of the development as the 'Olympic Mega Mosque'. Craig also established an organisation called Newham Concern whose website gives little away in relation to its founders though there is speculation that the group was established by two CPA councillors and Andrea Williams (of the Christian Legal Centre as discussed in the previous section).<sup>17</sup> The Mega Mosque No Thanks site and Newham Concern avoided direct reference to their Christian beliefs. In fact Craig distanced himself from a national petition against the mosque (which accumulated 255,000 signatures) on the basis that the wording - "We the Christian population of this great country England"<sup>18</sup> – excluded 'non-Christians who oppose the mosque, as well as Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh opponents'.<sup>19</sup>

Craig (as Newham Concern) accused both the Tablighi Jamaat and Newham Council of a lack of transparency and couched his concerns in relation to the regeneration of the local area, specifically local housing and employment needs.<sup>20</sup> Alan Craig's public statements, took care not to come across as anti-Muslim, stipulating their defence of mosques in general and their specific concerns about Tablighi Jamaat. They alleged that Tablighi Jamaat are a proselytising organisation with a separatist ideology and 'expresses itself in cultural chauvinism and gender discrimination', that Tablighi followers make strong distinctions between

believers and non-believers, and as such the organisation would be unable to deliver benefits to the wider Newham population and more likely to reproduce the monocultural area that has developed around their headquarters in West Yorkshire. Elsewhere, Craig issued concerns that the proposals would create a 'Muslim enclave' and 'shariah controlled zone', reiterating national discourse around segregation and cohesion.<sup>21</sup> In terms of gender discrimination, Craig's Mega Mosque website submitted evidence of the Tablighi Jamaat's 'subjugation of women'.<sup>22</sup> Although the website recognised that the Tablighi Jamaat are an introverted pietist movement that have renounced jihad, as with much of the press coverage of the issue, they drew attention to links between the Tablighi Jamaat's mosques in the UK and terrorist activity.

It is not that these concerns are baseless, the links are important and similar points have been asserted by liberal Muslims equally opposed to the Tablighi Jamaat's plans for the Abbey Mills mosque. But there was no other local campaign against fundamentalism, terrorism and social conservatism so it seems that even progressive Muslim activists signed up to Craig's interventions. Craig could capitalise on these and couch his concerns as less about Christian supremacy and the perceived threat of Islam and more as a stand against terrorism and sexism and for cohesion, community and integration. However, there is an intense contradiction between the Christian Right's assertions about the impact of socially/ultra-conservative and right wing Muslim formations and their deafening silence on equally problematic positions among Christians and other minority religions. For instance, east London is home to a growing number of particularly secretive and expansive Christian groups that have been implicated in corruption and child abuse but there is nothing at all from Craig or the CPA on these organisations.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding, I draw on Michael Keith's (2005) assertion that it is useful, if not necessary, to make a distinction between conditions of possibility and modalities of identification. The CPA and the CCF have benefitted from an



exponential growth in evangelical Christian networks in the UK and the USA. They are able to position themselves as the vanguard against the long-term impact of neoliberal economic policies, increasingly centralised party political structures and problems with local democracy. In part this is because national political, policy level and academic herald religious organisations as offering important moral frameworks and social glue to rectify and counteract the damage done by neoliberalism. Both organisations make use of multiple contemporary registers to legitimise their political interventions – selective use of human rights language, women’s rights, cohesion and integration, British values, terrorism and security. Moreover, the absence of local and national campaigning against Christian, Hindu and Sikh fundamentalism means that the right-wing ideologies of these organisations are rarely understood even by progressive activists challenging Muslim fundamentalists. What appears to be fooling progressive activists into thinking that these groups are potential allies in progressive struggles is the fact that their ideological commitment to creating God’s law on earth is often obscured from view. Christian fundamentalists attach themselves to struggles against a lack of local democracy and market forces. The rhetoric of big business and regeneration plays a significant part in their interventions, their outward expression is rooted in material concerns and there is often little reference to the Bible or their Christian values. This means that one must seek out documentation to understand their ideological world view. Ironically, it is the neoliberal and undemocratic but avowedly secular local Labour council that is clearest about the fundamentalist tendencies of the CPA.

Both the CPA and the CCF meet a number of the defining features of fundamentalism discussed by Cowden and Sahgal (in this Issue). They are neo-patriarchal, supremacist organisations that claim Christianity as the absolute truth and they clearly assert their opposition to secularism and human rights. Both organisations advocate financial incentives for marriage and to encourage women to stay at home and raise children. Abortion is depicted as a reflection of the moral degeneration of society.

The same language of holding big business to account underlines their attacks on reproductive rights as charitable organisations are pushed into the same box as profit oriented, corrupt, multi-national corporations. These are sophisticated organisations that reframe their arguments in equality and pro-women terms, thereby feminising fundamentalism and the anti-abortion lobby.

They are, however, willing to stand against anti-immigrant sentiment and are largely immersed in campaigns to improve the material conditions and life chances of local people, even the CPA's campaign against the Tablighi Jamaat mosque is framed as a campaign about transparent government and the need to prioritise the material needs of local people in relation to housing and jobs. Nonetheless, their claims to stand for equality and cohesion are ruptured by their far from universal application of human rights, a commitment to Christian supremacy and differential treatment of Muslim formations. Gender equality is appropriated as a value that reflects not just 'British values' but specifically Christian values and an allegedly inherent Christian character for the UK, without acknowledging the intimidatory tactics of SPUC and Abort 67 or the implication of Christian organisations in child abuse and corruption. In part, this focus is made possible by the rise and rise of a national rhetoric about British values and the UK as a Christian country.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on fieldwork undertaken between 2007 and 2011 as part of doctoral research. Interviewees signed consent forms and agreed to the use of extracts from their interviews in publications and presentations. This doctoral fieldwork is supplemented with additional insights from analysis of secondary materials on Christian Right interventions in national debates.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, David Cameron referred to religion as a moral framework and "a guide to life". See 'Teachings of Jesus are a "good guide to life" says Cameron' by Jenna Lyle dated 6/11/09 posted on *Christian Today* and available at: <http://www.christiantoday.co.uk/article/teachings.of.jesus.are.a.good.guide.to.life.says.cameron/24555.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Alan Craig conducted on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.friendsofqueensmarket.org.uk/2156/2182.html> [last accessed 12th March 2017].

<sup>5</sup> See Friends of Queens Market website: <http://www.friendsofqueensmarket.org.uk/> [last accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2017].

<sup>6</sup> See 'Newham mayor's attack on Christian Peoples Alliance success: "He is lashing out blindly at something' posted on 15/05/06 at: <http://www.cparty.org.uk/index.php?page=news&id=208&highlight=queens%20market>

<sup>7</sup> See: [http://www.newhamrecorder.co.uk/news/stratford\\_casino\\_creating\\_400\\_new\\_jobs\\_in\\_five\\_years\\_1\\_4459382](http://www.newhamrecorder.co.uk/news/stratford_casino_creating_400_new_jobs_in_five_years_1_4459382)

<sup>8</sup> See Hattersley, R. 'Family values 2011: Labour's elder statesman visits Britain's newest casino - and is appalled at the way it's being sold as family friendly and socially responsible' dated 15<sup>th</sup> December 2011 and published by *The Daily Mail*. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2074308/Roy-Hattersley-appalled-Britains-newest-casino-sold-family-friendly-socially-responsible.html> [last accessed 17<sup>th</sup> March 2017].

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-34678230>

<sup>10</sup> As quoted by Angela Saini in 'Say no to casino' dated 28 October 2014 and published by *BBC News*. Available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2007/01/31/anti\\_casino\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2007/01/31/anti_casino_feature.shtml) [last accessed 15<sup>th</sup> March 2017].

<sup>11</sup> The Casino Advisory Panel report is available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090213101914/http://culture.gov.uk/cap/proposals/Newham.pdf> [last accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2017].

<sup>12</sup> See 'Drawing All Faiths Together - Against Sexual Freedom' posted 8/11/11 to: [http://paulstott.typepad.com/i\\_intend\\_to\\_escape\\_and\\_co/2011/11/drawing-all-faiths-together-against-sexual-freedom.html](http://paulstott.typepad.com/i_intend_to_escape_and_co/2011/11/drawing-all-faiths-together-against-sexual-freedom.html) [last accessed 18<sup>th</sup> March 2017].

<sup>13</sup> According to Chris Cook (2010), Fiona Bruce MP for Congleton had around 300 local people actively campaigning for her through Christian networks because of her links with the New Life Church.

<sup>14</sup> A copy of the Bill can be downloaded here:  
[http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/files/guide\\_to\\_nadine\\_dorries\\_t\\_mrb.pdf](http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/files/guide_to_nadine_dorries_t_mrb.pdf) [last accessed 24th March 2017].

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3632591/The-shadow-cast-by-a-mega-mosque.html>

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9725631/Plans-for-new-east-London-mega-mosque-rejected-by-local-council.html>

<sup>18</sup> The petition and the government's response can be found here:  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20071227182534/http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page12552.asp>

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.megamosquenothanks.com/faq#g3>

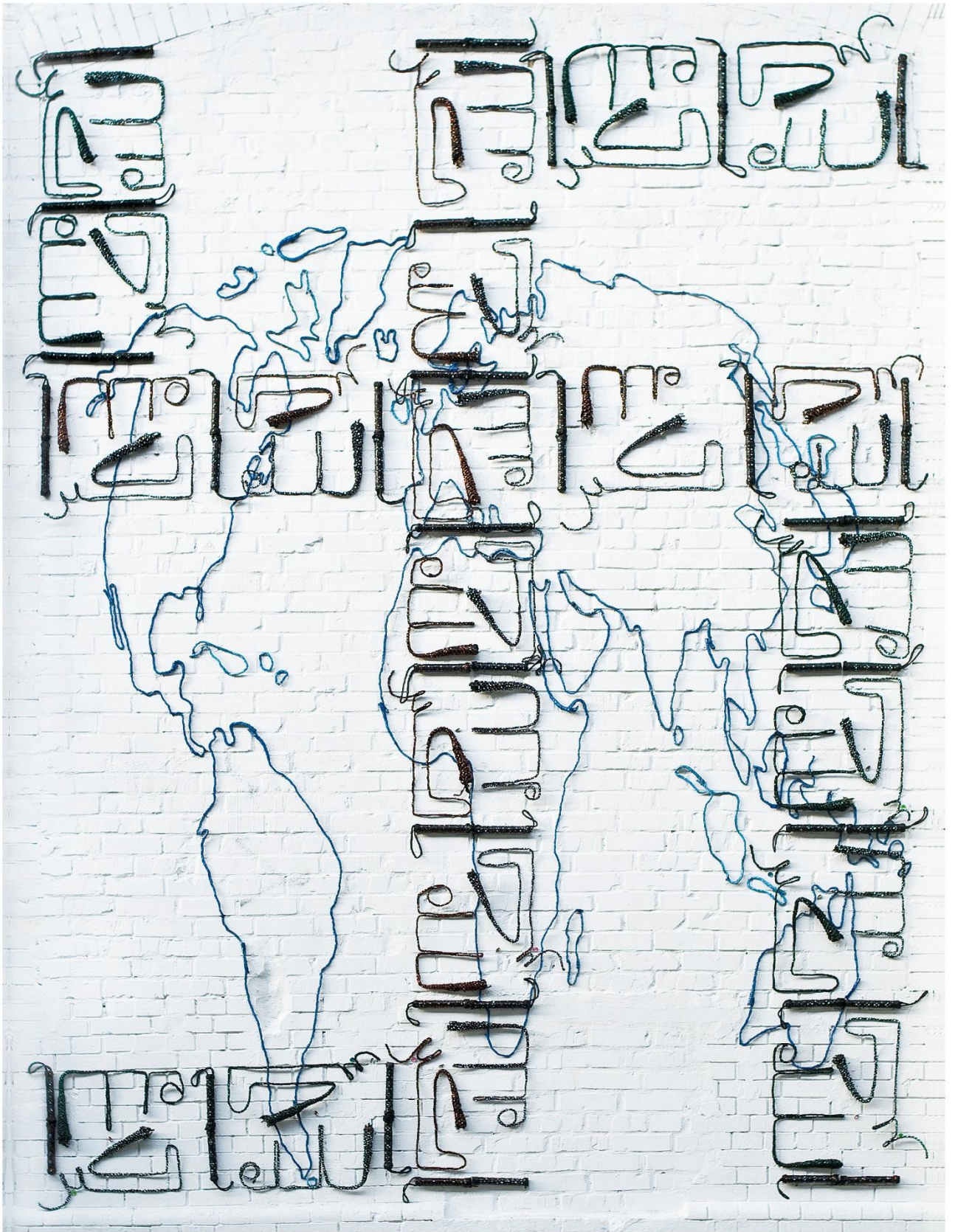
<sup>20</sup> Newham Concerns objections spelt out in a letter from their solicitors to Newham Planning Officer – interestingly little on the politics of the group, very much couched in the language of regeneration, planning and development  
<http://www.megamosquenothanks.com/sites/default/files/currentnews/Formal%20letter%20to%20Newham%20Council.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.megamosquenothanks.com/content/mega-mosque-muslim-place-worship-four-times-capacity-st-pauls-cathedral-planned-east-london->

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.megamosquenothanks.com/evidence/subjugation-of-women>

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## Secularism's Fault

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Saba Mahmood is not a huge fan of what she calls “political secularism”, not especially, of its twin principles of religious liberty (RL) and (religious) minority rights (MR), the modern liberal legal expression of such secularism. In her book, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, that uses the beleaguered plight of the Egyptian Copts to think of secularism “critically”, Mahmood contends that the culprit for their state of siege, suffering discrimination as individuals and periodic sectarian assault from religious majority Muslims as community, is not so much the incomplete secularism of Egypt, Egypt’s *religiosity* as one might be tempted to think, rather its Egypt’s political secularism per se. This is so because secularism’s promise of freedom of religion/minority rights granted to the Copts of Egypt, as expressed in the formal liberal legal system of Egypt, fails to deliver on their promise of protection because of the nature of state intervention they invite. For the sad fact is that secularism’s promise quickly turns into its threat. The liberal legal principle of “religious liberty” ends up giving license to the state to define and regulate the very religion it claims to grant a “laissez faire” to and its promise of minority rights only adds to the predicament of this minority by defining it as such. The minority status makes them “stick out like a sore thumb” so to speak exposing them to further attack and causing them to recoil in unhealthy ways in their particularity, attached to their church and their religious doctrine, and driving them into damaging alliances with authoritarian dictatorships for protection. This is not the lone fate of the religious minority of Egypt, Mahmood argues, but of that of any country that adopts the legal liberal expressions of secularism that Egypt does, even those like Western democracies historically steeped in secularist



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traditions. What difference in status Western religious minorities have from the Copts of Egypt can only be attributed to the difference in interpretation religious majorities of the respective countries end up giving to the twin legal expressions of secularism (RL and MR). The menace of secularism on these religious minorities might differ but it is there wherever secularism treads its liberal path<sup>1</sup>.

