



*Celebrating our
20th Anniversary year**

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A DAWN Special Supplement for the World Social Forum, Mumbai, India, 16-21 January 2004 on *The Many Faces of Fundamentalism*

At WSF Mumbai 2004, DAWN is holding a seminar on 18 January on the *Many Faces of Fundamentalism* to highlight and analyse the different ways in which different fundamentalisms — religious and market — affect women's lives. A key challenge facing women's rights activists and scholars has been the emergence and evolution of fundamentalism in various forms across religious and geographical contexts, the ways women are affected, and how to analyse and understand the forces and what they unleash. The seminar will attempt to problematise fundamentalism in its various avatars and its implications. Women speakers from Africa, Latin America, South East Asia, India and the Caribbean who have been working on these issues will make presentations; then open the discussion to move the debate forward.

*Anniversary design by Romane Zarate Marques

DAWN Special Supplement

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Religious Fundamentalism and Secular Politics: different sides of a single thought

By Sonia Corrêa, DAWN Research Coordinator on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Since the late '70s, when the Iranian revolution overthrew the government of Shah Reza Pahlavi and led Ayatollah Khomeini to power, today's world has been forced to re-examine the question of the relationship between religion and politics. The debate that has been taking place since then, within the framework of conventional political science, has focused its attention on the theocratic regimes of the Islamic world, emphasising that these regimes represent a break with the modern political tradition of separating political and "divine" authority. This approach tends to disregard the increasing influence that integrational religious forces have on self-defined secular States, the constitutions of which contain clear principles on the separation of the State from religion.

While Khomeini was attracting media attention as the leader of an emerging global Islamic fundamentalism, North American integrational Catholic and Protestant sectors were gaining a strong hold on Ronald Reagan's domestic and international policy. As a result, access to abortion became "anathema" to good citizenship, and women who had abortions were treated as the "new heretics". From that period on, in the United States virulent terrorist attacks were carried out against abortion clinics and against doctors who performed this surgical procedure. Several clinics were burned down and their professionals murdered. The Reagan administration's "fundamentalist" standpoint gained international visibility in 1984, at the International Conference on Population that took place in Mexico, when USA suspended its support to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), claiming that its resources were destined for the promotion of abortion. Meanwhile,

To P2

political scientists and the media never paid as much attention to this as they did to Islamic fundamentalism.

The effects of Reagan's policies were largely sidelined in global affairs and became exclusively the concern of those involved in family planning, and more particularly, of feminists. Already in 1984, DAWN affirmed that religious fundamentalism and its several manifestations – Islamic, Catholic, Hindu, Protestant – constituted an emerging global political trend, the impacts of which would be disastrous to women's lives. After almost two decades, as we can see, this vision has been dramatically confirmed: the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism has become patent in the four corners of the world. The Taliban and September 11th are, as we know, only the tips of the iceberg.

In its religious expression, fundamentalism condemns Nigerian women accused of adultery to death. In India, fundamentalism is present in the origin of civil conflicts between Muslims and Hindus, and in its trail of slaughter and systematic rape of women and of children as the principal victims. In Latin America, fundamentalism mobilises the Catholic hierarchy against the facilitative Protocol of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and motivates certain sectors, such as Opus Dei and evangelical groups, to be against reproductive health policies, and particularly against homosexuals and lesbians. As in the United States, in Latin American regions these forces have been gaining political power through the democratic route. They procure votes through the control of the media and through populist strategies, such as the distribution of resources for poor people via religious networks. In all those places where it proliferates, religious fundamentalism seeks roots in those sectors excluded from public policies and economic gains, and especially among unemployed young men. However, in many cases women are also fundamentalist policy-leading characters, acting as spokespersons in the defense of family, morality, and decency.

From September 2001 onwards, Bush's "sacred war against the axis of evil" has been featured daily in the global media. However, the general public is rarely informed that the US stance against sexual and reproductive health policies is a starkly funda-

mentalist element of current North American foreign policy. This policy involves cutting off resources to foreign NGOs working on the issue of abortion (known as the Gag Rule), promoting sexual abstinence as a preventive policy in relation to AIDS, and attacking sex work through USAID's policy on the reduction of human trafficking. In a meeting of the Economic and Social Commission of Asia-Pacific (ESCAP) in December 2002, the US government positioned itself openly against the Agenda of the Cairo Conference, remaining absolutely isolated before the countries of both regions. Today, any negotiations conducted with the Bush administration, for example the agreements on trade and resources for development, could hide an ultra-conservative element on abortion and sexuality. Government representatives who go to Washington, or negotiate with Bush emissaries, are bound to hear the following sentence: "We will offer resources to fight poverty in your country, if you commit to maintaining the illegality of abortion and promoting sexual abstinence"

