

Khan, Ayesha; Sharp, Samuel

## Research Report

# How women's movements lead demands for democracy in the face of backlash and politicised religion

ODI Report

## Provided in Cooperation with:

ODI Global, London

*Suggested Citation:* Khan, Ayesha; Sharp, Samuel (2025) : How women's movements lead demands for democracy in the face of backlash and politicised religion, ODI Report, ODI Global, London, <https://odi.org/en/publications/womens-movements-demands-democracy-in-backlash/>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/314359>

### Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

### Terms of use:

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Report

# How women's movements lead demands for democracy in the face of backlash and politicised religion



ODI Global

AYESHA KHAN AND SAMUEL SHARP

February 2025



# How women's movements lead demands for democracy in the face of backlash and politicised religion

AYESHA KHAN AND SAMUEL SHARP



ODI Global

ODI Global  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
United Kingdom

© ODI Global 2025

Online ISSN: 2052-7209

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI Global requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI Global website.

Views and opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s) and should in no way be attributed to the institutions to which they are affiliated or to ODI Global.

Khan, A. and Sharp, S. (2025) *How women's movements lead demands for democracy in the face of backlash and politicised religion*. ODI report. London: ODI Global ([odi.org/en/publications/womens-movements-demands-democracy-in-backlash](https://odi.org/en/publications/womens-movements-demands-democracy-in-backlash)).

Front cover image: Women from diverse backgrounds and grassroots communities protest at an event organised by SIHA calling for democracy and women's human rights, Khartoum, Sudan, 2019 Credit: Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA)/Ula Osman.



# Acknowledgements

---

The authors benefited from insights to the initial research design during a workshop with scholars Pilar Domingo, Caroline Harper, Naila Kabeer, Deniz Kandiyoti, Maxine Molyneux, Pragna Patel and Shirin Rai, held in October 2023 at ODI in London. We are also grateful for further feedback from Naila Kabeer, Maxine Molyneux, Jane Jaquette, Pilar Domingo, Ján Michalko and Khawar Mumtaz. We especially thank our key informants who shared with us their time and insights.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of our Communications Team, Emilie Tant, Emily Subden and Prerna Dhote, research assistance with Spanish language materials from Ruth Rodas-Kamminga and Diana Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, editorial guidance from Terese Jonsson, typesetting by Garth Stewart and proof-reading by Hannah Caddick. The authors take full responsibility for any weaknesses or omissions in this final version.

## About the authors

**Ayesha Khan** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team at ODI Global. Her research focuses on feminist movements, backlash to gender equality, and democracy.

**Sam Sharp** is a Research Fellow in the Politics and Governance programme at ODI Global. His research focuses on contemporary challenges to democracy and civic space and particularly how these manifest in emerging democracies.