But if not secularism with its twin liberal principles then what? It is not entirely clear. Mahmood's critical discourse sometimes waxes anarchist, at times libertarian and at many others, traditionalist conservative (nostalgic for the pre-modern). For instance, she offers by way of nostalgic references to the premodern times of the Ottoman empire a possible alternative to the contemporary globalized ideal of political secularism, riding roughshod on the back of the overbearing modern state, when Ottoman religious (non-Muslim) communities enjoyed an independent corporate status as *Ahl Al Zimma* in exchange for accepting their formal inequality to the Muslim majority of the self-avowedly Muslim Caliphate. The idea being that the pre-modern state is not as heavily interventionist as the modern one choosing instead to run its various communities through six degrees of separation that had allowed such communities independence in defining their internal doctrines and in running their communal affairs. If they had to pay *Jizya* (tax) to buy off their corporate independence and if they had to be formally placed as second in status to the Muslim majority then the trade-off may not have been so bad. In other words, Mahmood seems to suggest that the trade-off between second-class status for corporate status is superior to the one posited by the modern secular state between equal citizenship for minoritarian status combined with the grant of religious liberty. For what is obtained in the former is something very precious indeed: the tentacles of the state off the back of religious communities. *Religious Difference*, the norm Mahmood wants to protect, is thus better secured.

But if pre-modern times could not be redeemed for Foucault through historical reversal, then they will sadly have to elude Mahmood his pupil too (Mahmood's Foucaultianisms left me with a headache without making me the wiser), and in following the footsteps of her mentor in his last days, she ends her book with the oblique reference to "ethics" as our refuge from the overbearing state as a more "realistic"? alternative. She says,

This hope is symptomatic of our (not just Egyptians') collective incapacity to imagine a politics that does not treat the state as the arbiter of majority-minority relations. Given this context, the ideal of interfaith equality might require not the bracketing of religious differences but their *ethical* thematization as a necessary risk when the conceptual and political resources of the state have proved inadequate to the challenge this ideal sets before us (212).

Sadly for us, this was the concluding paragraph of the book and we are left with no guide posts as to what "ethical thematization as a necessary risk" meant though I confess it left me with the image of a Coptic pope negotiating a peace pact with a Muslim cleric over bitter coffee, on the rights and wrongs (not rights and duties) of inter communal social relations. It also left me with the queasy feeling that the ethics of the religious Patriarchs may not at all prove superior to the rights and duties of the modern liberal state, au contraire, decidedly inferior. In fact, I think, it is Mahmood's wager, and she hints at this here and there in her book, that, left to their own corporatist devices, religious patriarchs are more likely to tread the path of doing the right thing, ethically, than they would be when they are under the sleepless panoptical eye of the liberal legalist state. How this could be done is a question that is left hanging in *The Minority Report*, much as the thesis that female submissiveness among religiously conservative women in Egypt required relativist understanding from feminists did in *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood's previous book.

### **Liberty as Right**

Mahmood writes,

While I appreciate the protections and freedoms that secularism might extend to religious dissenters and nonbelievers, I would also like to point out that political secularism is not merely the principle of state neutrality or the separation of church and state. It also entails the reordering and remaking of religious life and interconfessional relations in accord with specific norms, themselves foreign to the life of the religions and peoples it organizes. This dimension of political secularism—shot through as it is with paradoxes and instabilities—needs to be understood for the life worlds it creates, the forms of exclusion and violence it entails, the kinds of hierarchies it generates, and those it seeks to undermine. The two dimensions of political secularism—its regulatory impulse and its promise of freedom—are thoroughly intertwined, each necessary to the enactment of the other (20).

Mahmood is absolutely right that secularism reorders religious life according to norms foreign to the life of those who practice such religions. Of course it does; in fact, as a secularist myself, I should *hope* it does. If the opposite were true, if the principle of *no* separation between church and state were to prevail, then secularists like me would have had their *own* lives upended instead and in ways that the specific interpretation of the principle of no separation in our state would dictate. We may have to veil in public. We may have to be shepherded to midday prayers in our workplaces. We may have to lie to public enforcers about not fasting in Ramadan. Many terribly unsecular things, “foreign to the lives” of us secularists would have to take place and we won’t like it one bit.

Better they than us, I say!

This is all to say that the fact that secularism upends the life of the religious is nothing more than an expression of its normative victory over the counter norm- no separation between church and state- that lurks in the shadow, just about everywhere, as an alternative organizing legal principle. In so far as Mahmood claims to be thinking of secularism “critically” by pointing this particular feature of secularism then I am afraid she has instead merely reiterated the obvious. This is not exactly a feature of “secularism” alone, rather, any prevailing legal norm: legal norms bite and this is just the way that legal norms of secularism do!

It is when Mahmood argues that the “regulatory impulse” of secularism in fact contradicts its promise of religious liberty that I find myself pausing. To be more precise, what is baffling to me is the argument that legal regulation and liberty are opposites, that to point to the regulatory aspects of secularism is to catch secularism’s claim of guaranteeing religious liberty in a gotcha moment: red handed committing an obvious contradiction.

This is so because liberty and regulation are not exactly opposites. Liberty can *only* express itself in regulated form and to think of regulation as a damper on liberty is to be guilty of formalist reasoning that holds little water on close inspection. In fact, and contrary to Mahmood’s analysis, in which “religious liberty” is discussed independently from “minority rights” allocating a chapter for each, religious liberty is nothing *but* minority rights. This is so because liberty is broken down to a bundle of claims, privileges, powers, and immunities that regulate the relationship of citizens of the state on the question of religion. The total sum of these claims, privileges, powers and immunities is what we call “rights” and they are one and the same as ‘religious liberty’. For how a state chooses to *distribute* these sets of privileges, claims, powers and immunities on the question of religion is what distinguishes its own mode of secularism from the next. Each distribution affects majority/minority relations differently, a difference that is obscured if one read the signifier RL/MR formally, the

way Mahmood does, and it is also a difference that may very well be worth dying for.

Take for instance the practice of “veiling” in a Muslim majority country that adopts RL/MR in its legal system. A woman might have a “right to veil” in this state as an instance of her religious liberty but this could mean different things legally. It certainly means and at minimum that she doesn’t have a *duty* to veil. For if she does, then the privilege to wear the veil, which the “right to veil” entails is taken away from her. But a state that sees the “right to veil” as an expression of religious liberty might legally interpret this right as allowing the woman to wear the veil anywhere in public. But then it could do so but create an exception to the exercise of the privilege of veiling in certain places such as say “private schools” administered by Christian missionaries. Those schools are given the option of refusing to admit veiled women as students even though public schools financed by the state are prohibited from doing so. The argument being that Christian schools are allowed to choose what violates the religious liberty of their students within the confines of their own administered schools and if they consider veiling as introducing Muslim symbolism in the public space of the Christian private school then they may very well choose to prohibit wearing it. Alternatively, a state might prohibit an exception as the above to the “right to veil”, seeing in the exception a violation of the Muslim girl’s religious liberty that would not be tolerated, but at the same time abstain from *facilitating* the right to veil. And it could do so, by prohibiting preaching the veil in the curriculum or class pedagogy of public schools. The argument being that preaching the veil violates the religious liberty of the Christian student minority. Any teacher that does so risks being expelled from his or her job. But then a state could do the opposite: it could allow for an exception to veiling in private schools but requires the assignment of state curriculum in those schools that advocates veiling as the word of God for Muslims. All of these forms of regulation are expressions of the “right to veil” itself an

expression of “religious liberty” –no duty to veil-itself an expression of what Mahmood called “culture of the majority” but each has a different configuration with a different distributive consequence for the majority *and* the minority, or to use the rather vague and literary expression that Mahmood uses, each “creates a life form” different to the next one.

### **Family Law**

Mahmood argues that contrary to common perception it is not “religion” that creates gender inequality, rather it is secularism, its very opposite. This is so because political secularism “jams” women, family, sexuality *and* religion, in the same place “the private” (as distinct from “public”) creating a form of “cross-contamination”- the religious appropriate the family and the family acquires the quality of the religious.

In Mahmood’s words:

I argue that family law, as an autonomous juridical domain, is a modern invention that did not exist in the pre modern period. It is predicated upon the public-private divide so foundational to the secular political order, and upon a modern conception of the family as a nuclear unit responsible for the reproduction of the society and the nation. Religion, sexuality, and the family are relegated to the private sphere under this system, thereby conjoining their legal and moral fates. As a result, family law has come to bear an inordinate weight in the reproduction and preservation of religious identity (26).

Note here how, in order to register her next critique of “political secularism”, Mahmood drops in the paragraph above all reference to the liberal legal complex of “liberty/rights” that characterized her previous discussion and transitions to another one, namely, “the public/private” one. This might be because the rule that addresses all Egyptians, religious majority and minority: “You are under the *duty* to marry according to the

doctrine of the religion you are born into” is an expression neither of “religious liberty” *nor* indeed of “minority rights”. It is not exactly a grand expression of “secularism”. Whatever invisible line there is that separates “secularism”, with all the internal possibilities of its articulation, is crossed here to something that is “not-secularism”.

If, however, the Egyptian state kept the rule above, namely, “the duty to marry according to religious law”, but also allowed for an opt-out right of marrying according to “civil law” and made this right available to all Egyptians, then we would still be within the domain of the “religious liberty” of secularism. But then if such an option existed, many Egyptians, Muslims and otherwise, would have flocked to this opt-out, thereby “minimizing” religious difference. It would then be hard to argue, as Mahmood does, that it was “secularism” that exaggerated religious “difference” (or gender inequality); and the more common one that it was unfinished secularism that was the culprit would make much more sense.

Moreover, it would be preposterous to argue that a state that regulates marriage according to civil law, but that also allows people to marry according to their own religious ceremonies, such as the US, sits on the same “political secularism” spectrum with a state such as Egypt that *requires* people to marry according to their respective religious laws just because both laws, civil and religious, are passed *by the state*. They may sit on the same “patriarchal” spectrum, depending on the particular family rules passed in each; they may sit on the same public/private divide spectrum with the family treated as the domain of the “private” in both, but they can’t possibly be described as sitting on the same “secularism” spectrum. To expand the meaning of “secularism” to everything the modern state passes as law that takes religion as its object- whether it *permits* its public expression, or *requires* it or *prohibits* it- is to make “secularism” literally incoherent by eroding the difference between it and its opposite. It is in effect to argue that living in a state that orders women



to veil in public such as Saudi Arabia and Iran is same as living as a woman in a state such as the US that does not.

To do so risks sounding absurd.

### **EIPR (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights)**

As I mentioned, I could not have written *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* without conducting work with EIPR and other minority-rights groups in Cairo. However, as I worked with these activists, I realized that the assumptions that informed their work were not simply “theirs” but belonged to a global political discourse that exerts an immense force on our collective imagination ... Upon my return from Egypt, as I began the process of analysis and writing, I was compelled to dig beyond the ethnographic encounter to grasp fragments of the past congealed into the present...this process in turn required an engagement with historical materials from 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present ...The book thus could not have been born without the ethnographic encounter, but also had to transcend it in order to make sense of *what* I encountered (23).

This has become somewhat of a familiar trope<sup>2</sup>: the anti-enlightenment US-based academic “*transcends* the ethnographic encounter” with the local activist who had gone out of his/her way to host and assist the visiting anthropologizing academic, by discovering, upon going back home to America, to where the land of enlightenment is you might say, that the local activist was in the grip of an enlightenment discourse that was globalized (bummer!) but that had the problem that it limited “our collective imagination”! The sense of admiration the academic may have had for the work of the activist when they were in the very local place, and Mahmood is full of praise for the work of the lawyers of EIPR, becomes a

tad ambivalent from a distance as the activist now appears to be suffering some kind of a “false consciousness”, you know, the type you have when you’re into too much enlightenment!