As such, many and complex are the fronts on which we must place ourselves in order to counteract the harmful impacts of religious fundamentalism on law, public policies and daily social life. This is why it is so important to incorporate the defense of a secular state in our agendas. But this is not all. In the beginning of this new millennium, we face other fundamentalist expressions that, though not religious, are characterised by the intransigent belief in a "sacred text", or in an ultimate truth. One of the most widely known expressions of this kind is the so-called "market fundamentalism". The media attributes to George Soros the invention of this term. But in fact, feminist economists had been using this terminology since the mid-'90s. It signifies a dogmatic attachment to the principles of neo-classical economics that underpins neo-liberal life or, in other words, the "belief" in a single economic model that can and should be applied in every corner of the world. Such "belief" inhibits the recognition of problems and crises emerging from the implementation of the model.

Finally, we are challenged to deal with another manifestation of "fundamentalism" that reveals itself in our own political field: integrational standpoints which can be observed in the sphere of identity, communitarian and cultural revivalist poli-

To bottom of P3

FUNDAMENTALISMS: POSITIONS AND DEBATES

From a presentation by Fatou Sow at the DAWN Training Institute, Bangalore, 14 September - 3 October 2003.

Fundamentalism does not relate to one group or one movement and is so imprecise that it is difficult to use as a concept to describe organisations as different as the Christian Coalition and Nation of Islam. A definition of fundamentalism is "the affirmation of religious (cultural/political) authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction; it is expressed through the collective demand that specific creedal and ethical dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognised and legally enforced." (B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age*).

Fundamentalisms are religious, political and social movements, mainly based on religion, culture and ideology. While denying their political ambitions, religious and cultural fundamentalisms use politics as a tool to fulfil their major goal: to influence and control people's minds and lives (and often resources) and get access to symbolic or effective power. Fundamentalists have several common trends that allow them to share common views regarding the women's rights struggle

- religious and/or cultural idealism as a basis for personal and communal identity
- an understanding of truth as revealed and unified - they envision themselves as part of a cosmic struggle and seize upon historical moments that they reinterpret in the light of this struggle
- they are reactionary and demonise the opposition
- they are selective about what parts of their tradition and heritage they stress - they fear modernist (western) cultural hegemony and try to overturn the distribution of power
- they are led by males.

Religious fundamentalism is the most important phenomenon, with Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism among the most common. While fundamentalists of different faiths may be antagonists, they have common characteristics of exclusivism, anti-pluralism and intolerance.

Fundamentalists in various traditions teach that there was a perfect moment that they strive to recover. This often involves reacting to what is seen as a threat to realising the ideal — even if the ideal never actually existed. They protest at the secularisation of society and seek to undo societal changes, replacing them with purified religious institutions and ethics. At the beginning of the 20th century,

From previous page

leading Christian evangelical clergy published a series of pamphlets titled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (in which lies the origin of the term fundamentalism) as a response by conservative churchmen to the loss of influence of traditional revivalism in America; the liberalising trends of biblical criticism; and the development of Darwinian theories about the origin of the universe. Christian fundamentalists are guardians of the Bible, which is to be understood as literally true to the exclusion of others' interpretations.

Therefore, in the beginning of this new millennium, we must be alert and attentive to religious fundamentalism affecting big politics, and to the more subtle temptation of economic and political fundamentalism, bearing in mind that the latter is also unfortunately latent in our own field of action: political parties and civil society. 🌺

This article was originally prepared for the magazine *Bocas no mundo*, which is published by the Brazilian Women's Coalition, AMB.

Islamic fundamentalism is driven by western economic and cultural penetration of the Islamic world during western colonialism. It has continued and grown because fundamentalists often see the non-colonial governments as a change of masters, from westerners to westernised Muslims. In most Muslim African countries, Islam was also used as an identity to resist the colonial power. To maintain Shari'a is a protest against secularisation of the law

To next page

implemented by colonisation. In many countries, the omnipresent dominance of external powers, mainly the US, is also perceived as contradictory to Islamic culture and as mechanisms for exploitation (e.g. of oil resources in Arab countries).

Some groups have expressed their resistance within political parties; some have used violent ways. Fundamentalist Muslims are willing to re-assert their identities within their faith and tradition in order to "challenge the causes of social disorganisation, political powerlessness, and economic frustration" (An-Na'im 1996).

Cultural fundamentalisms aim at the same objectives: build, maintain, renew a proper identity for communities whose identities, faith, social values, languages were stolen or spoiled by colonisation. Issues related to identity are crucial in contemporary Africa, which is constantly reconstructing itself under the pressure of both largely exogenous factors and internal reaction forces. (e.g. the Mobutu ideal of authenticity: obligation of a dress code, Africanisation of names, etc.) It is again a control of people's rights to determine their own identity. In other cultures, the wearing of local clothing and veiling are parts of cultural fundamentalisms.

