

Fundamentalism at work – the case of Serbia

Experiences in the field

“Fundamentalism is a political movement of an ultra-conservative, ultra-rightwing orientation which abuses religion, tradition, nation, customs with the aim of acquiring and maintaining power (governance). It does so by limiting and abolishing women’s human right, through sex segregation and gender apartheid, limiting and abolishing civil liberties, endangering democracy, abusing democratic institutions.”

(“Definition” of fundamentalisms at one of the seminars at Sijarinska Banja, southern Serbia, June 2006)
Experiences in the field: Women in Black

At regional seminars (general information is in the chapter “Overview of Women in Black activities”) that we organized between April 2006 and October 2007, we drew on diverse interactive methods: workshops, lectures of distinguished scientists in the area of history, philosophy, sociology, maintaining the principles by which academic knowledge and activist experiences necessarily permeate each other. Films screenings are an integral part of our work (feature as well as documentary films, by authors from Serbia and around the world). These films deal with the same topic, and thus highlight the interdependence of different fundamentalist tendencies and the way they are intertwined, and also the significance of joint actions that resist them. In addition, we promoted several publications that deal with fundamentalisms (published by Women in Black and like-minded organizations) in order to gain a better understanding of the complex and dangerous issues.

During this segment of educational activities, diverse negative manifestations of fundamentalisms in Serbia were observed. These were categorized as attacks against democracy, human rights, women’s rights:

Manifestations of clericalisation and fundamentalist tendencies

The classification of the aforementioned tendencies has been taken from the women who participated in our seminars. It has been divided into six large groups. It is obvious that women’s rights are a primary target of the attacks of clericalists and fundamentalists.

I Attacks on women’s human rights

a) Attacking reproductive and sexual rights:

(These processes have devastating consequences on women, especially on the younger generations. Even though this educational program did not encompass this, we cite other findings that will confirm and support this notion. Women in Black have been surveying the attitudes of women concerning abortion for years, even though abortion has been legal since 1952 in SFRY. Namely, we have noted an increase in the number of women who see abortion as “murder,” as a result of clero-nationalist propaganda. As far as abortion is concerned, there is a growing gap between women from older and younger generations. Older generations see abortion as a basic right of every woman since the “socialist” period, whatever ideological orientation they subscribe to. The younger generation of women speaks out against abortion more and more, due to Church propaganda.)

Women participants spoke of:

- propaganda against women: conservative and clero-nationalist representatives of religious communities limit women’s identity to motherhood and marriage, they advocate that giving birth in the name of religion and nation is the basic role women should play;
- racist and nationalist propaganda about the “white plague” (sub-replacement fertility) which is mostly aimed against women who are not giving birth or against women of other, minority nations, who have a higher birth-rate (Roma, Albanian, Bosniac);
- campaigns against abortion throughout Serbia: not just in religious institutions and their media, but in the public service television, and in most electronic and print media;
- demonizing women who have abortions, often insulting them by calling them “child-murderers”;
- SOC (Serbian Orthodox Church) Priests have forbidden communion and other rituals to medical workers (male and female) who perform abortions in hospitals and clinics (Zajecar); it is important to mention that since October 5th 2000, SOC has been advocating “conscientious objection for Christians in the workplace,” in other words they call on doctors and nurses to stop performing abortions. Especially since 2000, the Holy Synod of Bishops of SOC has been seeking to “prohibit communion for doctors and midwives who perform abortions as long as they do not repent.” This example shows how religious communities “kidnap” human rights and twist them into their opposite – so they end up limiting choices and attacking the reproductive freedom of women;

- propaganda to ban the use of condoms by believers (Vojvodina, etc.)

b) Gender apartheid and segregation – separate spaces for women:

- introducing a separate time slot for women in the public city swimming pool (Novi Pazar, Sandzak);

- taking girls out of school under pressure from the parents (in many parts of Sandzak);

c) Imposing dress codes for women in the name of religion and identity:

- covering women (Sandzak);

- women wearing scarves in orthodox churches; an increasingly common demand that women should cover themselves in orthodox temples. This practice is visible among young women throughout Serbia. It is interpreted as a “desirable” religious practice for women, as their respect for faith and tradition;

d) Sexual crimes against women in the name of faith:

- reported cases of genital mutilation of women in Sandzak;

e) Imposing traditional laws and fundamentalist practices on women:

-advocating polygamy justified by sharia law (Sandzak).