As I know some of the lawyers who work at EIPR and as I am familiar with the work they do, I find it hard to believe that those lawyers were not aware that “the assumptions that informed their work were not simply theirs!” They knew all right that they were part of a globalized rights movement and that they were deploying the international language of human rights: religious liberty, minority rights and all! I suspect though that these lawyers’ secularism, which they had put into good activist use on behalf of the Copts and other religious minorities through careful deployment of rights discourse, didn’t go down well with Mahmood whose academic agenda, as this book quite amply represents, is antagonistic to secularism.

And even though “the assumptions that informed [these lawyers’] work... belonged to a global political discourse”, contrary to Mahmood, I think these assumptions were very much “theirs”. For Mahmood makes much of the tainted origins and the bad company that “political secularism” had historically kept in its long and illustrious traveling career across the oceans. From its early origins as a ruse to allow European powers to intervene in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire on behalf of religious minorities, to its later association with bad projects such as neoliberalism, American Evangelism, and Copts of the US diaspora, “religious liberty” knocked on the door of the “orient” threateningly in the context of “differential sovereignty”. As the recipients of secularism gave no proper “consent”, and even worse, something precious was lost in the process, namely, “religious difference”, this secularism became irredeemably tainted for Mahmood. Its globalism was imperialism simpliciter, or so seemed the suggestion of *The Minority Report*.

And yet what the EIPR lawyers did so well and so effectively was to see in this secularism its *universalist* promise and by putting it to good activist use made it very much their own. For “RL/MR” the defining principles of secularism is nothing but a compromise formation on the twin universal norms of equality (of citizenship) *and* liberty (of religious practice), the details of which, how it would be translated into laws and regulations, was an object of struggle for *rights* that these lawyers chose to wage and push to define. As I tried to show in my discussion of the possible rules that this configuration could produce, the difference between the one and the other may very well be a difference worth dying for! Rather than “limit the imagination”, it was the very stuff that fired it up!

Far from seeing the inevitable complexity of the compromise formation equality/liberty of secularism as these lawyers did, Mahmood treated any incursion from the former (equality) on the latter (liberty) paranoiacly, as only a radical libertarian would do. Any form of regulation of religious liberty, or what she likes to call “religious difference”, for the purposes of promoting equality was excoriated as too intrusive and used to show the “contradiction and paradox of secularism”.

In short, while EIPR lawyers struggled for Egyptians to be equal *and* free in the only state they knew and lived in, Mahmood waxed libertarian (denouncing regulation), anarchist (denouncing the state) and religious conservative (nostalgic for the Ottoman) all at the same time!

She may win the contest on “imagination”, but the one on “justice”, I am afraid the EIPR lawyers will have to win each time.

### **Conclusion**

Reading *The Minority Report* was a very odd experience. A book on secularism in Egypt that doesn't make a single reference to *Al Sahwa Al Islamiyya* (“The Islamic Awakening”) the social phenomenon that has haunted the lives of Copts (as well as Muslims), for decades now, and pushed them to either migrate to the West in waves in fear for their lives

and livelihood or to alternatively seek protection by supporting dictatorships, leaves the reader thinking that they had just finished reading not a tract on theory exactly, but on ideology, and not the good kind!

It seems odd not to engage with a phenomenon the Egyptian historian Sherif Younis, describes in this manner:

*[Al Sahwa]* has colored the lives of people across the span of forty years with the darkest of tones: popularizing accusatory and violent language as well as the sense of grievance and siege in popular and semi official religious discourse; giving rise to the violence of explosions and suicides that has killed people and upended their lives, their livelihood and their sense of security; touching the lives of the Christian Arabs, instilling dread and fear in their hearts, threatening them in their possessions and nurturing sectarian feelings among the populace; it has undermined the status of women in society, threatened public rights and liberties, created a regime of censoring terror among writers and artists, and left a trail of death material and psychological in its trail..... All of this under the heading “The Return to Islam” whose grand theorist was Sayyed Qutub (Younis, 2014).

It is *this* that EIPR lawyers were intervening in on behalf of Al Sahwa’s victims. Of course, there are many interesting theoretical questions that could be posed about this secularism, including the role of the modern Egyptian state in delimiting its compromised form and the ways in which it is complicit in this *Sahwa*, but those would have only been possible if sufficient account of what that secularism was *intervening in* was offered by Mahmood. Instead what was produced was something of a mystification in which “secularism” *itself* was made to appear as if it were the culprit behind Coptic misery.

*The Minority Report* is a text that tries to respond to the problem of essentializing Islam (the culturalism problem) by performing a flip so that all the bad attributes typically attributed to “Islam” are now attributed to secularism instead. It is *secularism* that discriminates, that is sectarian, that encourages violence, that is repressive, is sexist, etc. This Mahmood does by on the one hand *hyper*-politicizing secularism (depleting it of its universalist drive), and on the other *under*-politicizing it by ignoring its internal indeterminacy, complexity, open structure and varied distributive effects. The result is an account that moves between crude historicism-secularism is its history- and formalist generalizations reminiscent of the ways “Islam” is treated in mainstream discourse. Islam is nothing but the history of its conquests and its doctrines create the world in a specific way. But a flip does not a critique make.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mahmood says, “While Islamic concepts and practices are crucial to the production of this inequality, I argue that the modern state and its political rationality have played a far more decisive role in transforming preexisting religious differences, producing new forms of communal polarization, and making religion more rather than less salient to minority and majority identities alike. Furthermore, I suggest that inasmuch as secularism is characterized by a globally shared form of national-political structuration, the regulation of religious difference takes a modular form across geographical boundaries. Two paradoxical features of this secular political rationality are particularly germane. First, its claim to religious neutrality notwithstanding, the modern state has become involved in the regulation and management of religious life to an unprecedented degree, thereby embroiling the state in substantive issues of religious doctrine and practice. Second, despite the commitment to leveling religious differences in the political sphere, modern secular governance transforms— and in some respects intensifies— preexisting interfaith inequalities, allowing them to flourish in society, and hence for religion to striate national identity and public norms. While these features characterize all modern states, in the case of non-Western polities such as Egypt they are often judged to be the signs of their incomplete secularization” (21).

<sup>2</sup> It is so familiar I am starting to think it is necessary. I have commented on it twice: See Abu-Odeh, 2013 <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/15350> and Abu-Odeh, 2015 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/lama-abu-odeh/holier-than-thou-antiimperialist-versus-local-activist>

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*Extremism  
is about political power, not religion.  
In countering it, women offer  
progressive alternatives that advocate  
rights, plurality and diversity.*

SUSSAN TAHMASEBI

# “Feminist futures are the seeds we plant today”: Building collective power for rights and justice at the 13th AWID Forum

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I recently returned from the 13th AWID International Forum, which took place from the 8th to 11th of September 2016 in Bahia, Brazil under the title *Feminist Futures: Building Collective Power for Rights and Justice*.

Based on a recognition of the complex intersections of power that shape the world, this AWID Forum was not about a particular “issue” but focused on imagining futures free from oppression, injustice, and violence. The event itself was a step in a collaborative journey, led by AWID and its partners, of thinking, planning, outreach, and dialogue that went on for over a year.

This article records some of my reflections from the perspective of my position within AWID’s *Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms* program, drawing on the experience of both the Forum itself and the pre-Forum process, including an International Strategy Meeting we held in Mexico City in February 2016.

I am sure my hybrid positionality comes through in what follows. As a participant-cum-organizer, I have shared my personal experience of this event, but very much from my position inside the organization too.

## From the local to the global, and back

The AWID Forum is the most international of affairs, with participants attending from 120 countries. However, the geographical location of the event was a tangible presence throughout all the discussions we had. That the north-eastern state of Bahia was the setting for the Forum was no accident—the choice of



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location was a political decision based on the long history of struggle in the region, particularly that of Black and Afro-descendent women.

Bahia is home to complex social dynamics around religion not least because it is the home of Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religion brought to Brazil from West Africa by people enslaved by the Portuguese<sup>1</sup>. To the tourist, Candomblé looks to be celebrated in Salvador's public space, with the shops full of souvenirs showing the symbols of the Orixas (roughly translated as Gods and Goddesses), and shows of traditional dancing and capoeira every evening. But this superficial, often commodified celebration of the religion belies the reality that its followers continue to be violently discriminated against by both the mainstream Catholic establishment, and by many evangelical Churches.

During the Forum, I met Mãe Jaciara Ribeiro, a Yalorixá (priestess) of a Candomblé house of worship in the Salvador area. In 1999 a newspaper published a picture of Mãe's mother, also a Yalorixá, along with an article smearing her reputation. Following from the article, Mãe's mother was attacked by a group of evangelical Christians who beat her with a Bible, and after the attack suffered a cardiac arrest that killed her<sup>2</sup>. Mae, or "Mother Jaciara" as she is now known, is an iconic figure in Brazil in the fight against religious intolerance, a struggle which is at once a struggle for religious freedom, racial justice, and gender justice.

Beyond the state of Bahia, the Forum was of course taking place in the midst of the country's so-called "political crisis", in fact a parliamentary coup d'etat ('*golpe*' in Portuguese). From session to session, chants of 'Fora Temer!'<sup>3</sup> were heard, from both Brazilian activists, and from others expressing solidarity with their Brazilian colleagues. The situation could not be discussed without reference to religious fundamentalisms. Conservative religious forces were at the forefront of the drive to impeach president Dilma Rouseff, with members of parliament openly dedicating their vote for Rouseff's impeachment to God, 'the family', and even to 'unborn children' (Telesur 2016; Telesur 2016a)

As the world's largest Catholic country, Brazil is highly influenced by the Vatican's anti-woman stances against sexual and reproductive rights. Meanwhile the rise of evangelical and Pentecostal Churches has seen the ever more mainstream presence of other religious players that also oppose women's autonomy and the rights of LGBTQI people. Maria José "Zeca" Rosado Nunes, of *Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir* (Catholics for the Rights to Decide, Brazil), an organization that has long been in the forefront of challenging the hierarchy of the Church, described religious fundamentalists as one element in a conjunction of conservative powers—economic, political, and religious—at play in Brazil. She presented a multi-faceted picture of a conservative backlash which is bringing regression in all areas: gender equality, reproductive and sexual rights, civil liberties, racial justice, and economic inequality<sup>4</sup>.

Christian religious groups have an enormous power in the media, with many television channels run by conservative evangelicals. Evangelical groups are also using new technology such as the WhatsApp messaging app to disseminate dogmatic religious ideas. In congress, religious groups exert influence over the law, and in the area of the judiciary. New caps on donations to political candidates in municipal elections, introduced as an anti-corruption measure, have had the unsavoury effect of increasing the successes of those with an independent source of funds - both millionaires and candidates backed by evangelical Churches (Boadle, 2016).

Zeca described how religious groups now focus their efforts not only on the capital Brasilia but also locally; taking advantage of the Federal nature of Brazil, they work to change local laws to roll back sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQI people<sup>5</sup>. There has recently been a push for a new law that prohibits school teachers from talking about gender or about equal rights. This infraction, which could be judged on the basis of one anonymous complaint by a student who reports feeling that their 'morality' or 'faith' has been attacked, holds a penalty of 3-6 years in jail. While civil society are continuing to mobilize

to prevent this law coming to force, it is emblematic of how far conservative religious forces have come in Brazil, that the latter feel they can even propose such a law. Nunes noted that this would not have been imaginable five or 10 years ago<sup>6</sup>.

Of course, the Zika crisis was also a prominent feature in the discussions. Activists from Brazil highlighted the role of religious authorities (and their influence in the health sector) in curtailing their sexual and reproductive rights by proposing that, in response to Zika, women should simply ‘avoid falling pregnant’, a ‘solution’ with similarities religiously influenced responses to HIV transmission (Fried 2016; Imam 2016, 29) The strong correlation between public health provision and both race and class was made clear; women living in poverty, racialized women are both disproportionately affected by Zika itself, and suffered the most difficulty in accessing contraceptive and abortion services.

It was clear that the Brazilian situation, while carrying its own historical particularities, had to be viewed as one piece in a global puzzle of rising sectarianism, identitarian religious politics, and ethno-nationalist movements, political polarisation, and the rise/resurgence of ‘post-truth’ right-wing and fascist politics. When Brazilian activists described conservative groups and individuals feeling emboldened to express hatred against women and minorities more loudly than ever, and with religious dogmatism at the centre of this, participants from various countries drew parallels—from countries in the Middle East and Africa where Islamists have once again taken centre stage, to those dealing with the election of Duterte in the Philippines, to the xenophobia of post-Brexit Britain and the Trump presidential campaign. Analysing the structural drivers behind this picture, those present largely agreed that we were seeing the outcome of a number of interrelated crises: widespread neoliberal economic policies, the arms trade and ongoing conflicts, political marginalization, and shrinking democratic spaces.

### **Working on Difficult Ground**

Throughout the Forum, some points of tension emerged through our discussions. For example, some of those present felt that the blurring of lines between religion and religious fundamentalisms was problematic, suggesting that a distinction was important to make, either for the purpose of strategic confrontation of religious fundamentalisms, or to ensure respect for people's individual beliefs. Laila Alodaat, of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, also expressed concern about the lack of distinction between Muslim/Islamic fundamentalism in particular, and 'violent extremism' as something taking many shapes including right-wing nationalistic movements. From her experiences of international approaches to women in conflict in Syria, she felt that this lack of distinction had led to all conservative religious actors being 'painted with the same brush', thereby alienating grassroots women peace activists who felt that international efforts were targeting their society or culture as a whole. On the other hand, we also heard of the dangers of a distinction between 'violent extremisms' and so-called 'non-violent extremisms', as in the cases of Western governments who, in their 'counter-terrorism' work, have made alliances with and concessions to far-right religious groups that hold abominable views on women.

