Fundamentalism And Women's Rights in Africa

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The essential paradox about a globalised world is that as global business and micro politics have relentlessly spread across the globe, there has been a tendency for many people to get closer to the ethnic, national, religious and racial identities. This nestling within a known identity has been seen as a form of seeking certainty and belonging in a world in which political, social and economic boundaries are being challenged and eroded. It has resulted in an increase not only in conservatism but in religious fundamentalisms, and right wing nationalism based on notions of ethnic, racial and religious community identity.

This has conferred enormous power on the religious right. These fundamentalists have served to cement the already vulnerable positions of women in many countries and communities. The convergence of armed conflict and reduced levels of social cohesion and religious and ethnic fundamentalisms have often dramatically worsened the social and economic position of women. The definition of collective identities has framed approaches to gender. There are for example, notions of what Muslim or Christian should look like, behave which are seen as integral to belonging. It explains in part, the continued emphasis on controlling sexuality and other critical aspects of women's lives. It is also seen to decrease the social and economic power of men in vulnerable contexts which in turn strengthens the desire to exercise power and control in other contexts, namely the family and women. This fundamentalist mobilising of concepts such as nationalism, ethnicity and religion, has led to changing forms of patriarchal control and generally increased levels of violence against women and children. Over the past 2 decades, 2 key concerns have emerged:

The first is the continued failure of States to close the gap between rich and poor and to provide jobs and basic services. In fact the abdication of their responsibilities for meeting the needs of their citizens whilst at the same time exerting control on the same citizens, has led to many seeking these services elsewhere – often in fundamentalist religious institutions. To this we add the cooptation of progressive discourse and language in the public domain, such as gender mainstreaming. In Africa, the spread of HIV & AIDS has had a negative impact on social structures, the quality of life, social welfare, security, migration and issues of sexuality and violence against women. Thus our advocacy strategies and approaches have to be more nuanced, sophisticated and more assertive.

There has also been a weakening of the UN and the space it had provided, particularly in the decade between 1985-95, for organising and for expressing alternative opinions. For example, it is extremely difficult in many political contexts to talk about secularisms and

how we might construct them. Yet we need to protect these spaces and to keep pushing these discussions further afield.

Whilst there are differences among the different sects of religious fundamentalisms, there are features they have in common. They seek to lay down regulations for every minutiae of daily life not just for the 'their communities' but for those deemed to be outside of these communities. In Nigeria for example, there are a number of occasions where Christian priests refused to officiate at marriage ceremonies on the grounds that the brides were wearing off the shoulder wedding dresses. And whilst these dress codes have changed over time, many of our young women are being told that these, often more restrictive forms of dress, are what women have always worn. This also extends into notions of what is deemed to be an appropriate way to make a living. An example is where women in Sudan and Malawi were instructed to stop brewing local beer because it was not appropriate for members of their communities.

The effect of this is to impose on each of us either the accusation that we are outside this community or that we have this single identity defined for us from outside. There is a whole erosion of the legitimacy of the multiple identities that we all have. We may all belong to a particular ethnic or religious community. But we may also belong to a community that defines itself for example as the feminist community. The ways in which we construct our composite identities out of these multiple possibilities is increasingly being eroded by this growth in fundamentalism. We need to ensure that we protect and the spaces that enable us to explore and maintain these multiple identities. We should do it in a way that recognises both the elements of popular consciousness and discourses, but also the structural elements that form the context and background of the ways in which fundamentalisms grow.

In Africa, we have many forms of fundamentalisms such as religious, generic traditionalist as well as ethnic fundamentalisms. These are constructed out of 3 types of patriarchy. The first is pre colonial, indigenous patriarchy; patriarchy in established religion, particularly monotheistic religions. To that we add the patriarchy that came with our colonisers. The intermingling of the forces of these 3 forms of patriarchy is what we contend with today. With the traditional, pre colonial construct, we have a form of patriarchy that thrives on selecting particular cultural norms and institutions (and ignoring those that for example valorised women's autonomy), mobilising the concept of ethnicity and resistance to western hegemony to impose them on us. It is also important to recognise that women are often co-opted into actively promoting fundamentalist identities. This needs further analysis and engagement.

Another important consideration is the need to make a distinction between conservatism and fundamentalism. Often the 2 coincide but they are can also differ. This distinction is critical because it may in some contexts be possible to work with conservative forces and even turn them into allies. One may have conservative views because have had little exposure or engagement with other world views. Nevertheless through dialogue they are able to change. It is easy to say that since by definition they are intolerant, it is not

possible to work with them. But this denies us an opportunity to engage an important constituency.

We should also remember that the adoption of these fundamentalisms can be a response to that community's marginalisation and exclusion by the dominant community/ies. Thus any engagement has to address the legitimate concerns of marginalisation and exclusion.

A continual concern for all of us is how some otherwise progressive forces, the left in Europe and the US in general and donors in particular, have accepted the appropriation of Human Rights discourse by fundamentalists and enabled them to continue making their claims to speak on behalf of their communities. In so doing, they de-legitimise women and other progressive forces from within the communities form establishing different ways of understanding community identity. Thus accusations such as, 'you are feminist and therefore Western and not part of this community', often go unchallenged.

Ethnic and religious identities have often been used to construct barriers between communities which plays directly into the space of armed conflict. The world can identify early warning signs of fundamentalism. When we see changing dress codes, it is not about fashion, but rather with ideologies of what women should be. In identifying these signs early, we can address the issues before the escalate. At the same time we must keep working to end impunity to those who militate for war at national, regional and international levels. As a result of military escalation, communities often erect barriers between themselves and those seen to be outside their community. Thus those, often women, who seek to work across community boundaries, put themselves at great personal risk in an effort to build peace. We need to strengthen these solidarity efforts and support the women who engage in them. Similarly women's exclusion in the discourses and negotiations on peace building and conflict resolution needs to be addressed particularly within the context of fundamentalism.

Africa's continued political and economic maginalisation in the world, increasing poverties and powerlessness clearly fertilises the soil in which fundamentalism thrives. We cannot ignore this and must keep up the efforts to address it.

We clearly cannot do everything. We all work in different areas. But we do have to do this work in a way that understands the synergies between working on different issues in a way that we push them forward together. It is a big job. But we can and we will rise to the task.