There is also political fundamentalism, a combination of theological fundamentalism and the personal commitments of religious adherents to combat vice and preserve tradition at the expense of progress; and global fundamentalism, a phenomena that denotes many religiously motivated politically active groups found in a variety of religious traditions and political systems.

Fundamentalisms appear in different and changing forms, sometimes as a state project, sometimes in opposition to the state, but all involve damage to women.

Control of woman's body as a political project

As stated by many women's organisations, at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas is the control of women's minds and bodies.

All religious and cultural fundamentalists support the patriarchal family as a central agent of such control. They view women as embodying the morals and traditional values of the family and the whole community. Their rhetoric focuses on woman as mother and caregiver. The need to promote the critical role of women in the family, the basic unit of society, was reaffirmed by the Holy See representative at the 23rd UN General Assembly Special Session.

The Holy See is a permanent observer to the UN and has diplomatic relations with countries worldwide. The Church and the Mosque are conservative forces that allied with each other each time women's rights (control of body, sexuality, fertility) were at the centre of debate. "Faced with the devastation that AIDS is causing in countries across Africa, the Roman Catholic hierarchy has coldly reiterated its ban on the use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS. The church leadership continues to pose serious obstacles to AIDS prevention at both an international and local level." (Bene Madunagu)

The current Bush administration can be considered fundamentalist because of its alliance with right wing fundamentalist groups in the US, and a very conservative and fundamentalist approach to the values of family, sexual and reproductive health and rights. The Islamic Republic of Iran's rhetoric, as in other Islamic states, abounds with the image of woman as mother and caregiver: the importance of woman's reproductive function is integral to her individual and social identity. To remove the former destroys the latter.

Most contemporary cultural and religious discourses aim at depriving and secluding women.

Any definition of 'self' for woman is directly and causally linked to her reproductive capacity. Even states that claim themselves to be secular 'protect' women as

mothers and caregivers. Where the religions of the Book and state family codes grant men full authority, making him the head, both from a legal and religious point of view, men prevail in both public and private spheres. They have totally taken up the public sphere and directly or indirectly rule the private sphere managed by women. However the limits between private and public spheres that are carefully outlined by laws are blurring through women's access to the actual exercise of their citizenship through education and political commitment.

Women are seen as the custodians of cultures, moral traditions and national identity, who as educators set cultural and social landmarks. While men can (and must) change, in this situation women cannot assume a modernity that might threaten the fragile moral and cultural balance of societies. They face these barriers in their demand for more equality and more consideration for their rights in constructing democracy.

Women's rights are perceived as anti-cultural and anti-religious. Most contemporary cultural and religious discourses aim at depriving and secluding women, as well as subjecting them to a cultural and religious order to which no man would subject himself. 🌞

In and against the state in Malaysia

- where men in government and Islamic opposition parties play the 'gender card'

Excerpts from a presentation by Cecilia Ng at the DAWN Training Institute, Bangalore, that scanned the current economic and political landscape and its implications for multi-culturalism and democracy in Malaysia.

There seems to be an assumption that women's groups in Malaysia have a rather rosy relationship with the State, particularly with the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Family Development in early 2001. This relationship is in contrast to the almost adversarial stance of the State to other NGOs, particularly groups involved in human rights issues and community organising that are perceived as critical of, or anti-, government.

In the 1970s the call of Women in Development at the global level fitted well into the development agenda of the Malaysian State, which wanted the integration of women into the capitalist development process. Both were interested in making women more productive, particularly by ushering them into the modern industrial sector. A National Advisory Council for the Integration of WID was set up in July 1976 and the Secretariat for Women's Affairs (HAWA) in 1983. The lack of resources and personnel provided for HAWA, however, revealed how insignificant the 'woman question' was to the State in the '70s and '80s. Nonetheless, by the early 1990s women's groups had established a stronger presence in the country, but efforts to lobby the State continued to yield mixed results. There was still no gendered political constituency to speak of and ethnicity was still the order of the day.¹ All this was to change significantly from the mid-1990s when women's issues became slowly appropriated and manipulated by political forces, and the gender card was thrown on the table — for better or worse. The process of engagement with the State became more complex and political Islam became an increasingly key factor in this process.

In the rise of new identity politics, ethnicity and religion were placed ahead of gender. Women quickly became the touchstone of a new project for recasting ideological foundations, and women's agency was used to rebuild Malay-Muslim identity. An enforced dichotomisation between

Muslims and non-Muslims also led to a pervasive though erroneous perception that unequal gender relations can only be associated with an Islamised social system and that Islamic practices were highly gendered while non-Islamic practices were more gender-neutral. Such a perception was not difficult to foster, given that political energies, including that of the State, were expended to fortify the *Syariah* and even more cultural attention was targeted to ensure a distinct dress code for Muslims, particularly women.