Many people felt that our analysis should push past a narrow focus on 'fundamentalisms' and interrogate religion as a whole—its institutions, its practices, its presence in the private and personal realms not only in public. Sheena Magenya, of the Coalition for African Lesbians, recalled a story from her personal life: her young son had already begun, through exposure at his nursery classes, to understand the world through a lens of religion, and had told her one day that she 'wasn't a woman of God'. This was a sign, she said, that we must talk about every aspect of religion—as feminists have we not built a movement on the need to address oppressive norms in our 'private' spheres as much as anywhere else?

This tension was an interesting one. There are many reasons that a distinction between 'religion' and 'religious fundamentalisms' is more palatable; we feel it has less chance of offending or alienating people, and in certain circumstances we may feel that we have to leave religion alone as a matter of civil liberty. But what is religion if not its ideologies, its practices, and the people who carry out actions in its name? With this accepted, it seems hard to draw a neat line between fundamentalism and 'religion'?

Another tension was the recurrent issue, specifically around Muslim fundamentalisms, of how to balance a need to resist co-optation to other oppressive agendas, while still unequivocally denouncing religious fundamentalisms, and standing in solidarity with those who oppose them. On one hand, some speakers pressed the need to see Western imperialism, military intervention, racist and anti-immigration policies as ventures which have all co-opted both feminist language and efforts to resist religious fundamentalisms. Other speakers, however, expressed frustration at over-emphasis on those concerns, at the expense of addressing the realities of religious fundamentalisms. Some expressed a sense of betrayal that feminists, especially those in 'the West', have not shown enough solidarity with those affected and resisting oppressive religious norms. They described Western leftists as being guilty of undermining feminists, especially those with a secular stances, in countries marred by regressive religious norms.

These tensions certainly rang true to my experience of the 'anti-imperialist' efforts in the United Kingdom which, while direly needed, have at times made extremely problematic alliances with religious groups holding regressive worldviews, especially as they pertain to gender. Dominant anti-imperialist narratives also often put forth a binary picture of 'the-West-coloniser' versus 'the-rest-colonized', which does no justice to the intricacies of global and regional power dynamics, and feeds the very victimhood narratives that are a key mobilising tactic of Islamists. At the international level, anti-imperialist narratives

have been co-opted, along with notions of sovereignty and culturally relativist arguments, to erode hard-won human rights standards as they pertain to women and LGBTQI people (OURs 2017 Trend Report, forthcoming).

I felt glimmers of the excitement that many present were trying to push past the polarization that characterizes this area of discussion, and that the Forum itself was great space for address different ‘sides’ of this debate at once, but I still got the sense that we were all still somewhat trapped in what Meredith Tax (2012) has called the ‘double bind’<sup>7</sup>. And I was still left wondering how feminists can find a thorough framework for opposing fundamentalisms in a way that does not feed xenophobia and imperialism, and vice versa. How can we stop seeing these different ‘sides’ even as sides and start to consistently denounce both imperialism and racism *and* fundamentalisms as all elements of the same big picture? Do we need to look beyond our existing frames of analysis and find a new political-ethical framework? Or do we have the analysis but find it difficult to translate this into concrete work?

### **New Thinking and New Ways Forward**

Despite the inevitable tensions, one of the things that struck me most throughout the process leading up to the Forum, and during the Forum itself were the new ways of thinking about gender and religious fundamentalisms that were coming up, and the innovative ways in which activists were already challenging religious fundamentalisms.

We spoke a lot about the links between the rise of fundamentalisms and neoliberalism. We heard local level examples, such as evangelicals in Brazil using drug rehabilitations centres (in the absence of state provision) to spread dogmatism, and discussed the big picture links between our work and military spending, lack of state welfare, and corporate power. I was shown parallels between phenomena I had never linked before, such as between the narco state and drug cartels in Latin America, and the dynamics of fundamentalist armed

groups in parts of the Middle East. We asked ourselves if religious fundamentalisms would exist if neoliberalism did not.

I was pushed to reflect on the ways in which, although knowing these links, to some extent we fail to work with those doing anti-capitalist work, either because they see our struggle as a ‘cultural’ one, not linked to their ‘structural’ work, because they have historically not paid enough heed to interpersonal and gendered violence, or because we ourselves have failed to convert our analysis into concrete collaborative actions. I am still grappling with how activists can make this important cross-movement work happen, in an environment where traction (and funding) often feel dependent on having a clear ‘issue’ and focus, but the Forum made it clear that this intersectional collaboration must be something we spend more time and energy on as we go forward.

Black and decolonial feminisms were central to discussions throughout the Forum, not least because of the Black Feminisms Forum, an historical pre-Forum event that was held for the first time this year. This perspective also broadened the horizons of my thinking on fundamentalisms.

For example, we are aware the many ways in which the cultural and religious colonialism of Wahhabism has stifled cultural diversity in many Muslim contexts in Africa and Asia denigrating local religious expressions as ‘un-Islamic’, but we rarely phrase resistance to this as an explicitly anti-colonial struggle. Christian fundamentalists in various African contexts often appeal to notions of “African culture” in anti-homosexuality and misogynist discourse, obscuring the reality that growing regressive religious norms in many African countries are in part fueled and funded by Christian fundamentalists from the USA. And yet, within ‘Western’ contexts at least, it is not usual to hear people connect up the dots between anti-colonial critique and resistance to this kind of fundamentalism.

The Black feminist perspectives at the Forum provided food for thought on how those working explicitly on fundamentalisms can work more closely with

Black feminist and anti-/decolonial groups, and vice versa, in order to articulate these struggles in new, more effective ways.

I was inspired by the work of the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) seen at the Forum. Their work is unrelentingly intersectional; they refuse to see 'lesbian issues' or 'LGBT issues' as separate from other social injustices. CAL's response to fundamentalisms is that which they describe as the 'think for yourself' strategy. Rather than providing, 'alternative' discourses to counter fundamentalist ideology, CAL's approaches revolve around facilitating discussion about the ideas people subscribe to, asking questions such as "“who does this idea actually belong to?” and “what exactly are your own ideas about this idea?”, pushing people to see if they have accepted a societal norm without question. The rationale behind CAL's approach is the understanding that fundamentalisms cannot function in a context of free thought; fundamentalisms are by nature prescriptive of what is acceptable and punishing of dissent. CAL's latest endeavour, the Autonomy Project, explores autonomy as a concept that goes beyond liberal individualist notions of 'choice' that can plague discussions of religion and gender.

The Forum also saw the public launch of the OURs (Observatory on the Universality of Rights), an initiative to monitor initiatives that misuse religion, culture, and tradition to undermine the universality of human rights in the international and regional human rights systems. As well as being the first initiative to do this work in a concerted cross-organizational way, OURs is exciting because it articulates a nuanced intersectional feminist vision of universalism. It insists on the universality of human rights, and resists claims that human rights are a 'western imposition' or an 'imperialist project', whilst recognizing the ways rights discourses have been misused to prop up existing global power inequality, and moving away from one-dimensional liberal constructions of universalism. This project provides one way forward from some of the tensions outlined above through reclaiming universal human rights in a sensitive and intersectional way.



Beyond these two examples there were many more, such as the Catholics for the Right to Decide network, who provide frameworks which align Catholic religious belief and gender justice to be compatible, while also advocating for secularism from a feminist perspective; the eye-opening artistic strategies of painters, cartoonists, and cabaret performers; work that involved engaging religious leaders but not in ways that ceded them more power, but which disrupted their hegemony while making them advocates for women's rights, to name but a few<sup>8</sup>.

In the lead up to the Forum I had recorded something said by Dawn Cavanagh of CAL as part of an art exhibit we were planning: "we cannot wait for joy, joy is in the struggle itself." This quote returned to me when reflecting on the amazing strategies and frameworks I saw during the Forum process—the most inspiring thing is that this work not only resists the advances of fundamentalisms, or 'pushes back'; it actively building microcosmic versions of the worlds we want, small glimpses of our feminist utopias in the here and now. As Dilar Dirik told us of the Kurdish women's struggle: "We never postpone the future. Feminist futures are the seeds we plant today"

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# Seven Pointers

For Development Actors Navigating Religious Fundamentalisms and Women's Rights



Taken from A. Imam, *The Devil is in the Details: At the Nexus of Development, Women's Rights, and Religious Fundamentalisms* (AWID, 2016)

**4**

**Everyone has multiple identities and should be defined by more than just their religion. Foregrounding religious identities tends to reinforce the power of religious fundamentalists.**

Use non-religious language, speaking to common goals: peace, justice, rights, quality of life, an end to violence, access to water, or better health, for example.

Combine arguments from multiple sources: human rights and gender equality, constitutional law, progressive religious interpretations, and empirical data.

Don't reduce a community to a single identity based on religion.

Don't assume that a conservative religious discourse is the only one that a community can relate to.

**5**

**Religion, culture, and tradition are constantly changing, being reinterpreted and challenged. What is dominant is always a question of power.**

Make sure that everyone in your organization is sensitized to a feminist, power-based analysis of religion, culture, and tradition.

Support the local actors who are enabling people to discuss alternative religious discourses that are congruent with human rights and gender justice.

Don't accept religion or culture as an excuse for human rights violations or the subordination of women.

Don't assume that religious leaders, who are often men, represent an entire religious community.

**6**

**Racism, exclusion, and marginalization all add to the appeal of fundamentalists' offer of a sense of belonging and a "cause".**

Take a stand against both racisms and religious fundamentalisms.

Advocate for state accountability and the political, civil, and economic rights of marginalized communities.

Don't oppose fundamentalisms in ways that reinforce racist narratives.

Don't shy away from challenging discrimination and religious fundamentalisms within minority communities.

**7**

**There is strong evidence that the single most important factor in promoting women's rights and gender equality is an autonomous women's movement.**

Identify the women's rights organizations who are at the forefront of challenging patriarchal religious and cultural norms and make it a priority to include them in consultations and implementation of projects.

Don't assume that large or mainstream international organizations necessarily have the know-how to address gender issues.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Candomblé is descended from Yoruba, Fon, and Bantu beliefs brought to Brazil from West Africa. The movement of African slaves to Brazil began midway through the 16th century, with the existing enslavement of indigenous peoples continued well into the 17th and 18th centuries. During the Atlantic slave trade era, Brazil imported more African slaves than any other country. An estimated 4.9 million slaves from Africa came to Brazil during the period from 1501 to 1866.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Mãe Jaciara Ribeira, Friday 9th September 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Out with Michel Temer, Brazil's new right-wing President who took office after leading the drive for Dilma Rouseff's impeachment.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Maria José "Zeca" Rosado Nunes of 8th August 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The 26 federate states of Brazil have the power to adopt their own Constitutions and laws, within limits set by the Federal Constitution. Information from interview with Maria José "Zeca" Rosado Nunes, 8th August 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Tax's book *Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights*

discusses asks how leftists and feminists should respond to human rights violations by the Muslim Right without feeding hate campaigns in a moment of intense xenophobia, focusing on the example of UK organization Cageprisoners.

<sup>8</sup> See Marler, 2016 for a sample of 12 strategies from AWID's partners' work to challenge religious fundamentalisms.

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## Is PREVENT too toxic for feminists?

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Well here we are again, confronted with yet another tightening of the government's noose around 'terrorists', 'non-violent extremists', 'radicals' – mostly synonyms for Muslim fundamentalists – which squeezes us, as secular feminists, into a space, the size of a postage stamp, in terms of our room for manoeuvre. The new look Prevent Programme is that noose which is simultaneously too tight and too loose. It's a kind of saturation policing which does nothing to make us safer whilst being a brutal assault on the civil liberties of Muslim minorities as well as an assault on the rights of all those forced to help deliver the programme on pain of prison or fines. And most problematically for feminists, its racist targeting of Muslims is a propaganda gift to those religious forces whose world view is antithetical to women's rights and other minorities. Additionally, the borders between words such as, 'terrorists' and 'radicals' are being eroded by the almost interchangeable use of those words in public discourse; this is a dangerous development which undermines democracy but a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this essay.

### Background

First a little history of Prevent, also known as Preventing Violent Extremism. It was introduced by the Labour government in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7 avowedly to foster the growth of moderate Muslim groups. The programme was funded to the tune of £45m over three years from 2008-2011, and was disbursed through local authorities to mainly Muslim groups to tackle radicalisation in their communities – one of the government's many contradictory attempts to cut down what it had pumped up with its other faith funding initiatives. How to define



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‘moderate’ is itself a minefield as we have seen in the on/off relationship between the government and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), for example, whose leaders had proven connections with religious extremists such as the Jamaat-e-Islami party on the Asian subcontinent. Besides as Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters (SBS) puts it, ‘So called moderate religious groups may be moderate when it comes to bombing the streets of Britain but they are certainly not moderate when it comes to women’ (as quoted in Gupta, 2010).

The Prevent programme was aimed at Muslim youth, women and mosques. According to Arun Kundnani (2009) who researched the earlier phase of Prevent while he was at the Institute of Race Relations, the sums of money given out were directly proportional to the size of the Muslim community in each area making it obvious that the Muslim community had been targeted as a ‘suspect’ community. After much criticism, the government announced that it would also sweep the far-right racist groups into its ambit.

