

Women in the Frontlines Reihana Mohideen

The rise in political-religious fundamentalisms coincided with the universalization of neo-liberal globalization. Neo-liberal globalization is not only universal, but it is universally applied in form and content: subservient states carrying out the economic and ideological dictates of the dominant states through global institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and the WTO – privatization; economic liberalization; the dogma of the free market – the father of all fundamentalisms. God, we are told, also supports the mythical ‘free’ market.

Neo-liberal globalization and this extreme socio-cultural chauvinism exist together, side-by-side. They are inter-dependent and feed on and off each other. The holocaust created by neo-liberal globalization – one child dying every few seconds – and conditions of extreme social dislocation, are then blamed on religious and ethnic differences.

There are important fronts of struggle taking place against these economic and religious fundamentalisms around the world today. Some of the most heroic and inspiring struggles are taking place within countries whose societies are in the grip of fundamentalist movements and regimes. The Pakistan women’s movement, for example, is one of the most inspiring movements that I have had the privilege to work with. These brave women, some working in semi-legal and even clandestine conditions, from the middle-class urban centres of Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, to the women brick kiln workers in Punjab and the peasant women in the Sindh province, to the girls who struggled to set up an all-girls cricket team in a village in Kasur, risk their lives as they challenge and confront the fundamentalists.

Women are in the front lines of the storm against neo-liberal globalization in Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Brazil and Venezuela – the continent that might defeat Uncle Sam. Women in the barrios in Venezuela are the backbone of the social transformation taking place in that country today.

And women are involved in the Iraqi resistance fighting against the US-led occupation. We better believe this, despite the propaganda images in the corporate media, which use the smiling faces of women supposedly welcoming the occupation armies in the name of women’s liberation, to promote wars of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Women are involved in unprecedented numbers in all progressive arenas of struggle. Many of them don’t describe themselves as feminists, but they are politically active and large numbers are influenced by the basic aims and visions of the women’s movement. Feminism has made a significant and permanent imprint on progressive thought and praxis.

Today no movement can effectively struggle against fundamentalism of any form without a feminist perspective – this means placing the women’s question at the centre of the agenda for social transformation.

While the rise of religious fundamentalist movements, especially in the last three decades, pose a significant threat to women’s rights, we are also witnessing a generalized assault against women by state and non-state institutions and political interests -- an assault which is especially focused on a women’s reproductive health choices and their right to control their own bodies. On this

assault the Christian right, the Islamists, assorted religious fundamentalists and the right-wing political establishment form a united front.

One of the most significant defeats suffered by the women's movement against reproductive health choices in recent years is in Catholic Nicaragua – where a blanket ban on abortion was reinstated as a 'historic compromise' between a former left-wing President Daniel Ortega and the Catholic Church. The call for the UN to place a moratorium on abortions comes from the heart of 'enlightened' Europe, the Vatican in alliance with the right-wing political establishment in Italy. And the U.S. government under George Bush poses a far greater threat to women's reproductive health choices today, than Osama bin Laden.

This 'war on women' belies the 'war on terror' propaganda of the West. For feminists the reality is simultaneously more complex and straightforward. All religions have buttressed patriarchal systems and ideologies. Conversely all patriarchal systems and ideologies have used religious reinforcements. The tactics of our struggle against this 'war on women', however, are complex. They have to be varied, grounded and context specific. Most importantly, it requires the organization of a strong women's movement, guided by a democratic discourse and the active participation of the masses of women.