In authoritarian, developmentalist, post-colonial Malaysia, Islam remained almost the only legitimate site for limited counter-hegemony. Islam was a two-edged sword: a force the State wanted to contain as well as co-opt.

The sudden meltdown of the Asian economic miracle followed by the meltdown between the Prime Minister and his Deputy in 1998 gave the Malaysian public a display of Machiavellian and sexual politics. There was also an unprecedented unleashing of the fury of the people, especially from the Malay masses - a situation in which many NGOs, including women's groups, came together with other progressive and opposition forces in a *Reformasi* movement.

A total of about 80 NGOs led by key women's groups formed the Women's Agenda for Change to work in part as a lobbying tool for the forthcoming general election, pressuring political parties including those in government to pay attention and give commitment to women's issues in return for votes. For the first time Muslim women representing welfare-based Islamic bodies joined in the call for reforms. More interestingly, the main women's wings of the ruling coalition also voiced their backing, with the government later even projecting it as their initiative, and using the gender card to deprecate political opposition.

The ruling coalition won the 1999 general

To next page

From previous page

election and rather surprisingly created the Ministry for Women's Affairs in 2001, with the appointment of a savvy woman Minister in an effort to win over the female constituency.² Strategies to build linkages — or to control women's NGOs — included offering funds and inviting women's groups to be on various task forces and committees, and finally, by appropriating the Violence Against Women Campaign - issues that the women's movement had spearheaded for 20 years.

A depoliticisation process seems to be occurring when women's NGOs are embedded within State structures without any long term and systematic vision. Recognition of being too deeply implicated with the State led to the withdrawal of progressive women's groups in early 2003 from chairing technical working group subcommittees. While critical of the State, they are caught in a dilemma with their support of the alternative political coalition because of the conservative position of the main Islamic-based opposition party (which has yet to reconcile its

professed democratic ideals with an Islamic world-view that avoids the question of gender equality). While allowing women to stand in the next election, it also recently pronounced that women were suitable for only specific professions, given their biological limitations.

Within the context of an authoritarian, non-feminist regime, which at the same time needs to seek legitimacy through an electoral system, the politics of engagement between the women's movement and the State is fraught with tensions and ambiguities. Despite an uphill struggle, the women's movement in Malaysia has succeeded in putting their agenda in the public domain, which is currently being institutionalised and mainstreamed. The challenge then is, as an autonomous movement, how to ensure that the organisation(s) and issues are not co-opted by a modernist yet repressive State? What does an 'in and against' the State position mean, particularly when the latter is a strong supporter of neo-liberal globalisation? And if one is 'against' the State, what opposition force(s) does one support?

As Malaysia moves to its 11th general elections by 2004, it is almost without a shadow of doubt that the gender card will be thrust into the political playing field once more. Already the Islamic opposition party has announced its intention to field at least one female candidate in every state — a complete turnaround of their decision four years ago when women were barred from contesting in elections. Religion and gender will surely be used to up the ante as women become pawns in the (male) jostle for power. In this context, more than ever, the women's movement has to craftily tread the political tightrope of being 'in and against' the State. ☀

¹ Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country and most political parties are ethnic-based. Islam is the official religion of the country.

² This was later re-named the Ministry of Women and Family Development.



Many Worlds in Different Places

By Fatou Sow, from a presentation at the inaugural DAWN Training Institute, Bangalore

In Sub-Saharan Africa, to be Muslim refers to a faith, and also to culture and class. In Islamic societies, religion is a way of life, present in the way people say greetings, the way they dress, immersed in the law and in language. Islamic values are woven into the social fabric. Islam is part of the basic culture and in certain periods, even became an identity - not just to be Muslim but to be non-western, non-French, non-Catholic. Local, traditional powers were overthrown by colonialism, but people were able to group around Islam as a site of resistance. In Senegal, allegiance to the traditional monarchies (Dammal, Brak, etc.) shifted to the new Muslim power-holders led by the *Almami* (Imam) of Fuuta Tooro, in the Northern part of the country or by Muslim brotherhoods led by Califs, in the central region. During the French colonial era, students went to French schools, learnt and spoke French rather than Arabic, which lost status and became unimportant. Those with only an Arabic or Islamic education were considered less modernised, less employable and found it difficult to get work. This colonial period synchronised with the Christianisation of the state. The French regime discriminated against local communities as colonised groups for education, employment, access to resources, and to decision-making. They planned to assimilate them culturally. The most common way the people could resist was to strengthen their Islamic identity and struggle by using Sharia law as personal law regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. The French could not prevent the Islamic courts from ruling on family cases. Their sentences were recognised by the people as well as by the colonial state. In independent Senegal, new family law was introduced in 1973 as part of a process to implement secular legislation that would be appropriate for all communities. To this end, some Islamic provisions were integrated, such as the Sharia law on inheritance and on polygamy. Other processes, such as divorce, were secularised and had to go to a state court.



