

# Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms to Ensure Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

ADVOCACY STRATEGIES FOR THE ASIA -PACIFIC & NORTH AFRICA REGIONS



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Advocacy Strategies for The Asia-Pacific & North Africa Regions**

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**Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre  
Pakistan**



# CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Acknowledgments .....  | i         |
| List of Acronyms .....   | ii        |
| <b>Introduction .....</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>SECTION 1: The policy environment: key issues and the need for advocacy</b>             |           |
| Achieving gender equality, human rights and SRHR for women throughout the lifecycle .....  | 4         |
| Why the need for advocacy to achieve universal access to SRHR .....                        | 6         |
| Interlinkages between religious fundamentalisms and extremisms and SRHR .....              | 8         |
| The effects of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR .....                                     | 11        |
| Strategies to ensure universal access to SRHR: Guiding principles .....                    | 12        |
| <b>SECTION 2: Evidence base from the Global South</b>                                      |           |
| National advocacy needs .....  | 15        |
| Synthesis of the ten-country research findings .....                                       | 19        |
| Key conclusions and recommendations .....  | 24        |
| Key messages for advocacy .....  | 26        |
| <b>SECTION 3: National advocacy strategies: Lessons to build on</b>                        |           |
| Country-level progress and achievements .....  | 29        |
| Progress and achievements .....  | 31        |
| <b>SECTION 4: International advocacy strategies</b>  |           |
| Need for international advocacy on religious fundamentalisms and SRHR .....                | 33        |
| Progress and achievements so far at the transnational level .....                          | 34        |
| Goals and objectives of international advocacy .....                                       | 34        |
| Synthesis of audiences, intended outputs and achievements .....                            | 35        |
| Regional and International advocacy spaces and allies and opponents .....                  | 35        |
| Review of advocacy plans and what more can be done by advocates at the international ..... | 36        |
| Risk assessment .....  | 36        |
| Monitoring the process, progress, achievements and challenges .....                        | 37        |
| <b>References .....</b>  | <b>39</b> |

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- Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan (YKP)/Women's Health Foundation (WHF) - The Influence of Conservative Religious Interpretations on Child Marriage in West Java and East Java - Indonesia
- Likhaan - Centre for Women's Health Inc. - Understanding Catholic Fundamentalism in the Philippines: How conservative religious teachings on women, family and contraception are wielded to impede the Reproductive Health Law and other reproductive health policies - Philippines
- Sisters In Islam (SIS) - Child Marriage: Its Relationship with Religion, Culture and Patriarchy - Malaysia
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## List of Acronyms

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AEP      | Adolescent Education Programme   |
| AMFP     | Morocco Family Planning Association  |
| APFSD    | Asia and Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development                          |
| ARROW    | Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women                         |
| AP       | Asia-Pacific   |
| AWID     | Association for Women's Rights in Development                              |
| BPfA     | Beijing Platform for Action  |
| BJP      | Bharatiya Janata Party   |
| BBS      | Bodu Bala Sena   |
| BQBBS    | Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena                                       |
| CBSE     | Central Board of Secondary Education                                       |
| CSO      | Civil Society Organisation   |
| CBO      | Community Based Organisation   |
| CSE      | Compulsory Sexuality Education   |
| CEDAW    | Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| ESCAP    | Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific                    |
| FGM      | Female Genital Mutilation  |
| HLPF     | High Level Political Forum   |
| HRC      | Human Rights Council   |
| iERG     | independent Expert Review Group  |
| ICT      | Information Communication Technology                                       |
| IEC      | Information, Education, and Communication                                  |
| ICPD     | International Conference on Population and Development                     |
| ICPD-PoA | International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action |
| ICCPR    | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights                       |
| JAG      | Joint Action Group for Gender Equality                                     |
| LGBTIQ   | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer                   |
| MDG      | Millennium Development Goals   |
| OURs     | Observatory on Universality of Rights                                      |
| RUWSEC   | Rural Women's Social Education Centre                                      |
| SRHR     | Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights                                  |
| SIS      | Sisters in Islam   |
| SHE      | Society for Health Education   |
| SDG      | Sustainable Development Goals  |
| UPR      | Universal Periodic Review  |
| VAWG     | Violence Against Women and Girls   |
| WMC      | Women Media Collective   |
| WHO      | World Health Organisation  |
| WYWC     | World Young Women's Christian Association                                  |
| YKP/WHF  | Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan/Women's Health Foundation                      |

## INTRODUCTION

**Achieving sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for all, especially women and girls, is critical to ensuring a world that is just, equitable and inclusive in which everyone is equally empowered.**

Achieving sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for all, especially women and girls, is critical to ensuring a world that is just, equitable and inclusive in which everyone is equally empowered. The centrality of SRHR is stressed in the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)<sup>i</sup>, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action emerging from the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women<sup>ii</sup>, the Millennium Development Goals and as of September 2016, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Gender equality demands that all girls and women enjoy bodily integrity, decision-making about all aspects of their own bodies, and have full access to appropriate sexual and reproductive information and services. However, control over women's sexuality and reproductive powers is the cornerstone of patriarchy, exercised in the name of 'the community' – be it ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious or national – and frequently justified by reference to religion as well as culture and identity.<sup>1</sup>

Religion, with its influence on traditions and culture, has always modulated women's access to and enjoyment of rights. While many of the world's religions profess equality between men and women, in practice religion and religious interpretations are often used to deny rights, especially SRHR. Those promoting SRHR as an integral part of the human rights agenda in the ICPD and Beijing processes were opposed by alliances of conservative elements whose position was articulated in religious terms.<sup>2</sup> Since then there has been an upsurge of religious fundamentalisms and growth of new political forces using religion to advance, often impose, totalitarian agendas. Often clubbed together as 'religious fundamentalism' or referred to as religious extremism, these forces promote self-serving interpretations of religious doctrines that undermine both human rights and pluralism across the world, particularly in the Asia-Pacific (AP) region.

When used in relation to religion, the term 'fundamentalism' connotes the imposition of a singular interpretation of religious doctrine as the only possible version accompanied by hostility towards all other interpretations as well as plurality (Sahgal and Davis 1994)<sup>iii</sup>. Religious fundamentalisms operate alongside cultural, political and economic fundamentalisms, all of which ascribe rigid normative rules.<sup>3</sup> Combined, these pose serious challenges to the fulfilment of universal SRHR for women and girls as underscored in the post-2015 sustainable development agenda and normative human rights frameworks.

This Advocacy Strategy, Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms to Ensure Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights aims to facilitate a strategic response and help to develop an international roadmap to address the growing

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion on how cultural rights impact women and girls' SRHR, see report of the Special Rapporteur on cultural rights, Shaheed, F. (2012). A/67/287.

<sup>2</sup> In her book *The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power, and the Future of the World* for instance, Goldberg's meticulously documents fifty years of international campaigning and resistance to make family planning services available to women and girls.

<sup>3</sup> Persecution and violence has historically been severe in the sphere of intellectual and artistic freedom and expression. For notable examples, see Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights. Human Rights Council, 34<sup>th</sup> session. A/HRC/34/56.

influence and hostility of religious fundamentalisms, fundamentalists and conservative thinking and organising on SRHR.

The document is an outcome of a project initiated by the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW)<sup>4</sup> with 10 national partners<sup>5</sup> to collect evidence on how religious fundamentalist forces influence SRHR on the basis of research on issues ranging from child marriage, abortion, and bodily integrity to comprehensive sexuality education and family planning. Based on this evidence, the Advocacy Strategy is a strategic counter-response appropriate for national contexts as well as transnationally in the Asia-Pacific (AP) and North African regions<sup>6</sup>, to be undertaken by ARROW, Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre, their partners, and other SRHR advocates in Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives, Morocco, Pakistan, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. It takes forward on-going work of ARROW and Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre on the pressing challenges of religious fundamentalism on SRHR.

The Advocacy Strategy has been prepared by Shirkat Gah, drawing upon inputs from ARROW and the research, experiences and challenges documented by national partners in the ten selected countries. To support efforts in countering the influence of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR, the Strategy:

- 1. Provides contextual evidence to input into national, regional and global advocacy measures, processes and spaces;**
- 2. Identifies best approaches to work with different stakeholders to achieve SRHR at the national, regional and global levels;**
- 3. Presents key messages to influence or counter the impact of religious fundamentalisms;**
- 4. Recommends actions factoring in risks and challenges and ways to mitigate them to ensure SRHR for women and girls.**

In this regard, several points need to be stressed:

- First, country-specific studies underscore that it is not easy to define religious fundamentalisms or to segregate their impact from that of other influences and social processes such as culture and traditions. Some national studies indicate that a number of factors affect SRHR concurrently; in some countries religion and culture are deeply intertwined, in others nationalistic, communal and ethnic tensions are infused into religious narratives. These interlinkages must be borne in mind when formulating an advocacy strategy to build a more nuanced understanding of the challenges in order to address them effectively.

<sup>4</sup> Established in 1993, ARROW is a regional non-profit women's organisation based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC) of the United Nations.

It works closely with many national partners in countries, regional and global networks around the world, and reaches stakeholders in 120 countries.

<sup>5</sup> Shirkat Gah, Pakistan; Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka; Society for Health Education, Maldives; Naripokho, Bangladesh; Rural Women's Social Education Centre, India; Likhaan Centre for Women's Health Inc., Philippines; Sisters In Islam, Malaysia; Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan Women's Health Foundation, Indonesia; Ikhtyar, Egypt, and Moroccan Family Planning Association, Morocco.

<sup>6</sup> This region refers to Asian-Pacific and North African regions, in which the study countries are located. The ARROW project focuses on ten countries: India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Morocco, and Egypt.