II Growing theocratization of the state – loosing the secular character of the state

(Almost all the state/public institutions in Serbia perform religious rituals, public spaces are abused by the majority church (SOC), SOC Priests enjoy an immunity from criminal prosecution for a variety of criminal actions.)

- the anthem “Boze pravde” (God Justice) limits Serbia to religious state, insults those belonging to other nations and religions, and especially those of different spiritual orientations;

- the inauguration of municipality leaders throughout Serbia is accompanied by religious rituals;

- municipal buildings throughout Serbia are used for SOC manifestations;

- religious holidays and household saints (Slava) are gaining a new public/state status. This refers especially to holidays of the majority orthodox faith (example: litany in Belgrade on the day of Savior);

- SOC is exempt from pay the VAT (Value Added Tax), there is no established price list for other services and receipts do not have to be issued;

- local authorities organize donation dinners to gather funds for building churches; which is clearly institutional financial support for SOC;

- all institutions (government and opposition parties, even some trade unions, booking and gambling enterprises, etc.) publicly celebrate family Saints (Slava);

- government representatives emphasize their own religious belonging at public events, they attend religious services as government officials, not as private individuals, thus violating the Constitution and freedom of religion;

- public and state celebrations of the Serbian New Year, organized and funded by the state, using money from all taxpayers (believers and nonbelievers);

- so called “St. Sava” celebrations that are organized for educators at restaurants and hotels;

- blessing ceremonies for state institutions;

- questionnaires for political party memberships (at some parties) contain questions about religious affiliation;

- military participation at church manifestations and vice versa;

- participation of high ranking officials of SOC in the negotiating team concerning Kosovo;
- avoiding prosecution and trial by law for sexual crimes, by some church officials (Pahomije, Ilarion);
- usurping public spaces: building churches on land owned by state institutions, most often schools (school playground in Zajecar); although funds for building a Medical high school were gathered (6 million euro), this will not happen because the Islamic community has claims on the land (and religious communities have priority in reclaiming property);
- constant building of new churches throughout Serbia. Estimates show that as many as 200 churches are being built at one time in Serbia.

III Growing clericalisation of public life

(We are witnesses of more and more direct interference of religious communities (especially SOC) in all matter of upbringing, education, culture, media, information.)

- introducing religious education in state schools (2001);
- Ministry of education pressures more and more children to enroll into religious education rather than civic education;
- celebrations of Easter and other religious holidays are organized for pre-school children (Velika Plana);
- the religious holiday dedicated to St. Sava has been established as a school saint (Slava);
- religious leaders in Sandzak slowly replace the state; they establish schools, universities, kindergartens: religious community (Islamic in Sandzak) “dictates” dictates all activities in educational institutions;
- collective christening of 120 children from the Center for Family Housing in Milosevac organized by the Velika Plana Municipality and the Center officials;
- in the former museum dedicated to National Liberation Struggle, a so-called spiritual center “Nikolaj Velimirovic” has been established instead (Kraljevo);
- a church was built instead a children’s playground: where, from the Totovo selo report???
- the summer school of philosophy in Krusevac has become a church manifestation;
- religious propaganda on public service television, an increased number of radio programs with religious content: Vekovnik, 48 hours wedding on RTS. The same pattern emerges on private media: Voice of the Church, TV Bridge, Fokus, New Spark, etc.;
- increased number of public events where clero-fascist and fundamentalist leaders speak (round tables, lectures at venues such as Engineering and Law Faculties in Belgrade);
- principles at certain schools insist that religious ceremonies should take place in educational institutions, and maintain that this is an obligation of employees of these institutions (Zajecar);
- the Church organizes free religious excursions and picnics for students, and constantly spreads propaganda against civic education.