In more recent years the secular has become a matter of contention and Islam has become a political issue in the struggle for power. Women's bodies are often the site of this struggle. In the 1995 Beijing UN conference on women, it became clear to women that the church and the mosque had become allies against sexual rights that women had gained at the ICPD Cairo conference. Yet Islam also claims to be empowering women through Sharia law, for instance, advising women in some rural communities to use condoms. This is in fact empowering the mosque to control women's sexuality. The situation has been manipulated by many states that are using the secularism and religious cards in ways that are extremely dangerous for women. In a Muslim society, the women's movement cannot openly be opposed to Islam, but it can be critical on some specific issues that do not directly challenge the Koran. How feminist organisations move on gaining freedom of choice for families, on sexuality, on rights, is extremely complicated in a situation of differing ethnicity, education, class, etc. as well as religion. Muslim women often feel trapped when the issue of religion comes up, dealing with negative and oppressive aspects of what they are supposed to be and also the negative images that other feminists have of Muslims. There is not one type of Muslim woman; they differ according to their countries, culture, language and other influences; the Sharia laws are interpreted differently within these influences and resolve issues in different ways. The Muslim world is not one world, but exists in different places. 🌞

Globalised media and ICT systems - Globalisation, Fundamentalisms and Militarisms

Excerpt from a paper by Anita Gurumurthy, representing DAWN on a panel organized by ISIS International - Manila for the World Summit on the Information Society in Palexpo, Geneva, Switzerland, 10 December 2003. The full paper is on the DAWN website, www.dawn.org/fj

Shrinking distances but not bringing people together: challenges of ICTs, militarism and fundamentalist revivalism

Globalisation has meant that fundamentalism is no longer the same beast that we knew it to be. For feminist analysis three interrelated dimensions seem relevant.

One, globalisation has facilitated the global movement of material resources. Money laundering and the movement of arms have never been so easy. For fundamentalism, the new economy has provided opportunities for easy networking and collaboration.

Two, at the national level, the relinquishing by the government of its sovereignty to international aid institutions has coincided with a reconstruction of nationalism along chauvinistic religious lines¹. A state that is increasingly incapable of addressing survival issues of the poor is eager to offer the marginalised quick routes to 'empowerment', through the Hindutva ideology. Dalits who have adopted Christianity are being converted back as Hindus, in a virulent ideological attack against minority religions under propaganda that is packaged as ghar-vapasi² (home-coming). Dalits and tribals/adivasis are being roped in to fight Muslims and propaganda with the aid of modern information technologies like CD ROMS during elections³. Thus, in electoral campaigns in far-flung areas such as in India, traditional media like printed literature have been replaced by potent technologies that cross barriers of illiteracy.

Identity politics and cooptation of the marginalised provide a useful route to deflect attention from the failure of the nation-state. Growing inequities characterised by increasing rural indebtedness, landlessness, dismantling of food security, increase in child labour and casualisation of work, as well as loss of work due to mechanisation, are compounded by the

denudation of social fabric in the rise of communal violence.

Three, the overtly homogenising trend of globalisation and the global media has also created a backlash in the reassertion of identities. The global has subsumed the local, and fundamentalist forces have sought to reinterpret culture, invariably through the control of women's spaces.

For feminist practice, the challenge of fundamentalism multiplies exponentially when the assault by global media is juxtaposed upon the threat of fundamentalism.

South Asia, home to about 45% of the world's poor, is within the footprints of at least 50 broadcast satellites. It is estimated that by 2007, there will be 550 million viewers in South Asia with half of them hooked on to Cable TV and able to watch 350 channels. The perplexing diversity of communication channels has shrunk distances but not necessarily brought people together - highly individualised and parochial niches combined with the accent on homogenisation has resulted in a low threshold for tolerating diversity⁴.

The emancipatory potential of the new media seems to support the increasing multiversity of identity politics. The spectrum of communication channels - regional, communal and linguistic - in South Asia is mind-boggling. Against the backdrop of the social landscape of South Asia, which reveals glaring faultlines of religious, linguistic and ethnic assertions and conflicts, these communication channels pose a huge threat to social capital and the legitimacy of nation states.

The moot question is whether this access to global information channels result in real

To next page

empowerment and lead to significant improvements in the quality of life. Will it lead to enhanced social capital and community networks, or will it provoke further lowering of the diversity threshold? Feminists have always been grappling with the question "how can feminist frameworks offer alternatives that respect plurality but are rooted in women's autonomy?" Now we need to also find answers to the question "how can we reconcile the proliferation of global media whose central strategy is to capitalise upon difference and recast diversity as an opportunity, with the urgent need to reinterpret secularism that is in keeping with women's autonomy?"