- Second, it is important to acknowledge inter- and intra-religion tensions between progressive and far-right/conservative/traditionalist elements, and make distinctions between these and more fanatical and/or violent religious elements.
- Third, although direct impact is difficult to ascertain, the influence of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR is nevertheless evident across all country reports, reflected in: shrinking spaces for discourses on SRHR; discriminatory policies or poor implementation mechanisms for SRHR services; resistance to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) or sexual health and rights-related information; and the growing discrimination and violence against women and girls in the name of culture or tradition.
- Fourth, in determining, developing, implementing and analysing the impact of advocacy strategies it is crucial to bear in mind specific contexts, including the social, cultural, religious, political, economic and historical dimensions. Country researches underscore that religious fundamentalists are a variegated and non-homogenous group: there are many similarities found across major religions and across borders alongside critical contextual specificities. Using religion as a clarion call, fundamentalists provide a wide rallying banner for other conservative allies, often accompanied by street power. A counter-strategy thus requires cross-movement alliances and stronger regional partnerships to exchange information, experiences, technologies and capacities to advocate more effectively for SRHR, building on synergies and learning from differences.
- Finally, solidarity and regional partnerships would help to better understand and resist the closing of spaces for women's groups working on these issues within their respective countries.

## **SECTION 1:**

# **The policy environment: key issues and the need for advocacy**

### **Achieving gender equality, human rights and SRHR for women throughout the lifecycle**

Gender equality is premised on the principles of non-discrimination and equality between all genders across the world at all ages, in terms of both opportunities and outcomes. It demands equal visibility, empowerment, benefits, responsibility, and decision-making for all in every sphere of public and private life. Equal access to and distribution of opportunity, resources and inputs will promote better results in terms of equality of outcomes for all, lifting those left furthest behind.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, or SRHR, comprise the following elements:

- Reproductive Health implying complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes;
- Reproductive Rights, that recognise the right of all to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children, to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health;
- Sexual Health, implying physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality;
- and Sexual Rights, including the rights of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to the highest attainable standard of health in relation to their sexuality, irrespective of their gender identity and sexual orientation or other factors.

SRHR are central to achieving gender equality; they intersect with the compendium of human rights, as progressively recognised by the international community starting with the International ICPD in 1994 that stressed that the realisation of SRHR is central to human dignity, equalising power relations and achieving social justice for all. Previously most population policies focused on addressing demographic trends through fertility control. ICPD expanded the global development agenda<sup>iv</sup> and the resulting Programme of Action (ICPD-PoA) stipulating several SRHR-specific objectives and actions.

Supplying meaning to Article 3<sup>v</sup> of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966, the Human Rights Committee explains<sup>vi</sup> that

“States parties should ensure that traditional, historical, religious or cultural attitudes are not used to justify violations of women's right to equality before the law and to equal enjoyment of all Covenant rights”.

Recognising the need to address the reliance on religious interpretations and cultural ordering in curtailing the human rights of women, the Human Rights Committee further elaborates that

“... article 18<sup>vii</sup> [of ICCPR] may not be relied upon to justify discrimination against women by reference to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”.

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA)<sup>viii</sup> established that human rights include the right of women to live freely and without coercion, violence or discrimination, and to have control over and make decisions concerning their own sexuality, including their own sexual and reproductive health.

The Platform stresses that:

“Women's right to the enjoyment of the highest standard of health must be secured throughout the whole life cycle in equality with men. Women are affected by many of the same health conditions as men, but women experience them differently.... Lack of food and inequitable distribution of food for girls and women in the household, inadequate access to safe water, sanitation facilities and fuel supplies, particularly in rural and poor urban areas, and deficient housing conditions, all overburden women and their families and have a negative effect on their health. Good health is essential to leading a productive and fulfilling life, and the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility, is basic to their empowerment.”<sup>ix</sup>

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG), 2000-2015, were introduced in the United Nations as a roadmap with eight global Goals, 18 Targets and 48 indicators. Five years of intensive lobbying by SRHR advocates ensured that “universal access to reproductive health” was included as Target 5b.

Today, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2015-2030, aspire to carry forward the previous work on SRHR and gender equality. SRHR bears prominent mention in Goals 3 and 5, albeit with some language losses in the text.<sup>x</sup> The Agenda 2030, Target 5.6 reads:

“Ensure universal access to **sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights**<sup>7</sup> as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.” [emphasis added]

In linking SRHR to religious fundamentalism, it is worth noting that the SDGs make no explicit reference to religious fundamentalism or extremism. There is a passing reference to religion in Target 10.2<sup>8</sup>. More interestingly, the original SDG text that was submitted to the UN General Assembly for adoption did allude to religious fundamentalism and extremism<sup>9</sup>, which was taken out at some stage of inter-state negotiations.

The fact that 'sexual rights' have been omitted signals the influence of conservative forces on the discourse.<sup>10</sup> Evidence from the Global South and the “South in the North”<sup>xi</sup> (migrant women, women belonging to religious minorities, poor women, immigrants and LGBTIQ) points to the increasing influence of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR. Country reports indicate that hard-won gains in the field have either been rolled back or are under threat by retrogressive forces<sup>11</sup>, which operate symbiotically to reinforce anti-rights narratives in what Ebner (2016)<sup>xii</sup> calls “reciprocal radicalisation”. Reports also suggest that excoriating narratives are increasing in tandem with rising economic and political inequalities as well as ethnic and communal tensions within and between nations, while extremist ideologies appear to be gaining traction for lack of audible and organised counter narratives in national, regional and international spaces. Fundamentalists have also demonstrated a tactical ability to band together at the international level to “thwart advances in human rights protection, in particular regarding women's human rights or those of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons”.<sup>xiii</sup> Further, in wake of a global roll-back on human rights, women's groups are obliged to defend and hold onto previous wins, instead of concentrating on their advancement.<sup>xiv</sup>

### Why the need for advocacy to achieve universal access to SRHR

In 1990, five years after the Third World Conference on Women, sexual and reproductive health accounted for 14.4 per cent of the global burden of disease, 14 per cent of all disability-adjusted life years lost. This remained virtually unchanged in 2010.<sup>xv</sup> The burden is the highest in Africa and South Asia, where the proportionate burden compared to other countries was larger in 2010 than in 1990.

Gains in maternal health and other dimensions of SRHR since 1995 reflect advances in many ICPD goals. These include technical advances relating to childbirth, increased access to contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies,

<sup>7</sup> Instead of sexual and reproductive health and rights, which include sexual rights.

<sup>8</sup> “By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status

<sup>9</sup> Shirkat Gah was involved in the review of the final draft for adoption.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the language losses, however, one may recall G. C. Spivak's criticism of the ICPD that though the language of the conference was of tremendous importance, “... at the grassroots level, where doctors and health workers coerce helpless women at the bequest of governments that are obliged to accept population control as a part of so-called 'aid package', the delicate nuances of the wording of a United Nations declaration do not make much difference”.

<sup>11</sup> Starting with the ICPD, the Doha conference in 2004 allowed conservative lobbies to start operating through government delegations of several Arab countries in order to put up with a united opposition to feminist interventions at the United Nations.

and proximate factors such as education and legal and political empowerment. The maternal mortality ratio has declined globally by 47 per cent: from 400 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 210 in 2010. This overall progress masks socio-economic and geographic inequalities however. There is widespread discrimination on the basis of wealth, age, marital status and other characteristics, and the ability to exercise sexual and reproductive rights is neither universal nor equitable. For example, while contraceptive prevalence among married or in-union women grew globally (from 58 per cent in 1994 to 64 per cent in 2012), in several extremely poor countries, prevalence remains below 10 per cent.<sup>xvi</sup> Estimates indicate that there were 43.8 million induced abortions worldwide in 2008.<sup>12</sup> Nearly half (49 per cent) of abortions in 2008 were unsafe and accounted for almost 13 per cent of maternal deaths worldwide. About 70,000 adolescents in developing countries die annually of causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Evidence points to adolescents being more likely to delay seeking an abortion and, even in countries where abortion is legal, resorting to unsafe abortion providers because of fear, lack of knowledge and limited financial resources.<sup>xvii</sup> Stigma and social censure further exacerbate these problems, keeping services and healthcare information out of reach. Nine of 10 births to girls below age 18 occur within early marriage, resulting in 1 million children not making it to their first birthday.

Further, despite an improving climate for adolescent reproductive health programs in parts of say, sub-Saharan Africa, resistance from religious and traditional leaders are features of most countries (Calves, 2000;<sup>xviii</sup> Caldwell et al., 1998;<sup>xix</sup> CEDPA, 1998;<sup>xx</sup> Pathfinder, 1999). The ICPD-PoA call to ensure health-care providers do not restrict adolescents' access to services and information, for services safeguarding "the rights of adolescents to privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent, respecting cultural values and religious beliefs"<sup>13</sup> (para. 7.45), to provide sexuality education to adolescents that encompass specific topics, including gender relations and equality, violence against adolescents, responsible sexual behaviour, contraception, family life, sexually transmitted infections, HIV and AIDS prevention, remains unmet (paras. 4.29, 7.37- 7.41 and 7.47).<sup>xxi</sup>

The country studies strongly suggest that SRHR can be more effectively promoted and achieved by increasing understanding of the drivers and enablers of fundamentalist ideologies alongside advocacy to highlight individual and collective harm inflicted by practices in the name of culture, and religion. For example, India's report shows that it is predominantly cultural considerations and not religion or religious interpretations that obstruct the imparting of sexuality education amongst youth and adolescents. Sri Lanka reports an intensifying ethno-nationalist narrative under the garb of religion, with deep links to local and national economics and racial identities. In Pakistan, similar to other Sunni Muslim countries, the importation of a

<sup>12</sup> 27.3 million in Asia, 6.4 million in Africa and 4.4 million in Latin America

<sup>13</sup> It could be said that "respecting cultural values and religious beliefs" in ICPD-PoA can be used by conservative groups to mobilise popular support against CSE.

definitive exegesis, namely petrodollar funded Wahabbism has been a source of economic and social power for various fundamentalist actors.<sup>xxii</sup>

### **Interlinkages between religious fundamentalisms and extremisms and SRHR**

As early as 1995, activists, advocates, and practitioners cautioned against the role of religious extremism as disruptive to women and girl's SRHR. The BPfA mentioned religious freedom as contributing to the “moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realising their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations” (para 12). It also cautioned against religious extremism as having a negative impact on women, leading to violence and discrimination (para 24), which acts as a barrier to women's empowerment, and perpetuates “the lower status accorded to women in the family, the workplace, the community and society” (para 118). Underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions in areas of culture, the media, education, religion and the law are also mentioned as contributing factors in preventing women from having a significant impact on many key institutions (para 183). The BPfA calls upon States to “take steps so that tradition and religion and their expressions are not a basis for discrimination against girls” (para 276).

