Religious Fundamentalisms Impact on Women's Rights in Africa

Concept Note

Objectives:

- To develop a greater understanding of religious fundamentalisms and how different forms impact women's rights in affected nations, regions and communities.

- To generate insight into some of the historical, cultural, political conditions which have led to the rise of different forms of religious fundamentalisms occurring in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the consequences they are having on women's rights.

- To fill in the knowledge gap of practical possibilities and challenges CSOs have in working in nations or regions where they encounter religious fundamentalisms.

The notion of universality is a key principle for civil society organizations. It consists of the promotion of international human rights standards, while respecting all aspects of civil life for different societies. Given this notion and the importance of religion, civil society organizations should seek to understand a variety of religious perspectives. The recent surge of awareness around religious fundamentalist beliefs makes the need for a clear distinction between religion and religious fundamentalisms all the more pressing. It is also important to understand how culture and tradition are used to reinforce the activities and practices of religious fundamentalist groups that lead to the justification of discrimination and violence against women and other minority groups. The negative impact on women's rights should be discussed, analyzed and strategized upon to develop a greater understanding across all sectors working in Africa, whether civil society, academic or institutional.

It's important to be clear that although religion has a paramount relationship with the development community, there is a difference between religion and religious fundamentalism. The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) defines religious fundamentalism as the strategic use of religious discourse and institutions to forward views and actions that are absolutist and intolerant, anti-human rights and women's rights and at their root fundamentally patriarchal. Fundamentalists often oppose the notion of liberalization and can consider their activities to be a modernization of religion. Recruitment methods may appeal to cultural and national identity to validate their ideas and agendas, leading to the perpetuation of inequalities disproportionately affecting women and minority groups. In addition, recruitment methods are

targeted to the youth demographic, providing alternatives to areas experiencing high unemployment rates.

We can find some examples in Africa where religious fundamentalisms begin to institutionalize themselves, thus re-enforcing negative impacts on women's rights. Religious discourses and institutions have been used opportunistically by politicians and extreme conservatives in civil society as a means of pushing their political, ideological and economic agendas on a range of issues from staying in power, to becoming wealthy, to maintaining legal and social gender inequality. Institutionalization can have the effect of increasing mobilization around suppressive notions and passing regulations or creating laws that weaken human rights and disproportionately women's rights. Messages can be disseminated through different communication structures, such as community leaders, religious leaders and traditional and social media.

Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHR), gender equality has been proclaimed as a fundamental human right. The UNHR ensures that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and inalienable. It continues to highlight that freedom of thought, conscious and religion, and respect for culture, diversity and tradition cannot justify violations of human rights including women's rights. States are obliged to create their own legally binding treaties, mechanisms or national plans for women's rights. An example includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW). In addition, the Beijing +20 process created political will and worldwide mobilization of women demanding the achievement of equality and empowerment. Internationally, there is support for women's rights. International policies are in place and they often are ratified at the national level, but at the same time there is limited application in many parts of the world.

Women's rights issues are present in every country, not just where religious fundamentalisms are in place. Women may be subject to issues around violence against women, sexual and reproductive rights, access to education and health services, early child forced marriage and bodily autonomy. In addition, rights to economic means may vary drastically between men and women, including issues around property rights and land ownership. We would like to explore whether or not these ever-present issues are worst for women living under a form of religious fundamentalism or how they differ.

How is civil society, in Africa and Canada, responding to the pressures of religious fundamentalisms? What are the root causes fuelling religious fundamentalisms and why do these groups have so much power? What are the success stories around civil society initiatives? Where is civil society struggling to make gains? How can the government of Canada as well as Canadian civil society support African civil society and other their counterparts who face these issues?

Participants will have an opportunity to share their experiences, knowledge and ideas on religious fundamentalisms and their impacts on women's rights. What do you believe can be done? What are the next steps? How can we collaboratively tackle the issues?