Militarism in the context of globalised media and ICTs.

Feminists have argued forcefully that the unabashed use of militarism globally by the US is very much a part of its imperialist and neo-liberal agenda. Militarism is an agent of the political project of globalisation and is consolidated by the centralised power of the new ICTs. The "shock and awe" mode of US's war strategy in Iraq rode on the marvels of ICT-assisted precision bombing, marking the brutal glamourisation of the annihilation of life, destruction of the environment and razing of national sovereignty. Aid and trade benefits are dangled as baits for use of air and land space for military operations. Global militarism is crafted jointly by new weapon supports, satellite systems, the global media and the use of economic clout.

In war-affected countries of the South, women are having to endure not merely the pains of reconstruction, but the challenge of fundamentalist revivalism that is erected as a fitting rejoinder to Western and US-led militarism⁵. The over-valorisation of cultural identities has trampled Asian women's human rights not only in their home-countries, but where they are living as migrants or refugees⁶.

The insidious face of militarism

Militarism needs to be studied not only as a phenomenon impacting geographic territory; the insidious face of militarism is in the increasing

abandonment of women's sexual and reproductive rights, at discursive and political levels. Militarism is not only about war over territory, but over people's spaces and autonomy. Hard-won sexual and reproductive rights in the language of the ICPD's programme of action are being attacked by the Bush administration, which contends that key concepts and language referring to reproductive health services, reproductive rights and reproductive health have to be removed as they can be construed as promoting abortion. The US has withheld previously approved aid to the UN programmes that it claims promotes abortions. Public information about sexual health and rights have been quietly expunged over the past year, a covert war on condoms - essential in the strategies to prevent the spread of AIDS - is being waged⁷. Meanwhile, the positions of human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are increasingly converging with US policy objectives. Feminist scholars⁸ have pointed to how fact sheets on CEDAW prepared by Amnesty International USA and Human Rights Watch stress that CEDAW is abortion neutral and does not require the legalisation of prostitution.

There is a deafening silence in the MDGs on sexual and reproductive rights of women.⁹ The constant clamoring in the ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) for Development corridors for marshalling the promise of ICTs to realise the MDGs, signals the risk of burying the needs and fundamental rights of women in the South in the new strategies to build information societies. The global consensus to use ICTs for promoting health and addressing health information needs of communities in countries of the South rests on a strange paradox: a recognition of the challenges of HIV/AIDS, unsafe abortions, denial of the rights of sex workers and the increasing delegitimisation of the sexual and reproductive rights of women.

Feminist strategies

Feminist explanatory frameworks have no doubt expanded our understanding of the global economy. The challenge at this juncture is to conceptualise differences among women in a way

To next page

that allows for the articulation of universal concerns; concerns that will make way for a Southern perspective and feminist reconceptualisation of the global economy.

This challenge is accentuated by the larger socio-political reality of the South, in the aftermath of the global war on terror. In the contestation of cultural identities, that owes its emergence to the global war on terror, we see a tension between two polarities of women's voices in the South – one that is privileging age-old customary laws and traditions, which are seen at one end as constituting the alternative and the other that offers the international women's human rights paradigm, often critiqued for its Western notions of women's equality, at another end, as the option¹⁰. For the feminist project, this tension poses a tremendous conceptual and political challenge.

¹ Gabriele Dietrich, "Loss of Socialist Vision and Options before the Women's Movement", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 25, 2003, pp4547-54

² The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is the leading party in the coalition government at the centre has led this ideological campaign in the tribal dominated state of Chattisgarh.

³ CD ROMs were used by the BJP, a national political party promoting a chauvinistic notion of Hindu religion, referred to as the Hindutva ideology, in the electoral campaigns in the recently concluded elections in Chattisgarh state. The BJP replaced the Congress party after the elections.

⁴ Personal discussion with Gopakumar Krishnan from

IT for Change. Email - gopa66@yahoo.com

⁵ Fundamentalism also creates and defines its own genre of militarism built upon exaggerated perceptions of threat to national culture and security. The Taliban state was built on such premises as also the nuclear bomb by the BJP, the ruling party in India.

⁶ See DAWN Informs, November 2003, "A deafening Silence on Women's Human Rights" by DAWN's regional coordinator for South East Asia, Gigi Francisco.

⁷ See DAWN Informs, November 2002, page 2 for a complete update on the prepcom for the 5th Asian and Pacific Population Conference.