This earlier recognition of the influence of religious (and other) fundamentalisms on SRHR supports the contention that narratives of the political and religious right frequently coalesce with existing patriarchal structures and other conservatisms to exert social control over women and girls, and promote a denial of SRHR. References to culture and religion are commonly found in the text or processes for making state policies and laws that selectively privilege a particular religion or sect therein, and particular religious interpretations, as well as particular ethnic and linguistic groups, disadvantaging those outside these groupings (for instance, religious minorities, refugees, young people, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer – LGBTIQ – and so on).

Autonomy in terms of SRHR is intimately connected with many fundamental rights, such as dignity, freedom of movement and expression, privacy, security of the person and bodily integrity.<sup>xxiii</sup> It specifically includes decisions related to reproductive health and women's right to make choices about their bodies. Some recent examples of a deteriorating global climate on SRHR and religious fundamentalism include but are not limited to: the US Government's Mexico City Policy (or the global gag on abortion information and services) and reduced access to contraception under the Trump administration; public whipping of gay men and police raids on a gay sauna to arrest over 140 men in

Indonesia; public shooting, lynching and burning down houses of Muslims as well as religious and ethnic minorities over blasphemy allegations in Pakistan; arrests and killings of transgender people in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan; mob lynching of Muslims over cow mongering and slaughtering in India as well as online vitriol and threats of rape and acid attacks on activists opposing a proposed ban on beef consumption allegedly by Hindu fundamentalists (The Tribune, 2017),<sup>xxiv</sup> in India, and so on.

Religious authorities traditionally legitimise gendered roles as preordained and based on God-created 'natural' differences. Regressive interpretations of religion combined with an appeal to morality tend to undermine SRHR, denying women the power to make decisions. Men are bestowed with greater privileges and rights over women, while women and girls' worth is contingent upon their virgin status prior to marriage, and subsequently on the ability to bear children (particularly sons), provide care, observe subservience and ensure the perpetuation of the 'chosen' race, religion or group. Hence, SRHR are part of a larger canvas where women's free will in marriage, ability to give consent, guardianship, and right to be treated as autonomous adults under law and in social practice remains contested. Legislation can also curb rights on the basis that certain practices go against religion or do not accord with religious precepts, thereby placing religion over and above the rights of people and leading to the politicisation of religion for greater political power.<sup>xxv</sup>

Further challenges have arisen with the emergence of religious fundamentalist movements in many parts of the world across all major religions - Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Islam. Of note, "...fundamentalists who actively engage public politics seldom approach it with modest, partial agendas. The attack on the distinction between the public and the private in social life is often explicit in fundamentalist programs for change..." (Williams, 1994).<sup>xxvi</sup> Religious actors' agendas directly contribute to poor SRHR indicators across the globe by propagating the confinement of women to the private sphere (resulting in a denial of quality healthcare, education, livelihood, etc.), and commonly a reduced economic and political status and participation.

All religions tend to conflate faith with morality, with the latter carrying reference to culture, tradition, nationalism and social norms often diametrically opposed to fundamental human rights guaranteed under international treaties and legislative frameworks (albeit unevenly). Today's **politico-religious forces** commonly referred to as fundamentalists or extremists, have added new highly problematic dimensions. These forces purposefully seek to reduce dissent and debate within religion as well as civil and political spaces, and emphasize punitive actions for any transgressions of the parameters they impose. Many have little compunction in using force to push their agenda; for some, it is the

preferred methodology. Problematic interpretations that undermine human rights and gender equitable norms feed into public discourse, popularised by right-wing or religious demagogues in mainstream politics (national to local levels) to influence laws, policies, and policy makers located in positions of leadership within government. Experts working to advance cultural rights have expressed concern at “the normalization of fundamentalist and extremist ideology and rhetoric in many political, cultural and media contexts, in particular through its increasing embrace by mainstream political parties and candidates”.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In parallel, economic inequalities, rampant poverty and other social inequities within countries continue to be major deterrents to SRHR in the Asia- Pacific and North African regions, fuelled further by growing inequality between the Global North and South. The growing influence of religious fundamentalisms in these regions, evidenced across all project country researches, use these inequities to promote mythical 'fundamentals' as a means of achieving a unified constituency in opposition to global or national actors (religious revivalism and nativism are alternative terms used to explain this phenomenon).

Political in nature, religious fundamentalisms cannot be separated from other fundamentalist movements based on ethnicity, nationality or culture (Kessler 1996, in Berer and Ravindran 1996: 8).<sup>xxviii</sup> For instance, in the context of political Islam, the “one common thread running through the multiple movements characterised as 'fundamentalist,' is not anything to do with their interpretation of the Islamic 'foundations,' i.e. the Qur'an or hadith but rather their claim to be able to determine a politics for Muslim peoples.... In this respect the rise of Islamist movements in the 1970s and 1980s bears comparison with tendencies elsewhere that deploy religious ideology in pursuit of other nationalist and populist, political goals in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.”(Halliday, 1994:91-113).<sup>xxix</sup>

It is important to note that the call for a return to 'fundamentals' is a deliberately promoted chimera; fundamentalist movements are modern-day phenomenon seeking to assert their power over state and society. Frequently the 'norms' proposed as a 'return to fundamentals' are new inventions unconnected with the past, as most evident for example, in new dress codes.<sup>xxx</sup>

During the course of this project, partners continually grappled with definitions and concepts related to religious fundamentalisms as 'fundamentalism' has become a catchphrase assigned to a wide range of ideas and behaviours. With an ever-widening bandwidth of meaning and application, the term spills into dominions that may be extreme forms of traditionalism, (pan) nationalism, dogmatism, and nativism; it is also used to describe socio-religious movements. Usage of the term varies substantially in different contexts (Nagata, 2001: 481-

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**For the purpose of this Strategy document, religious fundamentalism is defined as 'the use of religion (sometimes in conjunction with ethnicity, culture and nationality) by certain political and religious leaders, institutions and parties to legitimize as divine – and thereby immutable – authoritarian political power and to essentialise social control'. This control negatively impacts human rights, particularly women's rights.**

-498)<sup>xxx</sup> while the hermeneutical range of the expression has made distinctions difficult. In Bangladesh, for instance, it was difficult to distinguish religiosity from fundamentalism based on how often people visited religious sites. In Egypt, an understanding of bodily integrity and how much of this emanated from religion, culture or tradition was unclear. In Maldives, “extreme interpretations of religion” in the survey tools became problematic as one person's definition of 'extreme' may be another's middle-path.

Lexical alternatives that are used interchangeably such as “religious fundamentalism”, “religious extremism” and “extreme interpretations of religion” are fraught with subjectivity and unresolved tensions between what is understood as having a base in religion (or faith), and how this plays out across social groups, regions, history, spaces and institutions. Irrespective of the speaker and context, however, these terms are used loosely to obfuscate a political taxonomy of social control. It is not merely actors at the extreme end of the spectrum that are of concern, but their ability to mobilise the larger conservative religious polities against what is frequently projected as a foreign agenda and an assault on the native cultural norms and customs.

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### **The effects of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR**

Irrespective of the faith in question, fundamentalists aggressively push their version of religion, as the only true interpretation that is to be imposed on every aspect of private and public life directly or indirectly. In the Global South they exhibit a selective uptake of modernity, and reject basic human rights as antithetical to faith or against cultural norms. Examples include denying girls' right to education, healthcare, inheritance, imposing decisions on when and whom a girl/woman befriends or marries, controlling where, when and how many children she bears, what she wears, where she goes, whom she meets or speaks to, and/or how she conducts herself in daily affairs and within her social circle. Further, the cultural rights of women “... are a prime target for fundamentalists and extremists, who often claim to be defending culture, religion or tradition but instead deny the rights of others in these regards”.<sup>xxxii</sup> Women and girls' sexuality is controlled to prevent 'disorder' and shame from descending upon families and by extension, an entire people of faith. Most often religious teachings and culture are used interchangeably as reasons to

<sup>14</sup> The ex- Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, Farida Shaheed notes: “Culture permeates all human activities and institutions, including legal systems, in all societies across the world. Culture is created, contested and recreated within the social praxis of diverse groups interacting in economic, social and political arenas. It is manifested in individual and collective self-expression, understanding and practices. Delinking culture from the historical processes and contexts in which it is embedded essentialises cultures, which are then presumed to be static and immutable, homogenous and monolithic, apolitical and detached from prevailing power relations.” (A/67/287, para 2).

exercise and legitimise this control, as a host of norms are invented and imposed on the pretext of reviving old traditions that may not actually have existed.

The push by politico-religious forces for a reinforced policing of women's morality and social behaviour to ensure the legitimacy and purity of 'the group' (however defined) has found resonance in the general public as well as policy makers. This essentialist configuration of religion rejects dissent as tantamount to rebellion against God. This severely restricts the space to exercise personal choice, for dissent, growth<sup>15</sup> and development. How a country, state or territory defines or reconstructs its identity in relation to religion and society is a key determinant of the traction gained by these religious forces to usurp a share of state power in a bid to regulate and discipline society.

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### **Strategies to ensure universal access to SRHR: Guiding principles**

Historically, civil society and women's groups working on SRHR and gender equality have adopted dissimilar positions on whether to engage with religious discourses, institutions and now extremists. Taking into consideration the state's relationship with religion, strategies have pushed for change from within both religious and secularist frameworks. Those adopting the secular human rights framework, sometimes take an absolutist stance, i.e., the complete separation of religion from all affairs of the state, and reject all discourse based on a religious framework as legitimising the authority of (typically male) religious leaders to interpret religious texts. Others consciously engage with religious authorities particularly those considered more "progressive" to mobilise their support, seeing this as a beneficial partnership in terms of outcomes for women and girls whose lives are governed by such forces. A third school asserts that secularism is not anti-religion or based on a complete separation, but premised on not favouring or privileging any particular religion or belief system; hence secularisation can have varying degrees of separation between state and religion.

