

# 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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