⁸ "Gender, Human Rights and Therapeutizing Development", by Vanessa Pupavac, School of Politics, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD, vanessa.pupavac@nottingham.ac.uk

⁹ See DAWN Informs September 2003, pp 6-8

¹⁰ See DAWN Informs, November 2003, "A deafening Silence on Women's Human Rights" by DAWN's regional coordinator for South East Asia, Gigi Francisco. 🌻

Fundamentalism.... is a discourse that is used, especially in the era of globalisation, as a way of excusing certain forms of very violent practices, behaviour, belief systems, and tends to be an extremely male-dominant discourse. A way of understanding why people act in this manner is to see that they are experiencing a sense of violation of their national identity from globalisation and respond with hardened beliefs and violence. The nature of this discourse is gender blind. It also assumes that there are certain connections that threaten the notion of purity. The creation of 'impure others' is a critical part of the discourse — but it need not come out of the process of globalisation. It may in fact be coming out of other forces already challenging existing social contracts — most principally feminism and women's movements. This discourse provides an excuse for oppression. The key is what the fundamentalism is, and where the language comes from. There is religious fundamentalist, but is every movement that pulls to itself some religious identity in a violent way really religious fundamentalism? Some do not hold any religious values, but are, for instance, fascist.

Comments during discussion led by Gita Sen at the DAWN Training Institute.

Le débat français sur la laïcité prend actuellement une tournure bien particulière, avec la loi proposée, par le Président Chirac, dans son discours télévisé du 17 novembre 2003. Il y propose d'interdire tout port « ostensible » de signes religieux tels que la croix chrétienne, la kippa juive et le voile islamique dans les établissements scolaires. Ce projet émane du rapport de la commission Stasi, chargée par le Président français, de faire le point sur la laïcité en France. Le débat d'aujourd'hui s'est donc cristallisé sur la question du voile islamique qui est bien plus ancienne.

Le voile islamique est devenu une préoccupation française lorsque, durant les années 1980, un nombre de plus en plus important de jeunes élèves commencèrent à venir en classe la tête couverte, les unes pour affirmer une appartenance musulmane, d'autres pour revendiquer une identité arabe, d'autres enfin pour obéir à la volonté familiale, sans que l'on puisse préciser lequel de ces motifs a été primordial. Il n'était pourtant pas rare de voir des femmes en France porter un foulard dans la vie quotidienne. Elles étaient généralement originaires du Maghreb colonial, puis elles avaient accompagné les immigrations du travail au titre du regroupement familial. Elles étaient certes plus âgées et leur port du voile n'avait jamais posé de problème au regard de l'autre, comme si ce voile faisait partie de leur identité de base. Lorsque des femmes d'autres communautés nationales musulmanes notamment du Proche et du Moyen-Orient, en ont gonflé le nombre, leur voile a été à peine remarqué. On peut noter que les Africaines de l'Ouest, Sénégalaises, Maliennes, Ivoiriennes ou Guinéennes, qui participent de la communauté musulmane de France ne l'ont pas porté, lorsqu'elles sont arrivées plus massivement, au titre du même regroupement familial.

Le voile islamique devient une question française pour deux raisons majeures.

La première raison est l'irruption du fondamentalisme musulman avec, essentiellement, la révolution islamique iranienne. Les monarchies du Golfe qui avaient fait du fondamentalisme un fait religieux et culturel, mais aussi un outil

politique interne n'ont pas vraiment alarmé le monde occidental judéo-chrétien. C'est la rupture brutale avec la civilisation occidentale engagée, lors la chute du Shah d'Iran, par l'Imam Khomeyni réfugié à Neauphle-le-Château (France) et l'exportation de son modèle de pouvoir qui ont fait naître la crainte et l'accusation d'intégrisme. Ce n'est pas le voile saoudien, mais le voile iranien qui devient un « défi ». Pourtant, tous les deux signifient bien un « enfermement » des femmes dans un modèle religieux. C'est le voile à l'iranienne qui s'exporte dans le reste du monde musulman, comme au Maghreb ou en Afrique subsaharienne, de la même manière que s'exporte une idéologie fondamentaliste plus offensive. L'Arabie saoudite, même wahhabite, s'était contentée, jusque dans les années 1980, de financer des conversions de fidèles et des constructions de mosquées et d'institutions d'éducation religieuse et de charité, sans pour autant imposer des stratégies fondamentalistes. La richesse générée par l'afflux des pétrodollars, lors du boum pétrolier, et la radicalisation du discours des ayatollahs iraniens ont été des facteurs de propagation de prédications et de pratiques fondamentalistes dans une grande partie du monde musulman et ailleurs.