A secularist approach antithetical to religion (or anti-religion) is problematic for many reasons. Secularist systems in different parts of the world have evolved based on a confluence of historical, social, economic, religious and political factors, and the term secular, much like 'fundamentalism', defies precise definition. There are examples of religion becoming a basis for a push towards more secular (egalitarian and/or humanistic) values, despite the privileging of certain class interests, religious sect or schools of thought.<sup>16</sup> The challenge lies in the fact that no religion can be exhaustively codified which is an unavoidable part of secular dispensations for setting common legal standards. Trying to codify all religious teachings (or converting them into policy instruments), of any religion comes at an opportunity cost as it not only bestows sacrosanct

<sup>15</sup> Including growth of democratic and secularists traditions found within religions.

<sup>16</sup> Christian existentialism, humanist Judaism and Buddhism and Sufism in Islam are some examples of more egalitarian interpretations of religion. In terms of women's rights, movements such as Musawah, Sisters in Islam (SIS), and Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML) are striving for substantive legal and procedural reform to ensure that Muslim women's rights were upheld under the law. Catholics for Choice (CFC) is another such example.

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status to human interpretations in matters of faith, faith itself becomes a basis of privilege for some to the exclusion of others who do not adhere to that position or do not define themselves in religious terms.

At the same time, secularist state arrangements do not automatically confer human rights either. Patriarchy is embedded in all states and becomes more problematic under authoritarian dispensations, e.g., neo-fascist regimes, and/or states with rampant economic and cultural fundamentalisms that thrive on maintaining hierarchies of privilege and exclusion.

Despite varying degrees of secular-styled governance systems prevailing across most countries in the world and countries studied in the project, it is inadvisable to rely on the complete exclusion or infusion of religious philosophy or interpretations as various human rights principles draw upon religious values, and public policy carries significant ethical and moral underpinnings. Advocates must take into account the full spectrum of contextual nuances, including grey areas where religion, culture, history, gender, nationalism, communalism, the other identities interplay, and understand how other forms of non-religious fundamentalisms may be mixed in the equation.

**The critical questions for strategy then are:** How can advocates ensure that the process of negotiation between the state and its relationship with religion and society is inclusive and dynamic, promoting social justice both as a means and end, including women and girls' SRHR? How can civil society ensure that no particular school of religious thought is privileged by the state in determining public policy?

To be effective and sustainable, strategies must have wide social endorsement for SRHR and expand constituencies to affect change on the ground. Some country partners are involving religious clergy and religious institutions, albeit cautiously, in their advocacy plans, discussed in more detail in the following sections. Most strategies aim to change popular narratives by promoting alternate interpretations in light of religious teachings and texts. The results of these strategies would require a keen inquiry into major shifts in social narratives, to ensure that they do not result in a rejection of human rights on the basis of religion, or put rights into dispute on the basis of their source of origin. This is all the more important, given that the same texts or sources are often cited to support diametrically opposed positions by different religious leaders, revealing the influence of personal ideologies behind interpretations and temporality of religious doctrine. For a major shift to take place that overturns obdurate, absolutist or extreme interpretations, the proliferation of diverse voices must be ensured, both within and outside of religious discourses.

It is crucial to highlight successful resistance to religious fundamentalisms across the region, that showcase the personal limitations women and girls confront in their struggle to challenge the status quo and assert agency, in particular with respect to SRHR.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Movement-building is required across cultures and religions to build a sense of solidarity amongst women and girls. This must be nurtured at the grassroots for democratic norms to take hold with an increased participation of women and girls in all decisions related to different aspects of public and private life, bearing in mind that decision-making cannot be enhanced without addressing pivotal intersections with resource ownership and equal opportunities for women and girls.

Strategies must bear in mind that religion and faith mobilise people around shared spiritual as well as political objectives, resulting in social actors that play an important role in bringing about social change, whether within civil society, as political parties, or as part of the state or governance apparatus. When religion is an important governing force in people's lives, it cannot be wished away by rejecting any form of engagement. Further, it must be remembered that in many cases around the world, religion itself has been used to mobilise people for social justice and against other forms of fundamentalisms.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The generation of systemised counter-narratives, both religious and secular, are a crucial form of resistance to religious fundamentalism. The former requires knowledge of religion that can be applied and used by people engaged in work for social change and development.

The propensity of religious actors in general and fundamentalist actors in particular to exclude women from decision-making (Shah, 2004;<sup>xxxv</sup> Told, 2004<sup>xxxvi</sup>) underscores the vitality of women with an understanding of religious texts, spirituality and a gender-equality perspective being mainstreamed in institutions that hold sway over government laws and policies. It is specially important to change androcentric policy and decision-making structures and to open up public life to all in Southern countries. Similarly, local SRHR champions, both men and women, must be supported and their capacity built to understand the intersections between religion, state, politics, economics and SRHR. They need to differentiate between religion and other influences to counter fundamentalisms in all their forms.

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## SECTION 2: Evidence base from the Global South

### National advocacy needs

The ten-country project on the impact of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR in the Global South encompassed two components. The first involved national studies investigating the linkages between religious fundamentalism and different SRHR issues to create an evidence base. The second component consisted of carrying out national advocacy through various activities.

Advocacy was guided by country contexts, partners' respective areas of expertise, focus of work and the particular issues studied. Partners examined the influence of fundamentalist interpretation on specific SRHR topics including contraception (Philippines and Pakistan), child marriage (Malaysia and Indonesia), comprehensive sexuality education (India and Bangladesh), bodily autonomy (Egypt) and abortion with specific reference to rape, incest and foetal malformation (Morocco). Some partner organisations grappled with the impact on advocacy of changes within government (supportive individuals leaving office) alongside resistance from non-extremist stakeholders and religious groups.

The Sri Lankan study considered the interplay of nationalism, religion and ethnicity in assessing impact on SRHR, based on their understanding that fundamentalist movements are located within a nationalist-ethnic orientation. For example, Buddhist nationalists have used hate speech (incitement to kill) against religious and ethnic minorities on the one hand and pressed Sinhalese women to produce more children to win the ethnic war against Tamils and Muslims, on the other. Previously, it was considered that although language, race and ethnicity – rather than religion – were the most important 'identity markers' in Sri Lanka (Bartholomeuz 1999, Wriggins 1960), in the 1990s a chauvinistic 'fundamentalist Buddhist' movement emerged in the country under the Buddhist Revivalist Movement,<sup>17</sup> which emphasised the “essentials” of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Hence, the advocacy of **Women and Media Collective (WMC)** in Sri Lanka aimed at countering ideologies that frame women as bearers of cultural and national identity and vessels of reproduction for a new generation of Sinhalese Buddhists.

<sup>17</sup> The revivalist movements of Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka in the 1990s were nationalist movements against British colonisation.

<sup>18</sup> Hindu communalism first surfaced in the form of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in the 1920s, and entered national politics between 1970s and 1980s and again in 1996, when the BJP first came into power through the general elections.

In India, the study, intervention and subsequent advocacy addressed the opposition to and modifications in the adolescent sexuality education program initiated in 2005, by the ruling conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) whereby 12 state Governments moved against the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) on the basis of cultural inappropriateness and a resurgent Hindu communalism.<sup>xxxvii</sup><sup>18</sup> While private schools are free to choose whether or

not to include sexuality education in their curricula, the number having included a comprehensive curriculum in their syllabi is unknown. Private schools affiliated with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) are required to have a component of sex education in their syllabi but comprise a small minority. Most schools – private and public affiliated with state boards of secondary education – do not have any form of sexuality education in their curricula.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The **Rural Women's Social Education Centre (RUWSEC)** in India therefore aimed to develop and pilot a model comprehensive sexuality education curriculum for young people in Tamil Nadu to address gaps in information available to in-school youth.

Similarly, in Bangladesh, **Naripokho** focused on pinpointing cultural and religious impediments to government-supported CSE programs through its research, and developed a student-friendly teaching methodology for imparting CSE to secondary and higher secondary students in Bangla and English. The previously recorded reluctance from political leaders to risk a religious backlash by openly supporting sexuality education, noted earlier (Smith, Kippax, and Aggleton, 2000)<sup>xxxix</sup> persists.

Religio-political groups that enjoy access to government policy-setting forums advocate that that all answers are to be found in the Quran, and those that are not found in the Quran 'have been left out for good reason', thus rejecting the need to introduce supplementary teaching material for the youth. Both madrasahs<sup>19</sup> and parents have been reluctant to discuss sexuality with students; while in the Madrasahs resistance comes from religious beliefs and values, parents' views are influenced by social norms, fear of sexual activity, and misinformation regarding the content and intended impact of CSE. Further, teachers are often not equipped with required skills to impart sensitive information and carry their own individual biases and beliefs. Naripokho's interventions take forward past research that supports taking a community mobilisation approach for youth reproductive health in a wide range of countries, including Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, and Kenya (Senderowitz, 2000).<sup>xl</sup>

The Egyptian study focused on the issue of bodily autonomy and family/community sanctions for harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage, parental control over marriage decisions, denial of family planning and inflicting virginity tests on youth prior to marriage. Advocacy efforts by **Ikhtyar** aim to engage young people online through blogs, campaigns and street theatre to highlight right to bodily integrity.

The Pakistan and Maldives studies focused on access to family planning. In Maldives, as elsewhere, the production of religious knowledge is monopolised

<sup>19</sup> Madrasahs are Islamic seminaries and educational institutions.

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by religious scholars, many of whom promote the idea that contraceptive use and abortion are against religious teachings. SRH is seen as a women's issue, but decision-making in terms of family planning is left to men. The advocacy strategy of **Society for Health Education (SHE)** in Maldives is to mobilize moderate religious leaders to endorse family planning methods for greater uptake by couples who may believe it is against religious teachings. Advocacy by **Shirkat Gah (SG)** in Pakistan looks to create discursive platforms to counter the impact of religious fundamentalisms.

In Morocco, the **Morocco Family Planning Association (AMPF)** is advocating legislative reform to allow abortion for rape and incest survivors, and the sensitisation of the justice sector to address the high number of unsafe abortions and related maternal mortality due to anti-abortion laws. Advocacy efforts also aim to reduce and counter the influence of religious leaders' opposition to abortion, leveraging Morocco's constitutional proclamation to adhere to human rights as universally recognised (2011).

