

# Advancing women's rights agendas

Attaining women's rights is central to addressing broader issues, such as ending poverty. Shareen Gokal of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) talks about the negative impact a rise in religious fundamentalism is having on women's rights, how research can help improve understanding of fundamentalist groups and ways in which they are organized and funded in order to better combat the problem.



**Shareen Gokal** heads the Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative at the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). Before joining AWID in 2001, Gokal worked with Canadian refugee-sponsoring organizations on capacity building and refugee legislation, and developed programmes for Afghan women who had recently immigrated to Toronto. She also spent several years in the Dominican Republic working with Haitian migrant workers. Gokal holds a degree in international development studies and is completing her masters in sociology and equity studies at the University of Toronto. Originally from Pakistan, she has lived in Canada since she was 18.

## **AWID was founded in 1982 in North America. What is the role of AWID today?**

We are a diverse and dynamic network of over 5,000 men and women around the world. Our goal is to achieve gender equality, sustainable development and women's rights. We believe that women's rights are not only necessary in and of themselves, but that they are central to ending many of the challenges the world faces today, such as eradicating poverty, building peace and tackling the HIV/AIDS pandemic. No lasting solutions to these problems are possible without putting women's rights at the centre. AWID brings together researchers, educators, activists, business people, policy makers, development practitioners and donors. Every three years we get together at the AWID International Forum, which has become the largest gathering of its kind outside the United Nations system. In November 2008, AWID members from 144 different countries gathered in Cape Town, South Africa. We like to see ourselves as future-orientated innovators, who work on issues that are central to advancing women's rights agendas.

## **The Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms initiative seems to do exactly that. You have been leading this initiative from the start. How did it come about?**

The initiative responds to the need for more knowledge and advocacy on the fundamentalisms that span regions and religions. We work to foster international and inter-regional dialogue and to develop coherent global responses to religious fundamentalisms. All over the world, in both major and minor religions, fundamentalist tendencies seem to be gaining ground, with particularly negative consequences for women's rights. They are increasingly influential in imposing social norms that dominate everyday life. This can mean controlling sexual and reproductive rights, or negatively influencing public institutions and laws, especially family laws and personal status laws. When fundamentalist forms of religion dominate public arenas or private ones, space for plurality and dissent is increasingly undermined.

Women's rights advocates – including networks and organizations such as Women Living under Muslim Laws, Catholics for a Free Choice, and *Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur* – have already done considerable work to document

the rise of religious fundamentalism and to devise strategies to resist it. However, we felt there was a need for a coordinated effort, across religions and across regions. We believe there are many similarities between various religious fundamentalist groups and the ways they operate. So our research drew on the responses of over 1,600 women's rights activists working in diverse contexts to see how they were experiencing religious fundamentalisms. We try to create forums for transregional dialogue among women's rights advocates because we want to formulate and strengthen responses that are global in nature.

#### **What issues in particular do you think need urgent attention?**

It would be very useful to have more research done on how religious fundamentalist groups are funded. For advocacy purposes is it important to go beyond the anecdotal evidence that we have about funding sources for such groups. We need empirical evidence to answer questions such as whether religious fundamentalist groups get their funding from local sources, from membership fees, from governments, or if they are funded through tax breaks on properties. Also, how much money comes from other countries? And does this international funding come from other religious fundamentalist groups, or from governments and donor agencies? Quite likely there are 'charitable' groups that use the money they receive to further fundamentalist agendas. I know this sounds very much like the kind of negative security focus to which many legitimate organizations have been subject since 9/11, but we see this information as crucial for effective advocacy. If we want to challenge the negative impacts that religious fundamentalism is having on women's rights, then we have to know who is complicit and responsible for funding fundamentalist groups.

Research like this has been done on a very local basis. For instance, some women's rights advocates in Latin America have been looking at real estate holdings of the Catholic Church and calculating how much is not being paid in property taxes. More concerted, empirical research on funding sources of fundamentalist groups can be a very important starting point for our advocacy. We have to recognize, though, that this is hard work, as this information is not easily available, and it can be fairly dangerous work too. But it would be very useful information.

A second research area concerns the links between neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism. We know that this link exists; the growing gap between rich and poor is a causal factor for religious fundamentalism. But we need to go beyond that and think about how some religious fundamentalist groups themselves are supporting a very neoliberal capitalist agenda. More research on this would be really helpful. Despite all their rhetoric about being pro-poor, much of the energy of fundamentalist groups is focused on questions of morality and dogma, to the exclusion of social justice issues. Many of them support a neoliberal agenda because that strengthens their own economic power. We need to make that more known. For example, we know that the Taliban conducted negotiations about a gas pipeline with a California-based company called Unocal. The pipeline would run through Afghanistan and then down to Pakistan. And we know that many evangelical churches in Africa are raking in profits from the poorest of the poor while telling them to turn inward for salvation. This is not a new insight, but it is a starting point for much needed new research on the links between neoliberalism and religious fundamentalist groups. Such research will help us show that religious fundamentalism is not only about some people preaching a certain ideology, but is actually really destructive in terms of coming up with alternative economic or social paradigms that are truly pro-justice.

#### **Do you see a role for academic researchers in the projects you propose?**

Academic research is important for the conceptual framework and the analysis behind the findings. But the key is to think of the advocacy purposes when formulating your research questions. The most important research goal for us is to go beyond the anecdotal examples and come up with concerted, empirical research that allows us to identify commonalities in the ways that different fundamentalist groups operate, which would serve as the basis for stronger advocacy. We must bring academic researchers together with practitioners so they can figure out together how their two agendas might meet. ■

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□ For more information, visit: [www.awid.org](http://www.awid.org).