IV SOC Monopoly on spirituality and attacks on the secular value system:

- limiting spirituality only to SOC values and values of religious communities in general;
 - public figures establish themselves through their religious identity;
 - role-models connected to SOC are imposed on young people, youth clero-nationalist and clero-fascist organizations are financed by SOC;
 - SOC directly worked on banning an Italian artistic group from performing in Novi Sad.
- ### V Attacks on those who are different: atheists, homosexuals, human rights defenders:
- labeling and demonizing atheists;
 - physical violence against those who are different and a passive response from the police;
 - violence at the Gay Parade in 2001, especially on the part of Priest Z. Gavrilovic;

- politicians take on church attitudes on sexual orientation, homophobic attitudes;
 - advocating hate toward NGOs who stand for secularism and against abuse of religion;
 - physical attacks from youth clerical-fascist organizations against activists of NGOs that want a break with the criminal past, etc.;
- VI The increasing number of movements and organizations, especially youth organizations with fundamentalist or clerical-nationalist values:
- more students subscribe to right-wing attitudes;
 - Obraz (Cheek) – throughout Serbia
 - Krv i cast (Blood and honour) - throughout Serbia
 - Svetozar Miletic – in Vojvodina
 - Nacionalni stroj (National formation) – in Vojvodina
 - The Organisation of Orthodox Doctors
 - The Youth Serbian Club – in Sandzak
 - The Muslim youth Club – in Sandzak, Tutin
 - The strengthening of the Vehabi movement throughout Sandzak
 - Srpske dveri (Serbian gate) – at the Philology Faculty in Belgrade
 - Sveti Justin filozof (St. Justin the philosopher) – at the Philosophy Faculty in Belgrade
 - Nomokanon (compilation of Church and secular law) – at the Law Faculty in Belgrade
 - Kolo srpskih sestara (Serbian sisterhood) and Serbian singing association
- Fundamentalism - attack against human rights, women's rights and democracy
The exercise entitled Fundamentalism – attack against human rights, women's rights and democracy was at the core of each seminar Women in Black organized in 2007 on the general topic of fundamentalisms and clericalization.

Certain statements that contained examples of fundamentalist activities were offered to the participants and they were asked to name which human rights and liberties were violated. They were also asked which forms of violence, discrimination and repression they recognized.

Women many different responses, which we systematized in the following way:

1. Relationship of religious communities toward their own moral norms:

Women most often talked of the so-called ethical non-values, which were in practice opposite to the values that the religious communities advocated. This brings into focus the fact that the practice of religious representatives (women and men) is often different from what they preach/say (associations: false morality, blackmail, hypocrisy, superstition, abuse, fashionable behavior, new believers).

2. Relationship of religious communities toward other groups/forms of discrimination:

Another group of responses emphasizes the relationship of the religious community toward others. The hierarchical relationship of religious communities toward their believers produces a number of associations, and some specific forms of discrimination: misogyny, pedophilia, homophobia, social exclusion, condemning Difference, authority, hierarchy, patriarchy.

3. Methods of control:

A third, but equally important category which emerged through analysis of associations is a recognition of repression that different religious communities use in relation to their own believers and toward society in general: control, repression, awe, submission, restriction, threat, anathema, prohibition, fear...

The most extreme forms of violations of rights, the following were stated:
Women many different responses, which we systematized in the following way:

1. violation of the rights to life;
2. endangering sexual and reproductive rights;
3. endangering women's rights;
4. endangering the right to choose, which often entails (in most cases), endangering other specifically named rights.

As far as freedoms are concerned, these are most endangered:

1. freedom of movement;
2. freedom of thought;
3. freedom to make decisions.

According to the discussions which were always a part of the exercise, one can conclude that fundamentalism is most repressive toward women. Women's freedom to choose is restricted (speaking as broadly as possible), freedom of thought, freedom of movement, speech, assembly. In practice, women are exempt from public spaces, their political activity is diminished or completely prohibited, rules are introduced to forbid women to get organized in any way.

The next group is made up of people who are not heterosexual. They may lose their lives, or simply be forbidden to assemble, they suffer extreme physical and psychological violence. This is a reality that non-heterosexual persons are exposed to in all fundamentalist societies.

Reactions of civil society, in the first place women's groups, to increased clericalisation

These are responses to the question: Do women's groups react to these developments, if yes, in what way? If not, why?