**Sisters in Islam (SIS)** in Malaysia and **Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan Women's Health Foundation (WHF)** in Indonesia both studied the issue of child marriage amongst Muslim populations, based primarily on desk reviews.

Since independence in 1945, Indonesia has followed a secular path, with the national slogan "Unity in Diversity." In the 1950s, radical fundamentalism emerged during Suharto's regime with Islamist groups carrying out a number of attacks and riots that Suharto denounced as fanaticism (New York Times, 1985). After the fall of the Suharto regime, fundamentalist groups quickly gained strength in the political and social spheres. Child marriage in Indonesia was raised as a concern along with the high rate of divorces at the first Women Congress in 1928 but the subsequently formed women's federations did not take up the issue as it was deemed too controversial for the Islamic women's organisations (Blackburn, 2004).<sup>xii</sup> The civil Marriage Law, 1974, stipulates 16 years as the minimum age of marriage for girls, but local religious officials often agree to solemnise marriages of younger girls at the request of girls' fathers. The Indonesian research notes direct correlations of premature and underweight births in districts with high rates of child marriage as well as high infant mortality rates, with an undetermined number of babies dying before they reach one year of age. Girl victims of child marriage commonly lack awareness about contraception or other SRHR services and issues, which contributes to high infant mortality rate. The study found that divorce is a frequent occurrence in cases of customary child marriage, and women undergo multiple divorces as well. The Indonesian Ulema Council has repeatedly denied the need to increase the minimum legal age of marriage however.

To address the above, WHF lobbied with and supported the local and central government to enact laws outlawing child marriage, held public campaigns to raise awareness and pushed for a progressive interpretation of existing statutes in the community, including the pesantren and pengajian groups.

In Malaysia, dual legal systems i.e., Shari'ah and penal codes, provide room for girls under 16 years to be married off with the permission of the Shari'ah Court. There has been an increase of 47 per cent in reported child marriages between 2000 and 2010. Two justifications have primacy in perpetuating the practice: the alleged marriage of Hazrat Aisha to Prophet Muhammad when she was 9 (and according to some, 6) years old, and puberty as a signal for sexual maturity and readiness for marriage. While the National Fatwa Council of Malaysia openly denounced the practice of child marriage in 2014, its position was noncommittal in terms of declaring the practice haram (prohibited). Instead, it stated that child marriages are unhealthy; they are neither obligatory (wajib) nor encouraged (Sunnah- in the tradition of the Holy Prophet Mohammed). The incumbent Prime Minister has further postulated in public statements that liberal ideas or liberalism are a threat that will ruin the Muslim identity. Sisters in Islam (SIS) in Malaysia, together with other women's rights NGOs (collectively known as Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) have lobbied with the government to increase the legal age of marriage for girls and boys to 18 years old, regardless of religion and ethnicity.

In the Philippines, a direct source of obstruction to SRHR came in the form of the 1986 Constitution which purportedly incorporates Catholic teachings in relation to family and reproductive health. Much like Pakistan where General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88) launched the Islamisation drive, the re-instatement of Corazon C. Aquino in the Philippines (mid- 80s), pushed for Catholicising the Constitution and laws. The national study by **Likhaan Centre for Women's Health** notes that Corazon's first major move after taking office was the creation of a commission to draft a new Constitution, which comprised religious figures (priests and nuns), and associated with the influential Catholic organisation, Opus Dei (Pangalangan, 2010).<sup>xiii</sup> The religious doctrine pushed within this process was palpably anti-contraception, opposed divorce, and outlawed non-heterosexual behaviour.

One of the main additions to the new Constitution was the protection of a foetus from conception. The Declaration of Principles and State Policies, Article II Section 12 states: "The State recognizes the sanctity of family life and shall protect and strengthen the family as a basic autonomous social institution... It shall equally protect the life of the mother and the life of the unborn from conception...." The legal interpretation of 'conception' was forwarded by a Catholic priest (and lawyer), which recognises the rights of the foetus from the moment it is fertilised (Bernas, 2010).<sup>xiii</sup>

**Most research countries record a rise in extremist ideologies with fundamentalist groups asserting themselves through different means, including laws, policies, mass media, local sermons, etc. Collectively, these are impacting attitudes, service provision as well as policy making.**

**The net outcome is that religious fundamentalisms propagated by religious authorities and/or politico-religious extremist groups (and condoned by state institutions) are effectively obstructing and rolling back hard-won gains made on SRHR in international platforms and in some instances, national policies.**

## Synthesis of the ten-country research findings

The country reports do not establish a direct causal link between rising 'religious' fundamentalism and women's SRHR. In part this is due to the inexhaustible panoply of individuated and collective mediators of culture, tradition, ethnicity, nationalism, communalism, economics, history, demographics and politics (national, regional and global) that obfuscate its impact. Nevertheless, inferences can be drawn regarding the interplay between different kinds of religious fundamentalisms that have acted to disrupt, halt and, more recently, even reverse progress on SRHR, as synthesized below:

<sup>20</sup> For example, that it is acceptable in Islam for a girl to be solemnised into marriage as soon as she attains puberty, which she may repudiate upon acquiring 18 years of age. March 12, 2014: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1092571>

<sup>21</sup> That DNA evidence in rape constitutes secondary and not primary evidence, only to be used to establish paternity. September 22, 2013: <http://www.dawn.com/news/1045038>

<sup>22</sup> In Sri Lanka, Buddhist fundamentalist groups (e.g. Ravana Balakaya and Bodu Bala Sena) advocate a ban on vasectomy and tubectomy so Sinhalese women can 'out-perform' Muslim women in producing more children thereby protecting future Buddhist generations by maintaining a Buddhist majority. In the Philippines, the Catholic Church propagates the teaching of Pope John Paul II that human sexuality is based on "the inseparable connection...between the two meanings of marriage: the unitive...and the procreative..." (Familiaris Consortio 32). Further, that: "[M]atrimony exercised in...a way that the act to generate life is deliberately frustrated...is an offense against the law of God and of nature...a grave sin" (Castei Connubii n.55, 56). In Pakistan, Zina laws that purport compliance with Islamic teachings prohibit sexual intercourse out of wedlock (as fornication or adultery), sanctioning punitive actions by the state to regulate sexuality in society. Further, children born out of wedlock or adopted children have reduced or no share in inheritance passed on through adopting parents.

Most research countries record a rise in extremist ideologies with fundamentalist groups asserting themselves through different means, including laws, policies, mass media, local sermons, etc. Collectively, these are impacting attitudes, service provision as well as policy making. These groups commonly oppose or reject human rights provisions as 'Western propaganda', or a Western cultural invasion of the Global South, a perception reported across studies from Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Maldives and Morocco; or simply as against cultural norms and traditions. The net outcome is that religious fundamentalisms propagated by religious authorities and/or politico-religious extremist groups (and condoned by state institutions) are effectively obstructing and rolling back hard-won gains made on SRHR in international platforms and in some instances, national policies.

Similar positions are routinely taken by Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic religious authorities and groups with regards to SRHR of women and girls, on matters pertaining to access to contraception, abortion and sexuality education. Official institutions such as the Council of Islamic Ideology (Pakistan), the Ulema Council (Indonesia), Ministry of Islamic Affairs (Maldives), the Catholic Church (Philippines), and the National Fatwa Committee for Islamic Religious Affairs (Malaysia), etc., play a significant role in translating conservative religious teachings into policy instruments. The Council of Islamic Ideology in Pakistan has historically given anti-women statements on the subject of consent in marriage,<sup>20</sup> rape,<sup>21</sup> and a variety of other issues concerning women.<sup>xiv</sup> It has extolled men to prevent women from using family planning presenting this as a sin that interferes with God's will. Likewise, in the Philippines, Orthodox Catholics impose adherence to a 'natural law' that limits women's role to motherhood, and allows sexual intimacy only through marriage and for the purpose of procreation.<sup>22</sup> The President, in an understanding with the Church, has reiterated that he will use veto powers to overturn any bill on RH passed by the Congress. Although the Philippines has a secular constitution, the inescapable presence of the Catholic Church teachings and the Bishop on matters related to social justice have historically reinforced the primacy of progeny in marital relationships, and the sinfulness of contraception, abortion, homosexuality and divorce.

In Indonesia, the Ulema Council has consistently supported child marriages by refusing to change the minimal legal age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18. Likewise, in the Philippines, the Catholic clergy obstructed the passage of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012 for 10 years and since its passage, has been opposing its implementation. While the Philippines Department of Health in collaboration with advocacy groups had formulated 'Implementing Rules and Regulations' for the Act, fourteen Catholic entities, mainly pro-life groups<sup>23</sup> with close ties to the Bishop, successfully stalled implementation by questioning its Constitutionality before the Supreme Court. The Church dismisses women's rights advocates as "false teachers", and has publicly stated that women's emancipation in society, in the family and in the nurturing of children is "not emancipation but a crime...the debasing of the womanly character and the dignity of motherhood...of the whole family..." Philippine is also one of only two countries in the world that does not allow divorce.

In Sri Lanka, WMC documented hate speech in mass media (print and online) specifically targeting the Muslim population. Narratives that emerge from record range from condemnation for large family sizes of the Muslim populace, to averring higher fertility amongst Sinhalese women. Further, conspiracy theories come in the form of online vitriol and physical attacks by Buddhist monks targeting Muslim-run garments stores (No Limit, and Fashion Bug), which were accused of handing out sweets specifically to Sinhala women causing infertility and miscarriages, and "converting" Buddhist girls to Islam, respectively. Fashion Bug was further accused of creating "harems" of Buddhist girls; a blanket customer boycott was also called against Muslim-run enterprises by BBS through text messages to journalists (Asian Tribune, 2013).<sup>xiv</sup> Muslims were also targeted for accepting polygamy, although statistically, polygamy is not a commonly practiced in the country. Social media users argued that Buddhists should be allowed to have polygamous marriages as well to keep up with the (perceived) rapidly growing Muslim population. In social media postings, the slogan for the country's population policy promoting small families was ridiculed in spinoff slogans exhorting people to have larger families to increase the Sinhalese population.