Announcing the programme, Hazel Blears, the then Communities Secretary, said, ‘resilient communities can only exist where women are playing a full and active part’ (as quoted by Woolf, 2008). Women were to be empowered to challenge and head off extremism amongst Muslim youth. Their human rights were of no intrinsic worth despite the government’s declarations to the contrary. The government was playing the same game as religious fundamentalists – using women as a means of social engineering.

Little surprise then that Shaista Gohir (2010) of the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group resigned in protest because the government’s policies were not actually empowering Muslim women who ‘are one of the most disadvantaged groups in society, suffering the highest levels of economic inactivity, worst health and discrimination on multiple fronts.’ However, the group’s remit clearly involved advising the government on the role of women in preventing violent extremism which should have



made the government's real agenda painfully clear from the start. Gohir found that the Prevent programme was being used to build up Muslim women to 'spy' on their families. This was confirmed by Arun Kundnani who found that 'a major part of the Prevent programme is the embedding of counter-terrorism police officers within the delivery of other local services...to facilitate the gathering of intelligence on Muslim communities' (2009: p.6). Furthermore, many organisations were told that they could not access the funds unless they were prepared 'to sign up to a counter-terrorism policing agenda'. One of Kundnani's interviewees reported that 'All the doors to obtaining funding for work with Muslim women were shutting and all the signposts were pointing to Prevent' (2009: p.19).

Gohir also pointed out the divisive nature of Prevent funding. She felt that other faith and secular women's groups were hostile towards Muslim women's groups as a result of Prevent funding being targeted towards them<sup>1</sup>. She was right. Southall Black Sisters (SBS) found itself in that position when Ealing council threatened to withdraw our core funding. Although we worked across the entire spectrum of BME women, the Council chose to see us as a single ethnic group which undermined its interpretation of its cohesion duties while at the same time Prevent funding was being given out to Muslim Women's groups which were exclusive by definition. Ealing Council received between £200,000 and £300,000 from 2008-11 under Prevent; the Council made a grant of £35,000 to local groups to empower Muslim women and Youth services were given £10,000 to engage with Muslim girls in secondary schools through lunchtime sessions to discuss their concerns. Yet the very group that was empowering such women was being threatened with closure!

Secular women's groups are not hostile to Muslim women's groups per se, but to the idea that women should be defined primarily in terms of their religious identities when many of the issues – such as forced marriage and honour crimes – are faced by Muslim women in common with other

minority women, and need to be fought on a common platform, precisely to avoid a racist perspective which equates one community with a particular practice.

Whilst the cohesion agenda, flawed as it was, claimed to promote race and gender equality, the 'fighting extremism agenda' definitely undermined it. A senior commander, Steve Allan, of the Metropolitan police said, in a conference on domestic violence in 2008, that the government's agenda on terror was hampering police work on forced marriage because the government was keen not to alienate those same leaders in the bigger fight against extremism.

### **New Look Prevent**

The stick has displaced the carrot in Prevent, mark II. In 2011, the Coalition Government published its Prevent Strategy in which it described the previous strategy as flawed because, 'It confused the delivery of Government policy to promote integration with Government policy to prevent terrorism. It failed to confront the extremist ideology at the heart of the threat we face; and in trying to reach those at risk of radicalisation, funding sometimes even reached the very extremist organisations that Prevent should have been confronting' (HM Government, 2011: p.1). It's a fair critique. The Coalition's declared priority was to root out 'the ideology of extremism and terrorism' which left us in no doubt that the safeguarding of young people in danger of being radicalised was not its primary concern.

In the previous phase of Prevent, teachers, community workers, voluntary sector organisations resented having to share information with the police because they felt it was a breach of confidentiality and often refused to co-operate. To overcome this widespread resistance, the government has put Prevent on a statutory footing. Now these same workers are required to sit on Channel panels, a multi-agency forum, heavily populated by crime enforcement agencies: police, immigration

officials, border force, prison officers, youth offending services. Monitoring of compliance with the Prevent Duty and the promotion of 'fundamental British values' will be part of Ofsted inspections<sup>2</sup>. A failure to comply, in the last resort, places the individual in contempt of court, which is punishable by imprisonment, a fine or both. British values remain ill-defined: a hostility to homosexuality is often equated with extremism yet Nicky Morgan MP, voted against gay marriage.

The advice issued by the Department for Education to schools and childcare providers specifically includes nursery schools. David Churchill (2015) reported that since September 2014, 400 under 18s, including teenagers and children, have been referred to the Channel process, the de-radicalisation programme at the heart of the Government's Prevent strategy<sup>3</sup>. These figures were obtained from the London Assembly. I stress the source as there have been attempts to discredit these figures on the basis that organisations with vested interests, like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) have been bandying these figures about. Children have been taken into care and a three-year-old child was placed on this scheme as part of a family group showing suspect behaviour. One wonders what benefit a three-year-old is likely to derive from the relatively benevolent sounding support plans under Channel, ranging from life skills training to mentoring and guidance on extremist ideologies. Why such mentoring could not be left to schools, youth services and any professionals who come into contact with young people without the intervention of police on the Channel panels is a question that remains unanswered. It is highly likely that the youngsters will remain on police records. In fact, there is no mention of recordkeeping in the government's (2015) document Channel Duty Guidance except for an ominous reference at the end of the document about what kind of information will be made available to the public under the Freedom of Information Act. Since 2012, more than 4,000 people have been referred, half of them under-18s – for showing signs of 'non-violent extremism'. A police study of 500 cases referred to Channel

has found that 44 per cent of those referrals may have mental health issues which complicates the picture considerably (Dodd, 2016).

We have all heard the horror stories. A Muslim boy was taken out of class and questioned about his affiliation with ISIS after he used the word eco-terrorism in a debate in French on the environment (Dodd, 2015). Homa Khaleeli (2015) described a Prevent training video in which a teacher talks about a disquieting essay written by one of his students. He thinks she was 'struggling to fit in and not sure, culturally, where she belonged ... I am not suggesting she was going to support terrorism, but the opportunity was there if someone wanted to push her down that path.'

Of course, the horror stories provide ammunition to organisations like MCB in their critique of Prevent but the prospect of the MCB being in the same camp as us should not stop us from acknowledging the horror of these stories. Mona Eltahawy (2016) in *Hymens and Headscarves* describes the reaction to Aliaa Elmahdy, an Egyptian woman, who posted a picture of herself naked apart from a red hairclip, stockings and red shoes on her blog as a protest against sexual repression. Predictably she received vitriol from fundamentalists but more surprisingly she was condemned by liberals who we might have expected to support her. Liberals accused Aliaa of giving ammunition to religious conservatives. They will use any arguments that they can lay their hands on. We must never oppose anything simply because it furthers a reactionary agenda but because on principle we believe it to be wrong.

This kind of saturation policing is at work in immigration enforcement too where every imaginable social interaction requires a valid passport: from the health services to education providers to employers, landlords and marriage registrars. And the Immigration Enforcement hotline or the Anti-terrorism hotline are setting citizen against citizen. At one level, it's no surprise: immigrants and terrorists have often been collapsed into one category in the government's War on Terror narrative even though the narrative doesn't explain home grown terrorists e.g. 7/7 and those British

Muslims going off to fight jihad. Forcing every section of society from private businesses to public sector workers to individual citizens to take on a 'crime enforcement' role, to do the state's dirty work, used to be a marker of authoritarian states where citizens were encouraged to spy and report on each other. It is also a consequence of neo-liberalism where the state is rolled back and its duties can no longer be adequately financed so vast sections of the population are roped in to do the work. But why is it that some of us find it easier to oppose the new immigration measures than we do Prevent? Is it because the anti-Prevent camp is congested with Islamists?

### **Responding To Prevent**

We have many choices in how we respond to Prevent. We could take the line adopted by Inspire, the organisation that works with counter-terrorism measures and tackles inequalities faced by Muslim women. They support the program wholeheartedly and run teacher training sessions in schools to allay fears about Prevent and keep 'children safely in their families'. Whilst I completely understand the heartbreak of parents standing helplessly by as their children are radicalised and disappear to certain death and whilst we do need to find ways to support them, I believe that an uncritical implementation of Prevent is a dangerous capitulation to state authoritarianism.

If the whole issue had been framed as a safeguarding of children issue, the programme would have received a warmer welcome from parents in need of support. This is not just a question of semantics but a shift of focus – where preventing harm to and protecting the child would have been of greater concern than their criminal potential and the impact of their future actions, as a consequence of their radicalisation, on the rest of society. The safeguarding framework is used to support children at risk of all kinds of harm be it FGM, forced marriage or sexual abuse. However, the guidelines to deal with these harms recommend training of professionals, emphasise their duties and responsibilities, team work and information sharing, not

a prison sentence for failure to identify or report cases. Whilst mandatory reporting by professionals is required in 'known' cases of FGM, failure to comply will trigger professional disciplinary procedures not criminal proceedings. Nor is this duty applicable in cases of 'at risk' children, as in Prevent. There is no mandatory requirement to report children at risk of forced marriage either.

Having said that, even safeguarding policies are moving in the direction of criminalisation. Where child sexual abuse is concerned, there have been calls for tougher action from David Cameron<sup>4</sup> and campaigns like Mandate Now<sup>5</sup> run by the umbrella group, The Survivors' Trust, which demand that a failure to report should be a criminal offence. However, this demand is modified to exclude familial settings and only targets professionals suspected of malicious non-reporting<sup>6</sup> i.e. when they put the interests of their organisations above those of the child. Despite the general trend towards criminalisation, there is still a nuanced approach in safeguarding policy which says that professionals 'should' conform to certain standards which has been turned into a more draconian 'must' in the policies on Prevent.

The lack of trust engendered by the heavy-handed tactics of Prevent makes it counterproductive. Parents are less likely to approach professionals with concerns about the radicalisation of their children if it puts them on the government's radar rather than protects them. Rachel Shabi (2016) reported on a number of community initiatives which are run on a voluntary basis and aim to counter extremism among their young people, using history and reframing contemporary political questions. Suspicion of the authorities is so high that the very presence of this Guardian journalist reduced numbers by half at one of the sessions she attended. Those who run these counter-extremism programmes steer well clear of Prevent in the knowledge that their sessions will lose all credibility and impact among the young people they want to talk to.

We could choose to condemn Prevent wholeheartedly as a letter signed by over 200 academics, published in *The Independent* did<sup>7</sup>. At one level, although I might quibble with its analysis of a number of issues including what drives people to 'terrorism', the letter should be supported. But this is where the issue of lack of political space for secular feminists arises. Our room for manoeuvre decreases by the day. Yes, as the letter says, Prevent will have a chilling effect on free speech and dissent but so does religious fundamentalism on women's right to dissent. However, the letter does not mention religious fundamentalism. The other issue raised by the letter was who initiated the process. Hidden among the signatories is a certain Asim Qureshi of CAGE, reminding us that the letter is a CAGE initiative – this is the same Qureshi who was unable to condemn the stoning of women for adultery under Sharia and whose support for the right to dissent is limited, conditional and far from universal. Do we want to give organisations like CAGE legitimacy by becoming signatories? This is a purely academic question because we were not asked as far as I am aware. But it is an important question in terms of tactics. Should we have signed that letter and then written our own one pointing out the political implications of the silences in the first letter?

SBS faced a similar situation when approached by Baroness Cox in 2012 who was seeking our support for her Arbitration and Mediation (Equality) Services Bill to curb the powers of religious courts especially in family matters. We had been campaigning against a parallel legal system for some time but Cox was a well-known Christian evangelist and therefore a problematic ally. Cox's Bill was targeted at the Muslim Arbitration Tribunals. It would create a new criminal offence of 'falsely claiming legal jurisdiction' for any person who adjudicates upon matters which ought to be decided by criminal or family courts.

We wanted to go further than her bill. So, we produced a briefing paper for Helena Kennedy so that she could put forward our position in the debate. SBS recommended that the use of any religious laws in family

matters should be disallowed and that anyone seeking to arbitrate in family matters using religious laws should be criminalised. This proposal would sweep up sharia councils, MATs, the Beth Din and Catholic tribunals in its path, more than Baroness Cox would have bargained for. Cox's Bill fell at its second reading because the government refused to support it. It had been co-sponsored by the National Secular Society. I asked Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director, whether he saw any contradictions in working closely with Cox. He said, 'We will work with anyone on a common agenda'. Was it tactically preferable to focus on a common agenda, to narrow it down to one religion as we were unlikely to win on longstanding religious courts like the Beth Din or Catholic tribunals or did the principle of not working with a religious conservative with an anti-Muslim focus transcend all other considerations?

Does the Cox affair give us any pointers on how to deal with Prevent? The problem is that Prevent hands religious fundamentalists a gift - a narrative of victimhood which makes it much harder for us to challenge them. It allows the powerful to parade in the clothes of the powerless and garner sympathy. We know there are global terror networks standing behind that façade. But to maintain a distance from and a critique of the anti-Prevent lobby, where it is led by religious fundamentalists, is a difficult juggling act when the task of opposing Prevent is so pressing. It was this difficult juggling act in relation to Moazzam Begg that led to the split and closure of Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF). The political triggers which marked the launch of WAF and its closure illustrate my point perfectly. The group was formed in support of Salman Rushdie and split on the question of Moazzam Begg. The political ground had shifted seismically since 9/11. The government's condemnation of 'book-burning' Bradford Muslims at Rushdie's time in the 90s did not compare with state brutality against Begg and all the other War on Terror's crushing of civil liberties. And so, some members of WAF fell by the wayside as they could



no longer tread the fine line between anti-racism and anti-fundamentalism.