# Contents

---

**Acknowledgements** / V

---

**Display items** / VII

---

**Acronyms and abbreviations** / VIII

---

**Glossary** / IX

---

**1 Introduction** / 1

---

**2 Methods** / 4

---

**3 Global trends: democracy, civic space and politicised religion** / 5

3.1 Democracy and civic space / 5

3.2 Religion in public life and institutions / 5

3.3 Country cases / 6

---

**4 Women's movements, civic space and demands for democracy** / 9

4.1 Iran / 10

4.2 Sudan / 12

4.3 Pakistan / 15

4.4 Summary / 16

---

**5 Religious politics and backlash** / 17

5.1 Political Islam: Sudan, Malaysia and Bangladesh / 18

5.2 Hindu nationalism: India / 21

5.3 Evangelical Christianity: Argentina and Mexico / 22

5.4 Transnational implications / 24

5.5 Summary / 25

---

**6 Movement strategies** / 26

6.1 Collective action / 26

6.2 Women's rights activists build new alliances / 27

6.3 Using secular institutions to counter politicised religious authority / 33

6.4 Summary / 35

---

**7 Conclusion** / 36

7.1 Recommendations for further research / 37

---

**References** / 39

---

**Appendix 1 List of interview participants** / 50

# Display items

---

## Boxes

**Box 1** *Ni Una Menos*: a broad-based coalition against gender-based violence / 28

**Box 2** Women's movement alliances with new grassroots mobilisations: Indian response to Hindu nationalism / 29

**Box 3** The transnational campaign for recognition of the crime of gender apartheid / 32

## Tables

**Table 1** Summary of country cases / 7

# Acronyms and abbreviations

---

<b>BJP</b>	Bharatiya Janata Party
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>FFC</b>	Forces for Freedom and Change
<b>LGBT/LGBTQI+</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex (the plus sign represents people with diverse sexual and/or gender who identify using other terms)
<b>MANSAM</b>	Sudanese Women in Civic and Political Groups
<b>Morena</b>	National Regeneration Movement (Spanish: Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional), Mexico
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>SIHA</b>	Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
<b>SIS</b>	Sisters in Islam
<b>UCC</b>	uniform civil code
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>WLF</b>	Woman, Life, Freedom
<b>WLUML</b>	Women Living Under Muslim Laws

# Glossary

---

<b>Anti-rights</b>	Well-resourced movements that undermine human rights by promoting patriarchal power through hyper-nationalist and exclusionary ideologies. They target civil society and the rights of women, LGBTQI+ people, migrants and minorities, with their rhetoric increasingly amplified by political leaders globally (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023).
<b>Aurat March</b>	A feminist movement in Pakistan that started in 2018 and calls for gender equality and challenging societal norms, with annual marches held on International Women's Day (Kamal, 2022).
<b>Hadith</b>	Collections of the sayings or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, used by Muslims as a key source of Islamic religious law and moral guidance (Sayeed, 2024).
<b>Protestant Christianity</b>	<b>A branch of Protestant Christianity also called Evangelicalism or Evangelical Protestantism, that believes in the necessity of personal conversion and spreading of the Christian faith. Increasingly connected with ultra-conservative and anti-rights groups.</b>
<b>Fatwa</b>	An edict or a ruling issued by a recognised religious authority on a point of Islamic law (Shehabuddin, 1999).
<b>Hindu nationalism</b>	A political belief that a nation's policies should be based on religious Hindu and cultural norms.
<b>Hindutva</b>	A right-wing ideology that advocates Hindu supremacy and seeks to transform India from a secular state into a Hindu nation (Sahgal, 2020).
<b>Madrasa</b>	Schools or any educational institution, particularly focused on religious Islamic instruction or Quranic teaching.
<b>Ni Una Menos</b>	A feminist movement that originated in Argentina in 2015 and has since spread across Latin America. Initially focused on femicide (it is literally translated 'not one [woman] less'), the movement expanded to advocate on the legalisation of abortion (Daby and Moseley 2022).
<b>Political Islam</b>	Movements, institutions and ideas that bring Islamic beliefs and actors into the political sphere.
<b>Salafi movement</b>	A revivalist movement within Sunni Islam that seeks to return to the original teachings of pious predecessors (Hasan, 2010).
<b>Secularism</b>	A worldview or political principle that separates religion from the political realm. It asserts that a secular state's policies should be governed by nonreligious considerations and remain separate from religious institutions.
<b>Shariah law</b>	A legal system devised from the Quran. Shariah courts dispense justice on crimes covered by Shariah laws.

# 1 Introduction

Global policy progress on women's rights peaked during the 1990s, with the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action marking a culmination of women's movements' activism (Scheele, 2020). Since then, many gains in sexual and reproductive health, legal equality, economic inclusion and addressing gender-based violence have been eroded (Batliwala, 2012). Instead of building on gains from the 1990s, contemporary feminist movements now struggle to hold off the growing backlash against women's rights (Sanders, 2018; Goetz, 2020; Holmes, 2024). This backlash is now a global anti-rights movement, which brings together religious, political and capitalist interest groups on a shared platform to promote and restore patriarchal power, often as part of a hyper-nationalist and exclusionary political ideology (Edstrom et al., 2023; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; D'Angelo et al., 2024).

In many countries, the anti-rights challenge to gender equality is part of a broader threat to democracy. Yet many women's movements (including those among them that are committed to feminism) are deeply invested in democracy and are directly influential in achieving transitions from authoritarian or military regimes to democracy (Waylen, 2007; Ezeldeen, 2022). And they contribute to building a robust democratic culture, through both their deliberative practice and their collective action to build more inclusive democracies and hold their governments to account (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012).