The extent of Sinhala-Buddhist identity conflict came into sharp contrast after a peace vigil was held in 2013, against ethno-religious discrimination and promotion of inter-faith harmony. The vigil was organised by Buddhists Questioning Bodu Bala Sena (BQBBS), a Facebook group of Sri Lankan Buddhists critical of the Bodu Bala Sena's (BBS) discriminatory views and actions against other religious groups. Sinhala Buddhists present at the protest were harassed and criticised, referred to as "nightclub Buddhists" or the 'facebooking', English-speaking middle and upper-middle class" in online articles, and accused of using "NGO money", and insinuated that those

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<sup>23</sup> Pro-life groups in the Philippines represent an amorphous body of organisations and individuals – some independent, others allied – that publically profess to be anti-contraceptives and anti-abortion, as part of their commitment to Catholic teachings. None of these institutions have been able to devise any suitable policy framework, in keeping with notions of Christian dignity that also address people's contemporary and emerging SRHR needs.

present at the vigil were not true Buddhists.<sup>24</sup> Pictures of women taken at the vigil, as well as pictures downloaded from their social media profiles, were circulated online without consent. The Sri Lankan study notes that the women targeted also belonged to a privileged socio-economic class as evident in their attire, lifestyle, and other characteristics. This difference went against the state-endorsed narrative of women as wholesome mothers and good women, discarding online smear campaigns as fair-game. Further, pictures of BBS CEO Dilanthe Withnage's daughter, dancing in a nightclub, were leaked online, accusing Withnage of hypocrisy (Groundviews, 2014).<sup>xlvi</sup> According to WMC's report, women who had attended the vigil and whose pictures were shared online were 'slut-shamed' for their attire and accused of being sex workers, as well as threatened with sexual violence (Sunday Leader, 2013).<sup>xlvii</sup>

It is impossible to separate ethno-religious nationalism from this attack on women, or other similar attacks in Sri Lanka, and the graph of hate speech has risen continually since the candlelight vigil. In 2015, during Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections, Muslim candidates were attacked through fear-mongering and scare tactics; Facebook posts encouraged Sri Lankans not to vote for Muslim candidates to prevent a Muslim takeover. Moreover, a fear of ISIS's brand of militant Islam was used to instill a sense of fear for Muslims in political positions. Female candidate Rosy Senanayake on the other hand, was called a prostitute (sic), and suggestions of sexual violence against her and her daughter were made (Salam, 2017). Similar narratives reflecting Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism appeared on social media posts, urging Sinhala Buddhists to abstain from discord as that would result in minorities dominating the Buddhists (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2016).<sup>xlviii</sup>

In Bangladesh, although religious fundamentalists have not been able to set the parameters for individual and collective rights, there is a continued reluctance on the part of political leaders to risk a religious backlash by openly supporting sexuality education.

In Egypt, while the practice of FGM has been illegal since 2008 and parallel narratives have emerged on the desirability and effectiveness of more stringent laws to curb the practice (15 years' imprisonment should the girl/woman die), government officials continually obfuscate the issue. Some even encourage the practice to counter the weakness of men unable to resist sexual intercourse, with one Egyptian MP going so far as to state: "We are a population whose men suffer from sexual weakness, which is evident because Egypt is among the biggest consumers of sexual stimulants that only the weak will consume....If we stop [female genital mutilation], we will need strong men and we don't have men of that sort."<sup>xlix</sup> In another instance, it was suggested that a mandatory virginity testing be introduced for all university students, with varsities able to deny unmarried girls admission if found to be non-virgins.<sup>l</sup> Similarities can be

<sup>24</sup> Thematic Brief: E-Violence & Religious Conservatism: Interlinkages with SRHR. Ghausia Rashid Salam, Shirkat Gah, 2017.

found with Indonesia, where the National Police has recently instituted virginity tests for women police officers as part of Chief Police Regulation No. 5/2009 on Health Inspection (Pemeriksaan Kesehatan) Guidelines for Police Candidates. While not called a virginity test, Article 36 requires all women officers to undergo “obstetrics and gynaecology” examination to ensure “good morals” of recruits. In Pakistan, couples have to individually declare their virgin status (if not previously married) on the marriage registration form, although the government does not take measures to establish the veracity of claim made.

Evidence from across these countries suggests that fundamentalist interpretations combine with the cultural acceptance of violent behaviour; the absence or non-implementation of domestic laws and policies that extend impunity for violence against women and girls (VAWG), including but not limited to child, early or forced marriage; unsafe/ induced abortion; denial of sexuality education and information; denial of contraception, and harmful practices such as FGM, virginity tests and honour killing.

Country studies attribute the rising incidences of reported violence against young people, including incidents of technology-driven VAWG or e-violence (Sri Lanka), FGM (Egypt and Malaysia), and honour killing (India) to rising religious fundamentalism. Discussions around SRHR and fundamentalist positions on these occupy increasingly space in the mainstream and new (digital) media, including social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.<sup>25</sup> Media reports also play into the hands of politico-religious opportunists who deploy conservative and/or sensationalist language to further propagate their views (Sri Lanka). Frequently, these narratives spread misinformation amongst their audience in the name of religion.

The family emerges as a strong institution regulating SRHR-related decisions, attitudes, practices, and access to services especially for young women and men. Studies from Egypt, India, Malaysia and the Maldives reveal that families exert heavy control over the bodies of children, enabling parents to carry out harmful practices such as FGM (Egypt, Malaysia,<sup>26</sup> and Maldives), child marriage (India and Malaysia), and virginity tests on both unmarried girls and boys (Egypt).

Nevertheless, Partners note the presence of progressive religious groups particularly in Islam and Catholicism that support interpretations reconciling religion and culture with SRHR. The Maldives study, for example, recommends increased engagement with religious clerics who have issued fatwas (religious edicts) permitting abortion across the country to break religious and cultural barriers in contraception use; The Pakistan study mentions progressive

<sup>25</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq is using sophisticated social media strategies to propagate its successes, strategies and actions. An example is the "one billion campaign", which calls on Muslims to post messages, photos and videos on Twitter, Instagram and YouTube in support of Isis.

<sup>26</sup> In the Malay Muslim community.

**Fundamentalist interpretations combine with the cultural acceptance of violent behaviour; the absence or non-implementation of domestic laws and policies that extend impunity for violence against women and girls (VAWG), including but not limited to child, early or forced marriage; unsafe/induced abortion; denial of sexuality education and information; denial of contraception, and harmful practices such as FGM, virginity tests and honour killing.**

**The family emerges as a strong institution regulating SRHR-related decision, attitudes, practices, and access to services especially for young women and men.**

interpretations of a religious scholar (not politico-religious actors) who does not prescribe to the popular political discourse that aims to curtail women and girls' rights. In the Philippines, the Catholic Church has also taken vacillating steps towards addressing issues of social justice after the 1960s as a de-privatised institution, following dwindling powers of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup> Likhaan has also taken some religious leaders on board as part of the RH advocates' network.

Nearly all Partners' advocacy plans include working with religious authorities to sensitise them on SRHR matters. Sisters in Islam (Malaysia), however, recommends a diametrical approach by reforming laws and ensuring strict adherence in practice, and empowering girls to address the roots causes of social control over girls, with the involvement of boys.

Some have found endorsements from religious sources helpful in removing misunderstandings and promoting improved SHRH outcomes for women. Nevertheless, working with or for the endorsement of religious groups must be approached with caution given that country reports underscore that the greatest resistance emanates from religious groups. Further, the numerically small number of religious leaders whose support partners have mobilised cannot be considered as indicative of a larger reversal of religious fundamentalism in their respective countries, or representative of larger, more influential religious lobbies. Finally, the support and endorsement for a particular "progressive" interpretation cannot be taken to signify complete sensitisation towards other universal standards of human rights (for example, a cleric's support for abortion may not automatically translate into support for gender identities or sexual orientation that fall outside the socially accepted binary of male and female).

## Key conclusions and recommendations

Based on diverse country experiences in the Asia Pacific and North African regions where religious fundamentalism interface with public policy and regulations to influence SRHR, the following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn:

- There is an urgent need to counter patriarchal structures strengthened by fundamentalist and punitive versions of religion that narrow the scope for women's agency in both public and private arenas, and negatively impact women's and young people's SRHR.
- It is difficult to isolate the specific impact of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR from that of other mediating factors, making it vital to:
  - Squarely address SRHR within the overall framework of gender equality;
  - Carry out further in-depth studies to ascertain the specific confluence of factors impeding SRHR.
- Currently, most reproductive health policies lack a rights-based approach. A human-rights based approach must be promoted through developing inclusive SRHR policies that ensure access to services without discrimination on the grounds of, inter alia, sex, gender, age, religion, race, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation.
- Women and men in the general population are often less resistant to SRHR interventions than specific groups, including policy-implementers and makers. Local support can be harnessed by investing in community-led actions such as organisation of study-circles to understand the impact of fundamentalisms on people's lives. These should be strengthened through robust bottom-up and top-down systems of transparency and accountability in the form of periodic assessments of effectiveness and continuing/emerging challenges.
- States need to be held accountable against international agreements and treaties that promote SRHR to address gaps in the texts and implementation of domestic policies and programmes. These include in particular, ICPD, BPfA, CEDAW and the current SDGs.<sup>27</sup> States must be reminded that the 1993 Vienna Declaration on Human Rights specifies that it is the duty of states, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms (para 5). Governments must be strongly encouraged to develop and implement policies with a commitment to managing their populations

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Resolution 67/290 of the United Nations General Assembly ([http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/cdp/ARES67290\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/cdp/ARES67290_en.pdf)) provides space to address 'new and emerging challenges' and 'shared challenges' to ensure sustainable development (paras 2 and 18).

wherein every person's basic needs are met and formulate state policies and programmes from a democratic, rights-based and gender-just perspective.