By not standing up to Prevent unequivocally, it will appear as if we are relying on Prevent to do the work that we civil society actors should be doing and are doing – of fighting religious extremism wherever it rears its head – but also making our job harder by alienating communities, some of whom might well embrace extremism in response to their alienation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See 'OPEN LETTER - Resignation from the government's National Muslim Women's Advisory Group' at <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/news.php?id=58> [Accessed 13/06/2017].

<sup>2</sup> See ATL Advice on 'Understanding the Prevent Duty' at <https://www.atl.org.uk/Images/adv84-understanding-prevent-duty.pdf> [Accessed 15/10/2015].

<sup>3</sup> See HM Government's (2015) Channel Duty Guidance. London: HMSO. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/425189/Channel\\_Duty\\_Guidance\\_April\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425189/Channel_Duty_Guidance_April_2015.pdf) [Accessed 15/10/2015].

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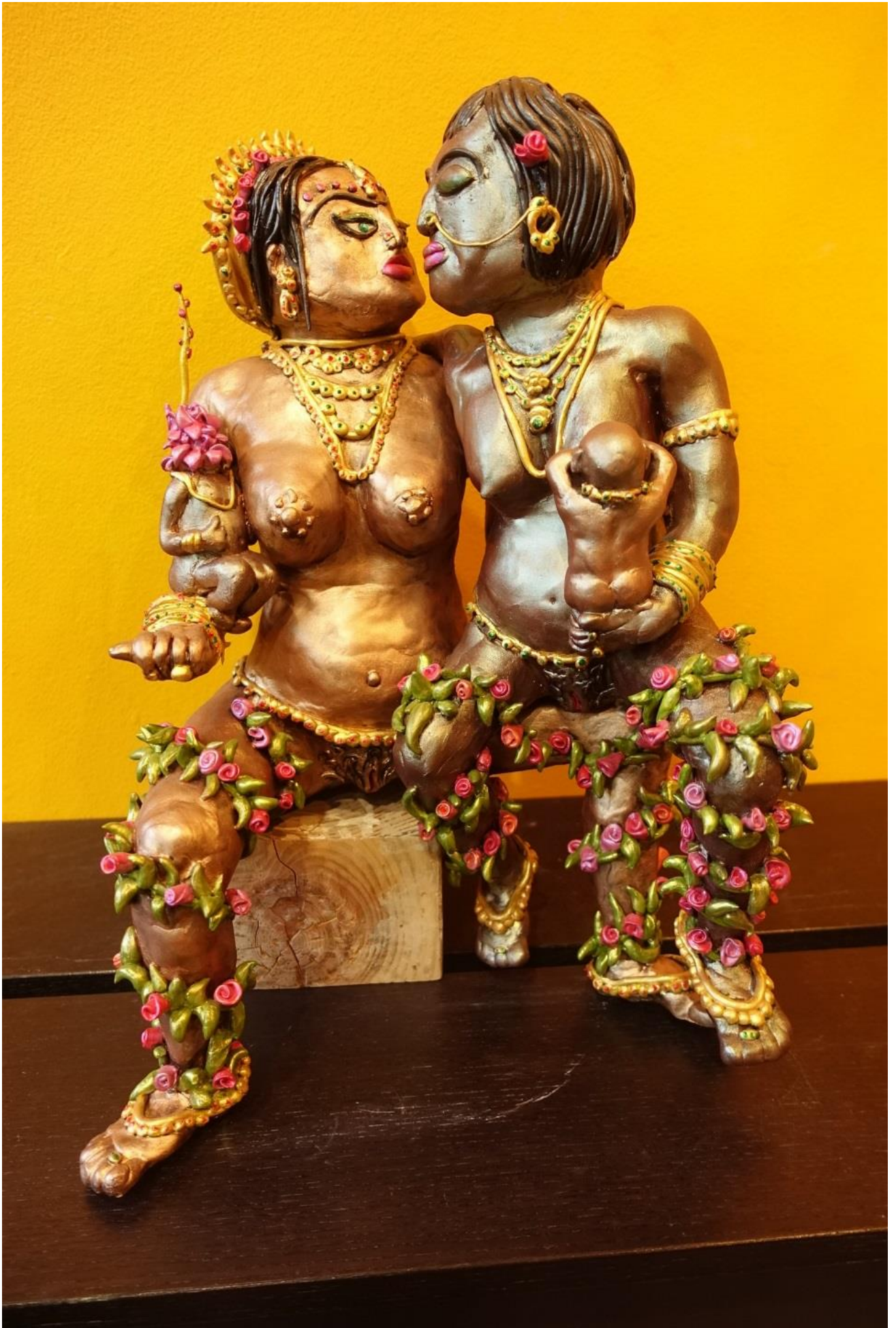
<sup>5</sup> See: <http://mandatenow.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/5-minute-guide-to-MR-270714.pdf> [Accessed 13/06/2017].

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://thesurvivorstrust.org/news/mandate-response-nspcc-policy-position/> [Accessed 13/06/2017].

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# No Battle Is Ever Won For Good

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Since the Black Monday in October 2016, Polish women have been in the spotlight. The scale of this strike amazed not only feminists all around the world but also Polish activists used to much smaller public protests. What had to happen to provoke such a massive reaction and what has happened since?

Firstly, let's take a look at the history of the law regarding abortion in Poland. Not surprisingly, during different authoritarian or totalitarian regimes abortion was fully or almost illegal. The law changed in 1956 on the wave of a political thaw after the death of Stalin. As a result, abortion due to 'difficult living conditions' became widely available on demand. Because of non-existent or limited access to contraception, it was a popular and widely accepted procedure.

Shockingly, after peaceful and democratic transformation of our society with the fall of communism in 1989, conservative politicians immediately undertook attempts to limit unrestricted access to abortion. After massive campaigns and huge counter-protests a new bill was introduced and remains in force. According to it, abortion is legal in three cases: when woman's life or health are in danger, the foetus is seriously malformed or when the pregnancy is a result of a crime. What has to be highlighted is that not many countries have gone down this path from legalisation to tightening up abortion regulations. The Polish nation has gained freedom, yet reproductive freedom has been taken away from women straight away. The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church was one of the most significant decision-makers in this process. Conservative politicians agreed on so called 'abortion compromise' (a compromise only with the



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Church which would like to ban it completely) and have changed the public debate about abortion for years.

Although the same bill introduced compulsory sex and relationships education (SRE) to Polish schools and obliged the authorities to provide access to contraceptives, these elements remain on paper. We can argue if the lack of SRE would have been more beneficial than a biased version of it – through all these years and regardless of the ruling party, the Polish Ministry of National Education has supported only the Catholic approach to educating about sexuality. Beliefs-based information presented in school books could not have been further from the up-to-date scientific research. Teachers, school headmasters and parents have not been encouraged to pay attention to the quality and curricula of SRE lessons. What is worth mentioning is that promoting abstinence-only programmes is counterproductive to the idea of decreasing the number of unintended pregnancies, it only results in less safe sex.

Both at schools and in the media, the narrative about abortion has changed drastically and anti-choice rhetoric has dominated all debates. The battle over the language has been lost and terms like ‘a conceived child’ or ‘killing babies’ have switched focus from women who get pregnant to embryos. The educational role of the law proved to be working – the word ‘abortion’ has become a taboo and the Polish society has got quickly used to the situation when it is sought either in the underground or abroad. Both of these options are expensive and leave disadvantaged women in danger. In reality, since physicians have the right to plead conscience clause, legal abortion is also impossible to obtain in many Polish hospitals. The lack of access to free and safe abortion seems to suit health care providers who are either too intimidated or well paid in the underground to stand up with women. I am sorry to say this – despite the obvious violations of human rights, overall this system has so far been comfortable enough to not to cause mass protests. Feminist organisations which constantly fight to change it have been left alone and underfunded for years.

The older generations have quickly forgotten how abortion was widespread in the past, young people have followed the Catholic propaganda and become more compassionate for fetuses than women. This has not only diminished the efforts to bring back our rights but also encouraged religious fanatics to proceed with banning abortion completely and punishing women who have had one. In 2016, after the first year of the single-party ruling of the far-right PiS, another project like this was forwarded in the Polish parliament. Nonetheless, this time it was too much to bear, 'the compromise' was endangered and the remaining rights could have been taken away. In response, women gathered spontaneously and protested in many places in Poland on a scale that has not been seen before. It scared the parliamentarians and they rejected the bill.

As successful as it may seem, showing our power and rage has not stopped PiS from continuously humiliating Polish women. After cutting off funds for a NGO supporting survivors of gender-based violence and declaring the will to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention (signed and ratified after enormous battles) I am not hopeful about the near future. Nevertheless, what is promising is growing awareness of Polish citizens who started to notice injustice and hypocrisy in which we live, and to discuss reproductive rights. The threat of losing everything and putting women in a real danger was a wake-up call. The word 'abortion' has regained its place in debates. Women who protested together have stayed in touch and do not stop mobilising themselves and their communities. The Polish case exemplifies how far-right movements value women's wellbeing, health and lives. In any country no rights are won for good. We must pay attention to mechanisms that take place all around the world and continue to raise awareness of what we have fought for and what may be taken away from us. I believe that only global solidarity and mass protests will lead us to reproductive freedom for all.

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*Silence  
maintains the status quo.  
I decided to speak up.  
I decided to Rise.*

ISATOU TOURAY

## Abortion and Reproductive Justice – The Unfinished Revolution II

Ulster University 2-3 June 2016

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Address

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Abortion and Reproductive Justice – the Unfinished Revolution II is, as the name suggest, the second conference in what is intended to be a bi-annual series. Bringing together academics, activists and the arts, the conference aims not just to be a space of dissemination and networking, but to shine a light on areas of the world that need improved access to abortion services. In June 2016, it was held in Belfast, Northern Ireland. For those who are not aware, the 1967 Abortion which governs the UK mainland did not apply to Northern Ireland. This means that the overwhelming majority of women seeking abortion have to either travel to the UK mainland or buy illegal abortion pills over the internet, risking prosecution and a potential prison sentence. If they choose to travel, despite being part of the National Health Service, Northern Ireland women have to pay for their abortions on the mainland, unlike women in England, Scotland and Wales that are treated for free. Abortion is usually considered a highly controversial issue in Northern Ireland, and so far repeated attempts to change the law have barely made a difference. Hence, the importance of holding a high-profile conference with participants from across the world cannot be overstated. Moreover, since the first conference in the series was held on Prince Edward Island, access to abortion has improved. Participants in Belfast were clearly hoping that this conference will also be a small step in bringing about change in Northern Ireland.

It cannot be overestimated the importance of holding conferences to bring together people working on such a stigmatised issue. Not only is it important to hear about struggles and successes, to make new friends and

potential future collaborators, being surrounded by others all working in the same, often stigmatised, area refreshes and renews the participants. Overcoming stigma was a major theme of the conference, and whilst this was most often discussed in relation to those seeking or providing abortion, on the sides other areas of stigma were discussed. For example, those of us who work in academia often find our work marginalised in mainstream conferences. Not having to start a conversation or presentation by justifying our feminism and our work on abortion is a liberating in itself. This does not mean to say that there were not disagreements on specific aspects, but the solidarity between (not quite all) the participants was palpable.

In total, 145 delegates from a range of different countries including Australia, Canada, Ireland, Poland, Zimbabwe and the Philippines. They represented academics in different disciplines such as sociology, law, medicine and history as well as activists and artists working in different places across the globe. Alongside traditional presentation sessions, discussion sessions also took place on issues such as developing networks, stigma, activism and counselling. A huge range of issues were covered including papers on religion, legal challenges, medicalisation and migration. A problem most of us experienced was finding it very hard to choose which of the parallel session to attend, and most of us would have wanted to attend them all.

On the first day of the conference, the key note speaker was Marlene Gerber Fried. As many people know, Marlene has been a reproductive rights activist for many years. Alongside her academic work, she has been actively involved in activism including being a board member of the National Network of Abortion Funds. For those without money, organisations that provide grants for abortion procedures and, if necessary, travel costs to access them are an important lifeline for women across the world. Marlene gave a moving speech about the constant battle in the US against the challenges to abortion. She reminded the delegates

of how just because abortion is legal does not mean you are able to get access to it. Many clinics have closed due to the activities of the anti-abortion movement both in harassing staff and patients outside of the clinics and through the introduction of 'TRAP laws', targeted regulation of abortion providers. These seek to reduce access to abortion by introducing unnecessary standards (such as making corridors wide enough so to gurneys can pass each other). Their tactics can also include introducing mandatory waiting periods or making health professionals tell women misinformation about the risk of breast cancer. Yet despite the difficult situation that Marlene was describing, her enthusiasm and humour inspired rather than depressed the audience motivating us all to go further in challenging those that seek to reduce or outlaw women's access.

The second keynote speaker, Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, known as Guy, was equally inspiring on the second day. Guy sees herself more as an activist than an academic and reported on the difficulties that women face in the Philippines. The high level of maternal mortality rates she reported caused by a lack of access to abortion and other reproductive health services were a sobering reminder that reproductive justice is a life and death issue. Guy described the battles that women have had to gain legal rights to contraception and abortion and spoke of how in order to gain rights sometimes it is necessary to focus on evolution rather than revolution. In the Philippines, she argued, they needed to focus on getting women to access to contraception before campaigning for abortion, as the former was more likely to be achieved first and would make a significant difference to women's lives. The Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act (2012), which sought to give women access to contraception, took about fourteen years to pass and then was subject to challenge through the court system afterwards. Guy reminded the conference of the need for both national and international campaigns to keep the long-term goals of reproductive justice in mind whilst fighting

different battles and to keep in mind both the universal need and the specific circumstances of women in very different circumstances.