- women's groups do not react because they are lonely in their environment when they criticize the church;
- because they are afraid of the reactions others around them, they are afraid to stand out;
- they don't want the Church to have a grudge against them, because the Church has a good reputation among people;
- because their relationship to the government is one of servitude, they are afraid that pointing out abuse of religion for political gains would jeopardize their cooperation with local authorities;
- because women in the local community would be against them;
- because they are not aware, conscious – they do not recognize abuse of religion, they do not have a clear opinion toward fundamentalism, they do not see it as a problem;
- because clericalisation is seen as part of identity, tradition, custom. This causes clericalisation and its disastrous influence on women to be minimized and relative; for example, a separate time-slot for women at the city-swimming pool in Novi Pazar was seen by some women as emancipation, and covering with a scarf as “free choice” or “protection from promiscuous behavior” or “from drug addiction” – this is especially characteristic of Sandzak;
- because there is no solidarity between women's groups;
- because cooperation with donors might suffer, since donors interpret Church behavior as multiculturalism rather than restriction of women's rights.

Further conclusions:

- Confusion concerning multiculturalism: In Serbia, especially in Sandzak, political confusion is abundant: multiculturalism comes down to folklore, exotic identities, religious and ethnic dimensions, and thus multiculturalism is limited to interethnic and dialogue between religious communities. Abuse in the name of multiculturalism (religion, nation, tolerance, etc.) is rarely recognized. One should not overlook or minimize the risks and dangers women face when they speak publicly against fundamentalist tendencies and movements – this is especially visible in Sandzak, but also

in all of Serbia. In that sense, we bring your attention to a recent research project of the Women in Black concerning the gender perspective of security; although the Church was not listed as one of the institutions women trust least, it is interesting that 10,5% of the democratically oriented women-participants added that they trust 'religious communities.' This shows their conformist views, and also points to the fact that faith, along with the nation, has become an important part of identity even among 'the most progressive female elite in Serbia.'

- Relationship of civil society and women activists from the majority nation toward abuse of religion among minority nations: on the one hand, there is an overwhelming feeling of guilt because of the crimes of the Serbian regime during the 1990's against minority nations, which makes them overlook abuse of religion in minority communities, most of all among Bosniacs in Sandzak. On the other hand, women activists in Sandzak for the most part see themselves as victims, exclusively of government politics, which is true, but catastrophic consequences of abuse of Islamic fundamentalist tendencies are overlooked. One should not overlook or minimize the risks and dangers women face when they speak publicly against fundamentalist tendencies and movements – this is especially visible in Sandzak.

- Women's solidarity is necessary in the struggle against all forms of fundamentalisms: it is wrong and contrary to feminist ethics to seek 'advantages' of one sort of patriarchy over another, in this case, one kind of fundamentalism over another. One should always keep in mind the feminist consensus – patriarchy and all its manifestations are a universal model, and actions against patriarchy should be universal as well. Or: instead of emphasizing that which makes us different, we need to pay more attention to what connects us, brings us together. In this case, that is the danger that fundamentalisms pose for all women, and that is why actions against them should be done together, taking into account different strategies. First, we need to agree that we are not talking about 'respect for identity, cultural heritage, etc.' but about abuse of religion and identity for political gain. Women-participants at the seminar agreed that Women in Black are most active, loudest, clearest in the condemnation of clericalization, theocratic, clero-fascist and fundamentalist tendencies, most of all of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Suggested action against clericalisation

There were many people who expressed an interest in our seminars, and participants offered a wide range of actions, which indicated a need for further, joint, coordinated, engagement against clericalisation.

What is the way to stand up to fundamentalism together?

We have divided suggested actions, according to frequency:

- a) educational – Almost all the women suggested education, in order to recognize fundamentalist tendencies because they are often cloaked by misrepresented references to identities, tradition; regional WIB seminars on this topic;
- b) networking, coalitions – feminist solidarity on local, regional, global levels;
- c) street actions – protests, performances, visibility for public actions against fundamentalisms;
- d) media campaigns – round tables and public discussions;
- e) publications – as much information as possible, to distribute to people (citizens), distribution of propaganda material on fundamentalisms (and its devastating affect on women, civil society and democracy in general) not just among women's groups, but also at clinics, hair and beauty salons, cafés; printing leaflets on fundamentalisms and the negative influence of SOC that are understandable and accessible to women and other citizens; each group should have these leaflets and distribute them to women who attend their activities;
- f) monitoring of Church publications to get acquainted with retrograde tendencies;
- g) working with young people, especially young women to talk them out of taking religious education classes; working on support for minority girls (especially Roma) to avoid getting married too early;
- h) upholding the principles of Women in Black feminist ethics: cleaning our own back yard first, in other words, condemning the fundamentalists in our immediate surroundings first. Only then do we have the rights to condemn others;
- i) law-making initiatives...