La seconde raison est le port du voile par les filles nées en France de l'immigration maghrébine. Les « beurettes », pour reprendre une appellation familière, ont été souvent prises en tenailles entre une culture maghrébine dont les familles tentent de leur donner les règles et une culture française enseignée à l'école et vécue dans la rue. Alors que les garçons peuvent et doivent « changer », les filles n'en ont pas toute la latitude. Elles sont tenues, par leur famille, comme les icônes des valeurs culturelles et ... musulmanes menacées par les efforts d'intégration à la société française. Les contradictions qu'elles ont vécues et leurs divers mouvements de révolte ont été largement discutés, ces vingt dernières années, aussi bien dans la presse que dans des romans et des travaux académiques. La marche organisée à travers la France, pour la reconnaissance de l'égalité entre les sexes dans leur communauté, en

2003, par l'association de Maghrébines « Ni putes, ni soumises » en témoigne. Elle rappelle celle organisée, en 1984, par de jeunes Beurs, pour lutter contre les discriminations raciales à l'encontre des immigrés et promouvoir l'égalité dans la société française.

Les contradictions sont exacerbées par les difficultés d'intégration des communautés étrangères en France. L'intégration, synonyme d'une assimilation à un idéal citoyen à la française, est un leurre que la classe politique française, toutes tendances confondues, continue d'entretenir, alors que la société n'a jamais été aussi cosmopolite. Si cette société a fini par absorber les vagues de l'immigration européenne (italienne, espagnole, portugaise, polonaise, russe, juive, ...) durant tous les 19 et 20^{ème} siècles, elle a rencontré plus de difficulté à assimiler celles d'Afrique du Nord et subsaharienne et d'Asie, en raison de leur appartenance religieuse et raciale. Elle invite ces dernières à l'intégration dans un modèle hexagonal de citoyenneté dont on peut noter une certaine réussite. Cette réussite est effective en termes scolaires et professionnels dans le cas d'étrangers qui, contrairement aux immigrés européens, ont dû conserver plusieurs identités qu'ils affirment en fonction des contextes et des situations.

Et pourtant les discriminations de classe et de race continuent d'être choquantes. Dans les banlieues urbaines 'sensibles' livrées aux communautés immigrées règnent le plus souvent la précarité liée à la faiblesse de l'éducation, au sous-emploi et au chômage, à la médiocrité des conditions de vie et à l'insécurité. Les jeunes désœuvrées de ces banlieues vivent mal leur marginalisation dans la société contemporaine. Elles peuvent choisir de construire leur propre univers cosmopolite généralement laïque développant une culture spécifique (musique, habillement, sport, ...). Elles peuvent aussi céder à la tentation de communautarisme ou être « récupérées », comme ailleurs dans le monde, par les mouvements fondamentalistes musulmans. Revenir à la foi, c'était revenir à une identité assumée. Le retour à l'islam a été aussi celui d'un retour à un ordre moral. Il a imposé aux femmes plus de retenue, voire le refus de la mixité, de serrer la main des hommes ou de recevoir leurs

soins médicaux, etc. Il a prescrit un enfermement dans des symbolismes religieux dont le voile est un élément fort et le plus visible, qu'elles l'aient voulu ou subi. On se souvient encore de la revendication, en 1989, de lycéennes et d'étudiantes à porter librement le voile qui a sensibilisé l'opinion publique française. Cette opinion fut en fait divisée. Si des membres en vue de l'intelligentsia adressaient une lettre de protestation contre le voile à Lionel Jospin alors ministre de l'éducation nationale, nombre d'autres personnalités invitaient à plus de tolérance, pensant que l'école républicaine remettrait de l'ordre dans les idées de ces jeunes filles.

Aujourd'hui l'État français recule face à ce qu'il considère comme une dérive ou une déviation communautariste. Interdire le voile, c'est, pense-t-on, faire échec à cet épouvantail. En fait, cette manière de mettre le port du voile au cœur du débat sur la laïcité, alors qu'il est en lui-même une vraie question d'identité et de liberté des femmes musulmanes dans le monde, ne fait que masquer une crise plus profonde de la société française. Celle-ci refuse, quoiqu'elle en dise son caractère multiracial et multiculturel. Tous les musulmans comme tous les chrétiens qui vivent en France ne se définissent pas par leur appartenance religieuse. La référence en devient un stigma. L'Islam, seconde religion de France, a peu de lieux de prières. Il ne possède aucune école confessionnelle, contrairement aux communautés chrétiennes et juives. Et lorsque le rapport Stasi propose que les deux plus grandes fêtes musulmanes et juives (Aid El Kebir et Kippour) soient considérées comme fériées dans le calendrier scolaire, pour marquer la reconnaissance de la diversité religieuse, les arguments qui les réfutent sont d'une légèreté presque offensante (du genre « que faire de deux journées de fêtes de plus ? »).

Et pourtant même si le voile cache la forêt de diverses discriminations subies par les étrangers et les musulmans, il faut bien le déchirer. Cette loi qui vise essentiellement le voile islamique, quelles que soient ses maladresses, devrait, à mon avis, être maintenue, ne serait-ce que pour empêcher les communautés fondamentalistes de jouer avec le corps et la peur des femmes pour marquer leur territoire et leur influence. 