One of the most interesting sessions I attended was a debate over the ethics of research facilitated by Susan Yanow. She raised the question as whether research on how women access abortion in ways that are illegal could jeopardize others ability to do so by publicizing their routes of access. Susan pointed out the number of accounts of women travelling across borders and to the internet sale of the abortion pill. Discussion took place as to how to balance this potential risk with the goal of showing how laws and barriers to access did not prevent abortion but could increase the potential for abortions to be unsafe. Further discussion took place as to how academics, activists and providers needed to better understand the constraints that each other faced in order to facilitate research that is useful to all.

There was one element to the conference that seemed to be more hotly debated than the others. A couple of delegates appeared to be questioning some basic aspects of abortion as an essential service, and when one of them presented a review of selected studies outlining health 'risks' of abortion it raised suspicions about their position, not least because of the outdated evidence that was presented. Later they publically revealed themselves to be anti-abortion activists. The debate amongst the rest of the delegates was to how to deal with this situation. Some people were extremely upset, especially if they had presented data not yet in the public domain, and were concerned about the implications for their research sites and themselves. Others, including myself, felt that whilst the covert nature of their attendance was unfortunate, being exposed to such a huge range of important presentations on all aspects of abortion might lead them to think again about some of the myths and lies perpetuated by anti-choice groups. Whether or not this lead to these particular individuals thinking differently we may never know, but I believe that it is of utmost importance for those of us who research, campaign

and/or provide abortions to defend women's rights to a wide range of audiences especially those who would seek to reduce them.

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## Review of Rana Ayyub's Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover up

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First, a word about Rana Ayyub. She is a journalist who used to work for Indian media outfit called Tehelka. She left Tehelka few years ago when they refused to publish what was essentially the content of Gujarat Files. Not only were her ex-employers not willing to publish the recordings and findings of Rana's investigative journalism but most publishers declined to print the book, prompting her to self-publish this in April 2016. The book turned out to be such a sensation that within six months, a second edition had to be printed with demand still soaring high. But the interesting aspect of this very popular book, which one Indian magazine quoted as 'one of the most important pieces of investigative journalism in Indian history', is that the launch of the book and its existence as well as reviews have almost been blanked out by mainstream media (barring a couple of exceptions).

This brings us to the explosive subject of this book. Gujarat Files presents in-depth interviews with those responsible for maintaining law and order in the State of Gujarat during the pogrom of 2002 when about a thousand Muslims were killed. Rana went as an undercover journalist to Gujarat in 2010 and stayed there for eight months. What she has unearthed is not surprising as hearsay from the State of Gujarat always pointed to the complicity of the then State Government and senior officials in the organising and spreading of riots in the state but what she presents very succinctly is irrefutable evidence of this compliance.

The transcripts presented in the book give a detailed account of provocation of violence that led to the pogrom in 2002. It chronicles the control of state mechanisms (police, civil service and state government) by the top two (Narendra Modi – current Prime Minister and Amit Shah –



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President of the ruling BJP) political leaders of the country. The instigation of violence, the fake encounters and tacit complicity amongst all sectors of governance that led to the pogrom are well-documented in the book and make a very sorry reading.

The other significant aspect that Rana uncovers is the caste conflict within the police force. She presents interviews with Dalit police officers, who candidly disclose how they had been entrusted with extra-judicial murders in the form of fake encounters as they can be dispensed with but the upper caste officers are never asked to do such encounters. This is an ancillary finding of this investigative journalism – the caste-based discrimination that takes place and how it works in the uppermost echelons of society and positions of power. Lower caste senior police officers describe how they are discriminated and not allowed to build homes in their native villages despite being holders of power.

One big lacuna of Gujarat Files is that it lacks analysis. Rana is a journalist and she presents facts as they are. All the transcripts are given in crude form as might be presented to a court as evidence. One can argue that a smart reader can infer and analyse on her own but building of context and analysing the information received would have made more in-depth reading of the subject. Sometimes this looks like a piece of work done in a hurry, almost like she had to get it all out in the public arena before she lost it. There are many typos and editorial errors, which, in a book of this nature are not significant. But it must be stated that this is a huge drawback of this book. If one does not know the context of the pogrom of 2002, then reading this book will be difficult.

What Rana lacks in analysis and depth, she fulfils with her inimitable flair for mundane detail. She adds small detail like being called to join a skype session with a friend's family as she was stepping out for an important interview, or the colour of her shirt as she goes out for a meeting, or the cost of her meal after a long day's work. This really does break the monotony of the transcripts one reads in the book and you

cannot but feel in awe of this very brave and committed journalist who took all the risks to go undercover and unearth what none of the official agencies was able to bring about.

Overall, Gujarat Files is a must read for all those concerned with politics in South Asia and interested in human rights and law and order in the sub-continent. The fact that those placated in the book are holders of power in the country is very scary and despite various smear campaigns on social media, the fact that she is still working as an independent journalist is nothing short of a miracle. In just over 200 pages, Rana has confirmed that characterising the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat as anarchy of mob is incorrect. Her investigation describes how regimes of impunity have been put in place by the State for its use and it leaves us with the need to understand how this could happen and what can be done to ensure there is no repeat of such a horror in a country still governed by the Hindu right BJP. What the book needs is further analysis and building of a narrative of all the transcripts provided, so it can be lucid for a reader new to this subject.

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# Review of Karima Bennoune's *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism*

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The end of my 2016 was one to remember. I spent New Year's Eve and the days leading up to it interviewing people displaced from Gwoza, a local government area in Nigeria's north east. With a primarily agricultural economy and on the border with Cameroon, Gwoza is multi ethnic and multi religious. People from at least 12 ethnic groups and followers of Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions live side by side, their relationships strengthened by inter-marriage and common ancestors.

The people I spoke with told a common story. They spoke of how, after the extra-judicial killing in 2009 of Mohammad Yusuf, the charismatic founder and leader of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati wal Jihad (JAS), commonly known as Boko Haram, and 800 of his followers by security forces, some JAS members escaped to Gwoza. They started preaching to the Muslims of the community, telling them how to behave and to stop mixing with their Christian friends and neighbours. Then they went on to attack, threaten and kill Christians and Muslims who opposed their ideology and actions.

As they tell me about the extent of this violence against those seen as oppositional to JAS ideology and actions, I think of Karima Bennoune's *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* (WW Norton & Company, 2013). Based on almost 300 interviews in nearly 30 countries, Bennoune tells stories of people fighting against Muslim fundamentalism and for peace, justice and human rights. She also tells her own story, opening with the death threats issued against her father, a professor and critic of successive governments and armed fundamentalists, in early 1990s Algeria and interspersing her



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personal reflections throughout the book. As she writes in her introduction, 'the struggle waged in Muslim majority societies against extremism is one of the most important - and overlooked - human rights struggles in the world.'

It's a fight that takes multiple forms. Indeed, many stories told are not of people considered activists in other contexts. Theatre producers, music presenters and playwrights, these are people fighting just to keep illuminated the space for culture and creative expression, even if only for a few hours. The first two chapters are devoted to the role of culture, not surprising given the author is the current United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights.

The interplay between defenders of cultural expression and fundamentalism is not often seen in narratives about fundamentalism but this is an important terrain of attacks and resistance as seen by the stories told. The book opens with Faizan Peerzada who, when interviewed by Bennoune in 2010, continued to run the Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop's Youth Performing Festival in Pakistan despite the last festival in 2008 having been bombed.<sup>1</sup> It goes on to tell the stories of Samia Benkherroubi and Aziz Smati of Bled Music, a music TV show that started at the same time as the rise of fundamentalists in Algeria who were against music. Smati was shot four times by a young man and left for dead. He survived and, together with Benkherroubi, is in exile in Paris.

Smati is not the only person profiled in the book to have been attacked. Maria Bashir, the first woman chief prosecutor in Afghanistan who focuses on cases of corruption and violence against women and girls, receives daily threats, is no longer able to send her children to school and has multiple survived bomb attacks. Sabeen Mahmud, who, in chapter two, talks about T2F, the café, cultural space and peace organization that she runs, was assassinated on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2015 while leaving the centre with her mother.

Peerzada, Benkherroubi, Smati, Bashir and Mahmud are just five of the many activists whose stories fill the book. Staff of the Kabul Museum talk

of how they fought to save priceless historical objects from mujahideen rockets in the late 1980s only to watch members of the Taliban destroy more than 2,750 pieces in 3 days, hiding some artifacts, 'willing to risk death to keep history alive.' Teachers fight Israeli checkpoints so children in the West Bank can attend a play at the Palestinian National Theatre in East Jerusalem. A documentary filmmaker and photojournalist finally leaves Iran, not after the many times he was arrested and beaten but because he is making a documentary about gay Iranians that he knew 'the government would not like at all.' A member of the Somali community in the US catalyses elders to speak out against recruitment by Al Shabaab and holds a Ramadan Basketball Tournament to give young people something life affirming and fun to do together after his teenage nephew becomes an Al Shabaab fighter. Women human rights defenders protest the flogging of a female journalist for wearing trousers in public in Sudan, fight for the rights of disabled women and girls in Senegal and successfully appeal sharianisation stoning sentences of women for zina in Nigeria. They also march through the streets of Kabul against street harassment, publish a magazine on sex and sexuality for readers across the straight to queer sexual spectrum in Pakistan and organize Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) to work from a secular perspective and seek to progressively interpret within religion. Journalists in Algeria get out the next day's edition even after bombs hit their newspaper offices killing 18 and wounding 52 colleagues and neighbours while their counterparts in Russia offer media resources to 'the internal and external Muslim world' showing the history of Muslims, Christians and Jews living in peace in their country.

*Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* provides a more nuanced narrative and analysis than that commonly depicted. Concerned with both rising fundamentalism and increasing discrimination against Muslims, Bennoune points out that 'writing about Muslim fundamentalism in this era for an American audience feels like dancing on a minefield.' She devotes her final chapter to abuses against human rights committed in the name of

fighting terrorism. Using examples of the Algerian, Russian and Israeli states, she reminds the reader that ‘the battle against fundamentalism is a critical fight for human rights as well as one that has to be guided by human rights.’

She highlights the number of people fighting against fundamentalism in Muslim majority countries who continue to express themselves freely and fight against fundamentalism regardless of whether the world listens or helps. This reality is at odds with common Western narratives and its questions of, ‘where are the Muslim voices?’ By sharing the stories of people of Muslim heritage that risk their lives to resist fundamentalism, Bennoune flips the question back: why do you not listen to those who speak? Perhaps one of the reasons for this dissonance between rhetoric and reality is that those in the West who demand that ‘Muslims speak’ are not looking in the right places. They are confined to their own borders and to the ‘right kind’ of Muslim. The queer Muslim or secular feminist, seen to be infected with Westernisation whether in the West or overseas, is often seen to have lost their ‘authenticity.’

Importantly, Bennoune decentres conversations about Muslim fundamentalism, shifting the locus of attention from Europe and North America to the countries where it causes the most pain and suffering. According to the Global Terrorism Index, 68 percent of terrorism related deaths in the world in 2015 took place in just 3 countries: Iraq, Afghanistan and Nigeria. Yet, the news cycle in recent years has been full of attacks in European cities: Berlin, Brussels, Nice, Paris, Zurich. Although what happened in these places and the response to the attacks are important to analyse, there is something intensely problematic about the fact that attacks outside Europe seem not to excite as much interest, even within the countries where they happen. While one group of Muslim fundamentalists killed over a dozen people working at Charlie Hebdo in Paris on 7th January 2015, another group was reported to have killed over 2,000 people in Baga in northeast Nigeria between 3rd and 7th January.

The fact that so much reporting, discussion and grief does not extend to Muslim fundamentalist attacks outside Europe was brought home to me five days after the November 2015 attacks in Paris. I was on my way to the airport in Kano in northern Nigeria when I got a call that a market we had just passed had been attacked by two bombers, one as young as 11. While I was trying to call my friends and colleagues from the departure lounge to check they were safe, my eyes fell on the video screen in the corner. Days afterwards, analysts were still discussing what had happened in Paris with only a rolling ticker tape message even acknowledging that attacks had happened in Kano. This was a Nigerian news channel.

Indeed, as the events of 2016 and the first few months of 2017 show us, the fear of Muslim fundamentalism continues to be a strong mobilising factor for discrimination against Muslims in countries across Europe and in the United States of America. This narrative obscures the reality that the impact of Muslim fundamentalism is most felt outside Europe and the USA. As Bennoune writes, far from seeing a clash *of* civilisations between ‘the backwards Muslim world’ and ‘the enlightened West’ as common anti Muslim rhetoric implies, what we are witnessing instead is a clash *within* civilisations.

Bennoune also highlights the ways in which all sides of the political spectrum in the West often get it wrong. The right justify torture and other human rights violations as part of the war on terror, whipping up racism and prejudice against all Muslims who are seen as a monolithic block of potential terrorists or walking time bombs. On the left, however, refusal to acknowledge the reality of violence and essentialised notions of ‘culture,’ which are in themselves deeply racist, proliferate. As she forcefully states, ‘Muslim fundamentalists are our extreme right’ and ‘when we talk about Muslim fundamentalism, we have to actually talk about it. It exists. It gravely menaces the human rights of people of Muslim heritage.’ The book raises crucial questions about what solidarity looks like in this context and the importance of centring the need to fight



discrimination against Muslims as well as to resist Muslim fundamentalism.

*Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* may be aimed at a Western audience where it should make an important contribution to ongoing debates but it needs to be read in the countries where the clash within civilisations is most taking place. Unfortunately, it is unlikely to reach many in these countries, a missed opportunity as the story of my colleague and friend Lauratu shows.

Lauratu works to build peace and protect human rights in Nigeria, training journalists to be conflict sensitive so their reporting doesn't create or increase tensions between or within groups. She started this work in the weeks after nine women polio workers were shot and killed in northern Nigeria after a cleric appeared on a popular radio station claiming contaminated medicine caused polio and vaccinations were part of a Western plot to sterilise girls and eliminate the Muslim population. Lauratu is a devout Muslim who prays five times a day without fail and spends much of her weekends learning Arabic and attending Islamic school. She asked to borrow the book when she saw me reading it and sped through it in two days, staying up until the early hours of the morning to do so. She told me just how much she had learned: that people in other countries are experiencing similar dynamics of narrowing theological space; the need to question what religious leaders teach; and the importance of claiming and widening the space for dissent. The book had also started her thinking about her children's Islamic education. Their Islamic school had recently appointed a new director who had fired all the staff and brought in new teachers from Saudi Arabia. In the weeks after reading the book, she mobilised other parents to investigate exactly what interpretations were being taught in the school to make sure their children were not being radicalised.

In the months after this conversation, I have lent my copy to many other friends in Nigeria, particularly activists working in its northeast who

saw the rise of the fundamentalist movement and its ideology and work in the aftermath of the devastation left by the confrontation between JAS and state security forces. Without fail, it stimulates discussion about the similarities and differences between countries and the lessons Nigeria can learn from what has happened and is happening elsewhere.

I finish writing this review at the Pinnacle Hotel in Maiduguri on a hot Sunday afternoon. Maiduguri, where Yusuf gathered followers, is the home of JAS. The Pinnacle is an unlikely site of resistance against Muslim fundamentalism. It was the location a few years ago where a wedding celebration between two men took place. It wasn't a 'real' wedding of course and the men concerned were arrested but the very fact that there was a celebration of love and commitment between two men in the city that birthed one of the deadliest Muslim fundamentalist groups globally shows the struggle that takes place within Muslim majority societies.

The Pinnacle is also the only place in Maiduguri where I almost feel comfortable uncovering my shoulders in public. Every Sunday afternoon, there is a party by the pool with the latest Naija beats played at loud volume by the enthusiastic DJ. The hotel also has a nightclub that eager clubbers attend, despite it being a likely target of attack. It is strange that going out clubbing equals bravery. But in Maiduguri, the loud drumbeats and the DJ spinning his tunes in the corner feel like an act of resistance. As Faizan Peerzada said, 'If we bow down to the Islamists, then everything is going to be rolled back and they will always have their way, and then there will be nothing. We'll just be sitting in a dark corner.' *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* is a powerful testament to and celebration of all those who try to keep a light shining in the darkness.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Its headquarters in Lahore were subsequently bombed in 2010. Peerzada died of a heart attack in 2012. His twin brother, Sadaan Peerzada, with whom he had been running the festivals, started holding them again in 2014 in both Lahore and Islamabad.

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# The New Cool: A Review of Generation M Young Muslims Changing the World by Shelina Janmohamad

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There is a certain group of Muslims that writer and advertising industry professional Shelina Janmohamed believes we need to better understand. Her first book, *Love in a Headscarf*, was a breezy, lighthearted memoir about finding a husband, published in 2009. *Generation M* is somewhat more serious, addressing the fact that young Muslims, including in the West, are becoming religious in ways that their parents never were. She believes that, rather than fearing this trend, we should welcome it. This generation, she explains, are making Islam thoroughly modern and progressive.

There are caveats, of course. Not all Muslims belong to this eponymous *Generation M*. If you're old, you don't belong. If you condone religiously-motivated violence, you don't belong. If you aren't fashionable, sociable or educated, you don't belong. If you think women should stay at home while their husbands work, you don't belong. Like hipsters, Generation M is a relatively elite group, but disproportionately influential. They are generally young, middle-class and – crucial to her argument – they wield enormous spending power, contributing many billions of dollars to the global economy. They are all over social media, and now mainstream media, too. What makes them different from other hipsters is that they are also 'a segment who believe in faith and modernity as mutually beneficial,' Janmohamed writes.

This is a book clearly written by someone who works in advertising. It celebrates consumerism, colourfully recounting the stories of young entrepreneurs flogging halal wine and halal convenience foods, halal



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makeup, halal toothpaste, breathable nail polish that makes ablutions easier, stylish hijabs and abayas, sharia banking services, beef bacon, Muslim Barbie dolls, Islamic pop music, Islamic alternatives to Christmas presents – indeed anything that can be transformed into something religiously acceptable (begging one to wonder just how Muslims have managed until now). ‘Generation M love brands,’ she exclaims. By creating an enormous parallel economy of halal products, she argues that *Generation M* is making it possible for people to replicate a modern lifestyle without breaking the rules.

And the rules are key. Janmohamed makes Generation M sound like an exclusive club. But let’s not forget that this isn’t a club that anyone can join. It’s for Muslims only. And for a certain type of Muslim at that. *Generation M*, although it professes to be an honest account of the members of this club, reads overall more like a rule book for a ‘good’ young Muslim. And these rules are where the problems lie.

Millions of young, educated Muslim women in liberal societies, belonging to *Generation M*, have chosen to dive deeper into their faith than their parents did. They have adopted veils – some even niqabs – when their mothers never wore them. They pray five times a day, adhere to shariah law, some refuse to vote, and they have chosen to bring their faith firmly into their public lives. This trend has been spurred by the creeping spread of puritanism within Islam, often Saudi-led, and by the politicisation of the faith by a wide range of movements. The particular generation that Janmohamed describes marks itself apart in trying to reconcile the cosmopolitan and often western lifestyles they want with a new (or at least new to them) strict religious doctrine that demands they be modest, devout and unwaveringly committed to God and the Ummah.

This struggle to have the best of both worlds is the reason we today see hijabi women in big-budget fashion campaigns and recently even in an issue of *Playboy* magazine. Generation M women want to be fashionable, but must ‘always remember the guiding faith principles in the way that

they express themselves,' says Janmohamed, like a tutting aunt. On the one hand, some may want to be pop stars, but on the other hand they may find themselves held back by the Islamic concept of 'awrah', which states that a woman's singing voice should not be heard in public. Apparent paradoxes like these crop up so many times in the book that being a member of this exclusive club starts sounding like a lot of hard work. One chapter even ends with her cheerfully quoting one her interviewees: 'Muslims put the fun back into fundamentalism.'

Just how religious fundamentalism can meet the rights, needs and desires of modern women is territory Janmohamed navigates like a ship's captain steering around icebergs. Although she states (only once) that Generation M is just fine with women not wearing hijabs, both the book cover and its content make abundantly clear that veiling is a major part of being a 'proper' Muslim woman. She describes in positive terms a Muslim beauty pageant in Indonesia in which contestants are judged on their piety and must all wear veils. Never does she mention protests against female veiling in countries that demand it. Nor does she explore the regressive impacts that shariah courts have had on so many women's lives, and their resistance to them.

It's difficult to get a handle on just what role feminism plays for this particular generation. She is insistent that Generation M are feminists like herself, but she also rejects mainstream feminism. 'Generation M women believe in the right to equal participation, equal respect and a full role in society, but increasingly demands this on their own terms as Muslims rather than accepting the goals of feminism rooted in the Western tradition,' she writes. What these 'own terms' are isn't made entirely clear, but it does seem to mean that when feminism conflicts with religious rules, then she doesn't want it.

The problem with Janmohamed's characterisation of Generation M is that it risks pushing her own narrow image of young, middle-class Muslim women as the default. This mainstreaming of Muslim women as

headscarf-wearing and opposing 'Western' feminism betrays the countless women who don't fit inside this box. At the same time, though, in trying to forge a new Muslim identity, it's clear that the women who belong to Generation M are spotting avenues for changing the more conservative and patriarchal institutions of old. They insist on being heard, on having spaces in mosques, and on equality in the home and workplace. It's conceivable that, in asserting themselves and their identity, they may well change their religion from within. The question the book also raises for secular feminists is whether women like the author, who put their religion before their feminism but still identify as feminists, can be included in the wider movement without feeling alienated by it.

But if a middle ground exists, which both secular feminists and conservatively religious feminists can occupy, it's clear that Janmohamed has not yet found it. By ignoring the women within Muslim societies that so powerfully and actively resist the expectation to cover up and conform to religious diktats, she lets them down. Does her Generation M include women in Saudi Arabia who want to be allowed to drive, work and not be chaperoned at all times by a male guardian? What is it doing to support the young girls being forced to wear headscarves by their fathers? What is it doing to support the women whose lives have been damaged by patriarchal shariah courts in Britain? These are the complexities that she conveniently skips over in her glossy descriptions of what she believes young modern Muslims want. This book is a remarkable read, not only for what it says but also for what it leaves out. It is a sanitised version of reality. One in which cool people are happily sipping on their halal wine, cosy in the belief that they are good Muslims, and wouldn't the world be a better place if all Muslims were like them.

The reason *Generation M* is important is because it will serve as a manual to many young Muslim women, nudging them to believe that this is how they should behave, dress and live. If Janmohamed doesn't have a deeper agenda, perhaps she is simply naïve. If she does have an agenda,



then this is religious propaganda at its stealthiest. By leaving out the experiences of those who don't fit inside the narrow constraints of her club – including those who support what she disdainfully dismisses as “Western” feminism – she deliberately turns her back on the millions who define being young, Muslim and modern in other ways.

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## Artist Spotlight

Jaishri Abichandani\*

\* <http://jaishriabichandani.net>



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*Rise and Fall with artist Jaishri Abichandani, 2008*

Born in Bombay, India, Jaishri Abichandani immigrated to New York City in 1984, dividing her time between NYC and London. She has continued to intertwine art and activism in her career, founding the South Asian Women's Creative Collective, <http://www.sawcc.org>, in New York and with Sonia Mehta in London. She is internationally renowned and a leading feminist voice on art and activism.

Abichandani's work is committed to a visualisation of the female body as the site of conflict and resistance to dominant narratives of nationalism

and religion. Using an eclectic range of materials and media, her art focalises embodiment itself as a mode of questioning power. The artworks carried in this special issue on Gender and Fundamentalisms help us visualise the challenges facing women and minorities today in the context of newly emboldened religious fundamentalist and populist authoritarian projects globally.

For more information about her work and current shows check:

<http://jaishriabichandani.net>

## **Illustrations for Issue Two**

### **Image References**

*All artworks are by Jaishri Abichandani, unless otherwise noted.*

Cover image: [Period Piece](#), 2017

[Return of Devastasia \(after Maria Benjamin\)](#), 2010

[Holy Family \[detail\]](#), 2016

[Fountain of Youth \(after Xenith\)](#), 2010

[Goddess of Resistance](#), 2017

[Before Kali Number 73](#), 2014

[We Were Making History 3](#), 2013

[Angry Ladies](#), 2017

[No Way Home \(gupta/o'keefe\)](#), 2010

[Rise and Fall](#), 2008

[Sussan Tahmasebi](#), 2016 – Illustration by Carol Rosetti

[Period Piece \[Detail\]](#), 2017

[Holy Family](#), 2016

[Isatou Touray](#), 2016 – Illustration by Carol Rosetti

[Ruffling Feathers](#), 2016

[Period Piece](#), 2017

[Detour](#), 2011

[Rise and Fall with artist Jaishri Abichandani](#), 2008

The artworks have been curated by Sonia Mehta who is the Arts editor for *Feminist Dissent* and founder, curator and producer of South Asian Women's Creative Collective - SAWCC –London.

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## Call for Papers

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*Feminist Dissent* is an online peer-reviewed journal hosted at the University of Warwick, UK and edited by an Editorial Collective consisting of academics, writers, artists and activists. It invites submissions of original and unpublished work that reflect the aims and principles of the journal. We publish full-length academic articles, shorter Voices of Dissent pieces and book and film reviews in each issue. We also invite proposals for special issues from potential editors.

*Feminist Dissent* looks to open up new ways of thinking about secularism, religious freedom, civil liberties and human rights, nationalism and identity politics, anti-racism and multiculturalism, neo-liberalism, feminist theory and feminist resistance. In particular, we are interested in essays, reviews, reports and creative work that interrogate the multiple connections between religious fundamentalism and gender.

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<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/feministdissent/submissionguidelines/>

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If you would like to review a book, film, exhibition or event or request that *Feminist Dissent* carries a review of your book, film, exhibition or event please contact:

Georgie Wemyss at [G.Wemyss@UEL.ac.uk](mailto:G.Wemyss@UEL.ac.uk)

Rebecca Durand at [rbdurand@hotmail.com](mailto:rbdurand@hotmail.com)

### Artwork:

*Feminist Dissent* is keen to feature artists' work. If you would like your artwork or photographs featured in one of our issues, please contact our Arts Editor Sonia Mehta at

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**Issue 2 – July 2017 – Special issue on Gender and Fundamentalisms**

Co-edited by Nadjé Al-Ali and Nira Yuval-Davis

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**Book and film reviews**

**Featured Artist Jaishri Abichandani**

**Additional art by Carol Rosetti**

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