- State co-option of religions tends to have an offsetting effect as hyper-normative interpretations contravene fundamental human rights. Bids to appease religious authorities for fear of a perceived or real backlash invariably reinforce patriarchal and fundamentalist narratives. To ensure SRHR for all in countries where state policies and laws tenaciously make reference to religion, it is essential that alternate views and voices be identified and included in the discourse; steps must be taken to ensure these voices reach officials and service providers.
- States must exercise due diligence to ensure no one is allowed to spread hate speech and incite violence, including those acting in the name of religion.
- State institutions responsible for or authorised to make, religious proclamations, edicts, etc., must ensure the participation and representation of women. Even then, proclamations must follow a process of board-based consultation and avoid exploiting differences on the basis of religious identities.
- Mass media campaigns should be launched to raise awareness about SRHR and relevant services to improve attainability of services and to align demand with supply; campaigns must ensure the involvement of men to overcome low levels of demand for SRHR services identified by studies as emanating from lack of awareness.
- E-violence and hate speech does not exist in a vacuum; it stems from existing inequalities that originate offline. Criminalisation and the law do act as deterrents but only address the symptoms, not the underlying problem, i.e. the discriminatory attitudes contributing to hate speech. Addressing the root cause of e-violence demands constant dialogue that catalyse shifts in mind-sets, both for achieving women's SRHR and cultivating an egalitarian society free from ethnic or racial strife. While considerable on-going work aims to empower women by imparting digital security skills and encouraging them to occupy online spaces, the burden of finding solutions to hate speech and e-violence falls on women. This must be overcome by including other parties in the process of generating supportive and transformative discourses, both online and offline.
- Alternate readings of religious texts by scholars that support human rights should be widely disseminated along with basic health information to

dispel misconceptions and misinformation spread in the name of religion.

**A word of caution:** Often times the same religious text is cited by fundamentalists to forward different, even contradictory interpretations, resulting in futile back and forth with limited, if any resolution of the basis of conflict.

- States should engage with civil society advocates as well as religious leaders, faith-based groups, politicians, government officials and law enforcement agencies, and create spaces for a free and frank exchange of views in order to break hegemonic narratives.
- Civil society organisations should initiate forums and engage various stakeholders to generate informed debate so as to create public awareness and dialogue on coexistence, peace, and ethnic and religious harmony that are critical to countering the essentialising discourse of the religious right.

### **Key messages for advocacy**

Some key messages drawn from the country studies as a potential pushback to religious fundamentalist narratives in the region are as follows:

Holding states accountable to human rights standards & international obligations:

- SRHR is central to all human rights and critical for achieving just, equitable and sustainable development. International commitments obligate all states to use a human rights-based approach while developing and implementing SRHR policies and programs to address inequalities, discriminations and power imbalances. States are accountable for giving full effect to numerous international agreements and treaties that promote SRHR by translating these into local policies and programmes. States must take steps to deliver on their international commitments, including informing all citizens about the commitments and human rights standards that countries have signed off on or promised to uphold.
- The Asia-Pacific region contains 60 per cent of the world's youth population, or 750 million young persons aged 15 to 24 years.<sup>iii</sup> The region's youth bulge needs urgent attention in order to derive demographic dividends for sustainable development.
- States should only authorise those having sufficient educational attainment and knowledge of theology and theosophy, religious history, sociology, and political religion as well as human rights standards and commitments,

integrated into dedicated syllabi, to provide non-binding interpretations of religious teachings, with due consideration to problems facing societies and their solutions. Preference should not be given to any particular interpretation unless the same has been solicited from other sources, including opposing views. This process must be inclusive and participatory, with women increasingly occupying these spaces.

- Taking forward obligations to mainstream gender states should ensure equal participation and representation of women in all official religious institutions with advisory/recommendation powers and/or to pass decrees.
- States must hold to account individuals in influential positions who make ill-informed and religiously biased statements in public forums that directly affect women's health and rights.
- Citizens must be facilitated to have access to global information about SRHR in pursuit of common and context-relevant solutions.
- Free media is a cornerstone of democratic societies. Mainstream as well as online spaces should be democratised wherein everyone is able to participate in knowledge production and dissemination. The state should be vigilant and take appropriate action to prevent and sanction the dissemination of hate material, particularly in terms of media/technology-driven violence against women and minorities.

### **Education**

- Comprehensive sexuality education is pivotal to advancing gender equality and to attain sustainable development. SRHR education curriculum need to be introduced with appropriate content and pedagogy, sensitisation of both teachers and parents, and the establishment of more collaborative working relationships between the various stakeholders to minimize resistance.
- Education and culture is an important means for promoting SRHR and counter-balancing the negative impact of religious fundamentalisms; sexuality education should be promoted using different teaching tools/aids especially visual aids and in language appropriate to the audience's age.
- In countries with high drop-outs or out-of-school children and youth, mass media or illustrated Information, Education and Communication (IEC) material should be used to spread knowledge about services availability and impart basic knowledge about health and well-being.

## **Civil Society**

- Civil society organisations must be supported to lead the documentation and development of remedial actions on SRHR violations, inclusive of the denial of SRHR information and services based on religious grounds, including by petitioning local justice systems and mobilising support around priority areas.
- Counter-messaging in terms of online fundamentalist discourses on social media needs a two-pronged approach: reclaiming online spaces from fundamentalists, and occupying these spaces with rights-based narratives.
- Civil society discourse must be based on inclusivity and openness to unpack the effect of religious fundamentalist ideologies on people's life choices and to foster understanding of human rights and their underlying principles.
- Civil society's human rights agenda must emphasise inclusive debates and work towards weeding out exclusivity in every sense.

## SECTION 3: National Advocacy Strategies-Lessons to build on

### Country-level progress and achievements

Broadly, strategies and results across national partners for action were as follows:

- **Research and analysis**

All national advocacy plans started with research and analyses by local experts, guided by expert input into design and analysis frameworks, and finalised through various stages of peer reviews. Assessments of country-specific social and political contexts during and following research identified how to expand strategic constituencies, pinpointed potential allies and opponents, established local partnerships and undertook collective actions as well as a varied mix of other activities.

- **Expanding and interlinking constituencies and convening spaces**

Country partners involved different stakeholders from amongst identified allies, while many worked with potential opponents to gain understanding and build alliances or mitigate potential opposition. National events including consultations with local allies, regional reviews and planning meetings helped partners to tighten the technical aspects of their research and to derive evidence-specific advocacy strategies for particular audiences. The dissemination of research findings through various means and platforms raised awareness on various SRHR issues and elicited feedback for strategies. These included awareness raising sessions, trainings, photo exhibitions, lectures, community discussions, magazine articles and blogs, info-graphics, health camps, and national policy briefs.

- **Galvanising media outreach:** Media engagements have differed amongst country partners. Where SHE (Maldives) effectively encourages and engages media to highlight the impact of religious fundamentalisms on family planning and contraception, Ikhtyar (Egypt) was obliged to keep activities low profile to avoid religious backlash amidst an uncertain political climate. Effective communication strategies encompassed making information accessible through translations into local languages for greater impact, reach and awareness. Pakistan's national report translated into Urdu makes it accessible to a larger audience (including rural and peri-urban), while in Sri Lanka, WMC has published SRHR-related material in their online magazines in Tamil and Sinhalese. Likewise, Morocco intended to produce a documentary in Arabic on

SRHR for regional and national audiences in 2016.

- **Forging alliances & multi-stakeholder partnerships:** Alliance-building (with both traditional and non-traditional partners), promoting alternate discourses through multi-stakeholder platforms, and making SRHR knowledge more accessible to the public are common strategies to country partners. All partners have formed alliances or collaborations in their respective countries on SRHR with like-minded CSOs (as well as other actors) and have convened spaces for garnering broad-based support. Collaborations have also strengthened the overall SRHR work of partner organisations. In particular, advocacy plans in India, Philippines, Bangladesh and Malaysia are highly collaborative in nature around the issue of child rights. Collectively, this supports the objective of cross-movement building to counter the impact of fundamentalisms to improve specific SRHR outcomes.
- **Engaging religious leaders and other non-traditional partners:** In some countries, partners that identified progressive religious leaders as potential allies have engaged them in activities aimed at removing misconceptions about religion and SRHR. In Maldives, SHE successfully engaged an Islamic scholar to deliver lectures on Islam and family planning generating positive debate. In Indonesia, YKP/WHF involved religious leaders in community dialogues on child marriages so as to further mobilise support from grassroots level religious leaders to secure decrees against child marriages. Apart from seeking endorsements of their perspectives, partners have identified religious leaders as target audiences for their sensitisation efforts on SRHR.
- **Expanding the actors to reach the marginalised:** To build a stronger presence in neglected areas and among marginalised communities, partners are building the capacity of grassroots or community based organisations (CBOs). In Pakistan, a number of CBOs have been trained to work on reproductive health issues at the districts and village levels. Similarly, the partner in India is trying to reach out to rural populations through local intermediaries who are being trained on imparting CSE.
- **Lobbying for legislative reforms and policy reviews:** Partners have used lobbying as an effective persuasion tool especially when working with decision makers on intended outcomes. In Morocco, the advocacy goal involves reducing unsafe abortions through legislation. The Morocco Family Planning Association has led the government into signalling its willingness to amend abortion laws to extend to rape, incest and foetal malformation cases, in order to ensure the mother's health. In India and Bangladesh, meetings are being held with concerned ministries and

education departments on the adoption of an improved comprehensive sexuality education curriculum. In Indonesia, YKP/WHF has built awareness around child marriages through judicial review and engaging legislators and policymakers to raise the minimum legal age of marriage for girls to 18 in line with international conventions ratified by Indonesia. YKP/WHF has reached out to district level leaders in order to impact decentralised levels of policy-making on child marriages. As a result, West Nusa Tenggara province and the District Gunung Kidul of Yogyakarta province governors enacted decrees to increase the minimal legal marriageable age.

– **Building capacity**

Alongside legislative reforms concerning abortion, the AMPF (Morocco) is building jurisprudential literacy amongst judges to extend abortion laws to cases of rape, incest and foetal malformation, from a health perspective. Indian Partners are focusing on addressing the need for comprehensive sexuality education by building cross-sectoral capacity to roll out a multi-lingual curriculum in this regard.

**Progress and achievements by national partner**

Partners implemented a mix of strategies to address specific SRHR issues. A review of the difficulties faced in implementing various strategies confirms a strong presence of religious fundamentalist forces and their continued influence on government laws and policies. The single biggest challenge faced by all partners was governmental leaning towards retrogressive interpretations and difficulty countering religious actors. While some partners have treated religious leaders instrumentally in terms of getting their endorsement on specific issues, others have consciously engaged to broaden leaders' understanding of equality and human rights.

While individual religious clergy have been engaged by national partners in their advocacy for SRHR, impact is undermined by state-sanctioned religious institutions that govern and have binding legal powers in matters related to religion, and state position has an overriding effect to varying degrees. Further, while religious forces have organised effectively to reach a wide audience, civil society initiatives remain a drop in the ocean. While in Malaysia, religious institutions dictate public policy in matters related to SRHR, countries like Pakistan and Malaysia have set up parallel institutions with power to recommend changes to the constitution as well as laws in light of Islamic teachings. These institutions enjoy access to policy makers and control the production of religious knowledge through self-proclaimed priestly status and access to popular media. State-supported parallel legal systems in Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia confound implementation of existing laws and policies.

National advocacy spaces vary depending on the country context, research focus and findings. Partners worked with a number of stakeholders, engaging both directly and indirectly with target audiences. Most partners used their existing networks and alliances with other SRHR experts at the national level to disseminate key messages and learnings from the research findings. Despite working with 'progressive' religious leaders and groups, the biggest opposition to advocacy remained from the religious lobby and in some cases, state institutions.

## SECTION 4: International Advocacy Strategies

### **Need for international advocacy on religious fundamentalisms and SRHR**

The Global South carries a disproportionate global burden of poor SRHR indicators. Advancing these rights for women, men and youth at national, regional and global levels and translating internationally agreed norms and standards into practice at country level requires a strong, vibrant and better networked Southern-based civil society as well as political will by states in order to sync global policy frameworks with local contexts. To achieve this, human rights treaty bodies and national policy-makers need to be provided evidence in terms of SRHR violations and good practices.

International forums provide an opportunity for local SRHR advocates and practitioners to highlight impediments obstructing progress on SRHR which has been uneven across project countries. In the event of dissonance between commitments and actions, as clearly reflected in most country studies, it is important to remind states of their obligations to effectuate changes at the national level in keeping with international commitments and globally recognised human rights standards.

Human rights accountability mechanisms have not been optimally used to report on SRHR and to ensure that governments are held accountable to their commitments. ARROW and its partners have taken the following measures to link regional and global accountability mechanisms:

- Capacity building and experience sharing on human rights accountability mechanisms, in particular CEDAW and UPR with ARROW partners
- Country mapping of CEDAW, UPR & SRR on SRHR visibility
- A round-table discussion on sharing regional experiences and action plan
- Musawah partnership for developing a framework for engaging with CEDAW
- Planning advocacy with the CEDAW Committee involving the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Musawah and Women's Centre for Change

## **Progress and achievements so far at the transnational level**

Under the international advocacy plan, a number of activities have been undertaken. Evidence generated on the influence of religion on gender outcomes and SRHR through country studies will guide the future work of national partners and ARROW at the national, regional and international levels. Key messages identified in this document will be taken forward to amplify collective and individual voices on SRHR from the Global South.

## **Goals and objectives of international advocacy**

International advocacy objectives for the project were:

- a) To address the limitations posed by religious fundamentalists' policy arguments and policy actions aimed at eroding women's SRHR; and
- b) To hold decision makers accountable in ensuring SRHR.

These objectives were to be addressed through:

- Creating an evidence-base at national, regional and international levels, as well as outreach and advocacy activities;
- Creating greater visibility of issues in international spaces through amplifying changes from the Global South;
- Creating an interfaith and intra-faith, women's global-regional partnership.

The regional partnership has been successful in issuing timely statements to international treaty and UN bodies including the following global forums:

- 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on Population & Development, 2014;
- International Day on Women's Health, 2014;
- Public Statement to the Human Rights Council on The Protection of the Family in 2014 and 2015
- Final plenary of the Asia-Pacific Conference on Reproductive & Sexual Health and Rights in Manila 2014;
- The General Assembly Special Session on ICPD Beyond 2014;
- 59th Commission on the Status of Women – Beijing Platform for Action (written & oral statements);

- Written and Oral Submission to a General Comment No. 36 - Article 6: Right to Life of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) by the Human Rights Committee 2015.

These interventions have reiterated the importance of SRHR in the face of global opposition in the form of resistance and/or roll-back on rights. They form part of public documents that anchor SRHR within the larger context of human rights, and can aid advocates in framing the issues and lobbying with governments to uphold of their commitments to both the international community and their citizens.

### **Synthesis of audiences, intended outputs and achievements**

Advocacy audiences at the international level encompass UN treaty bodies, in particular CEDAW, as well as SRHR advocates and practitioners. The Partnership has produced a range of printed material including five regional thematic briefs (Child Marriage; The Use of Social Media to Perpetuate Hate Messaging; the Influence of RF on Laws and Policies; Contraception; and Comprehensive Sexuality Education), national researches, briefs, written and oral statements, and a regional paper consolidating all research findings and recommendations. This advocacy strategy is one of the partnership outputs. All these documents are tools for advocacy that provide evidence for SRHR proponents to advance SRHR within and beyond their immediate constituencies.

### **Regional and International advocacy spaces and allies and opponents**

The **allies** in the global advocacy include:

- National partners from the Asia and Pacific and North African regions;
- Regional alliances such as AWID which has been creating spaces for women's groups and religious groups to engage to realise the importance of SRHR, and is co-coordinating the Working Group for the Observatory on Universality of Rights (OURs), engaging with human rights accountability mechanisms;
- Musawah – a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family, is gathering learning from its work on human rights accountability mechanisms (including Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women- CEDAW) related to Muslim family laws;
- Shirkat Gah, for advocacy at the international and regional fora (including CEDAW; the UPR process; Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development – APFSD; and the High Level Political Forum – HLPF – on sustainable development);

- World Council of Churches, for progressive interpretations in Christianity for SRHR;
- The World Young Women's Christian Association (WYWCA).

The potential **opponents** to global advocacy on and demand for SRHR include:

- UN member states and regional blocs including retrogressive official positions or viewpoints towards SRHR;
- Oppositional groups in regional and global spaces.

### **Review of advocacy plans and what more can be done by advocates at the international level**

In terms of **regional and international advocacy spaces**, the following additional forums can be considered by ARROW and partners, to provide written or oral statements and other submissions:

- High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development;
- Asia and Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development;
- Every Woman Every Child's Independent Accountability Panel;
- WHO technical bodies (Care for New Born; Ending Preventable Maternal Mortality; iERG); European Development Days conference;
- Commission on the Status of Women;
- Human Rights Council;
- UN Economic & Social Committee, in particular ESCAP Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

### **Risk assessment**

Partner organisations have identified major risks that may potentially derail advocacy plans, in particular: i) direct or indirect threats in response to advocacy activities; ii) geo-political, economic and environmental variables beyond the control of partners and target groups.

Direct opposition to advocacy include public shaming; attacks on allies; backlash from conservative groups; difficulty in getting government buy-in; negative government response; and lack of interest from major stakeholders

resulting in counter-productive rather than a constructive dialogue with stakeholders. As countries in the Global South are susceptible to increasing conflicts due to pervasive inequities, religious extremism, political unrest and/or effects of climate change, SRHR advocacy work is fraught with indirect risks that can impact progress. Additionally, technical difficulties in carrying out activities might also occur as most of activities are utilising technology or ICTs for social change.

To overcome these risks, partners need to undertake a number of relevant measures which include adopting a non-confrontational and inclusive approach; consulting and joining hands with national allies for joint strategising; using a context-responsive approach and language to appeal to relatively moderate or non-fundamentalist elements; and expanding government support-base where it takes pro-SRHR measures.

### **Monitoring the process, progress, achievements and challenges**

For the monitoring process, partners need to set pragmatic and measurable targets assisted by periodic reviews, updates to partners and thorough documentation of challenges and successes. All progress indicators, milestones and achievements as well as difficulties and challenges in carrying out the advocacy activities need to be documented in a timely manner and conveyed to allies and local partners working on similar issues. Further value can be added to partners' work by having local civil society allies include religious fundamentalism as a major agenda point for discussions within their own constituencies. Timely communication of discussions and results between allies and partners would strengthen collective action on the ground, in addition to sharing of what works in particular contexts.

Partners should keenly follow regional and international processes and developments to locate and claim spaces that can further discourse on SRHR. Stories of resistance to religious fundamentalisms from the grassroots should be documented and used for international, regional and national/local advocacy. This can be tracked for effectiveness by observing the effect they have in shaping the global, regional and national agenda for development, with particular regard to aiding or condoning extremist ideologies by state governments. Research into the effects of religious fundamentalisms on SRHR should not cease with the national outputs and new opportunities to further understanding and discourse must be constantly explored.

Partners would need to define what a change or shift in extremist agendas would look like and craft suitable indicators against it. Given the shifting rules of the game when it comes to engaging with religious extremists, partners must constantly employ a critical lens to detect potential as well as actual

derailments and undesired or unsustainable change from a human rights' perspective. Gains and successes must be defined as medium to long term, and counter discourses popularised to the extent possible so as not to let a small and loud minority of extremists and fundamentalists undermine the human rights of the majority in the region.

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- vi Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 28 (2000) on equality of rights between men and women, para. 5.
- vii ICCPR Article 18:
- "1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching; 2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice; 3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; 4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."
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**ARROW** is a regional and non-profit women's NGO based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Since it was established in 1993, it has been working to advance women's health, affirmative sexuality and rights, and to empower women through information and knowledge, evidence generation, advocacy, capacity building, partnership building and organisational development.

**Shirkat Gah- Women's Resource Centre (SG)** was initiated as a small voluntary women's collective in Pakistan in 1975, and has evolved into a leading women's rights organisation that operates out of offices in Karachi, Peshawar, Lahore, and four field stations across all four provinces. SG's core strategies in its work with grassroots organisations in more than 20 districts include research to generate evidence for capacity building and advocacy in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); personal status rights and laws; a gendered perspective in sustainable development and promotion of peace, with violence against women traversing the four focus areas. Nationally, SG contributes to the overall policy and legal framework and works with elected representatives and government functionaries to bolster an environment conducive for women to claim rights and to facilitate accountability. SG also engages regularly with international development organisations and agencies both for setting norms and standards as well as ensuring accountability on Pakistan's international obligations.

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