Open civic space is vital for feminist movements to thrive and contribute to building an inclusive democratic culture (Fraser, 1990; Gaventa and Barrett, 2012). Closure of civic space is a key feature of democratic decline, with grave

implications for women and other marginalised groups. Scholars have found that shrinking civic space prevents women from participating in building a more democratised citizen–state relationship (Kabeer, 2005; Goetz, 2007). Where restrictions within a country constrain civil society and collective action, feminists increasingly rely on transnational civic space to make their voices heard (Roces and Edwards, 2010; Swarr and Nagar, 2010; Goetz, 2020).

Anti-gender equality politics is often fuelled by the influence of politicised religion. Because women's movements often challenge religious doctrine (e.g. when demanding sexual and reproductive rights or their rights in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance), they directly confront such religious authority. When politically institutionalised religious authorities exercise power through law, courts or government office, they are likely to resist progressive policies or bring in regressive reforms (Charrad, 2001; Htun, 2009; Htun and Weldon, 2018; Khan, 2018). When democratic space is weak, women's ability to challenge religious authority and promote gender equality is impeded because they cannot advocate or engage in collective action safely, public debate is curtailed and recourse to justice free from discrimination is less likely.

Contemporary backlash to gender equality is accompanied by a rise of public religiosity and growing influence in politicised religious authority in many contexts. New influences, such as the Christian right and Evangelical groups, are impacting gender policies in Latin America and Africa, for example, while ongoing Islamist politics is shaping the lives of women in Afghanistan and Iran, and growing Hindu nationalism threatens

the safety of religious minorities in India. As a consequence, women who assumed that a decline in politicised religious authority was necessary to achieve gender equality find its influence has instead increased, while their ability to challenge patriarchal interpretations of religion upheld by such authorities is constrained by limits on democratic inclusion and civic space.

This report asks how women's movement activists in the Global South<sup>1</sup> negotiate gender equality claims during the contemporary rise of religion in politics and decline in democracy, and what insights their experiences offer for contending with backlash today.

Recognising the ongoing reality of public religiosity and a public role for religion in many contexts, scholars such as Anne Phillips share the concerns of most secular feminists that the formal or informal role of religion in the political system enhances threats to gender equality, while holding out the possibility for 'a more nuanced, less oppositional, understanding of religion and secularism' (Phillips and Casanova, 2009: 41). Political actors use the rights of women and sexual minorities to signify a threat to cultural and religious authenticity, while they simultaneously close civic space, increasingly deploy authoritarian tactics and retreat from

global human rights commitments (Hunter and Power, 2019; Roggeband and Krizsan, 2019; Biroli and Caminotti, 2020; Arat, 2022). Nonetheless, as will be seen in the discussion that follows, rights-based advocacy continues to resonate for women engaged in social justice struggles, countering the argument that human rights is a western concept without resonance in the rest of the world (Madhok, 2021). As scholar Neera Chandhoke (2017) notes, visions for the appropriate public role of religion have not disappeared from the 'political imaginations' of feminists, yet without robust democratic inclusion their vision is unlikely to be actualised.

After a discussion of methods (Chapter 2), Chapter 3 situates the studies of women's movements in different countries within global trends in democracy, civic space and politicised religion. Turning to the country studies, Chapter 4 outlines how their mobilisations remain at the forefront of democratisation in many contexts. Chapter 5 identifies how movement actors negotiate their claim-making in countries where religious authority is integrated in governance structures and politics. Chapter 6 focuses on their key strategies for navigating restrictions in civic space and politicised religion. Chapter 7 reflects on the key findings of the research.

---

<sup>1</sup> The 'Global South' is a common term used to categorise countries around the world. Often it is employed to refer to nations that have historically been exploited through colonisation. In using this term, the authors would like to acknowledge current international debates that question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North–Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.



A young Indian Muslim girl holds a sign advocating for democracy protesting the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill during a demonstration in New Delhi, India, in March 2020. Credit: Im\_rohitbhar/Shutterstock.com



## 2 Methods

This report is based on a review of secondary sources and interviews with feminist activists. The first phase involved reviewing literature on rights-based feminist mobilisations outside western and European contexts. EBSCO Information Services, Google Scholar and University of Sussex databases were used to identify research from the global majority world in English and Spanish. These sources provided essential historical background and conceptual insights.

In the second phase of research, key informant interviews were conducted with 11 feminist activists (some in-person and others online) from Argentina, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Sudan and the United Kingdom (UK) (interview participants are listed in Annex 1). The activists interviewed are all leading voices in the women's movements from their countries of origin. Three (from Iran and Sudan) are based outside of their countries of origin

due to prevailing security concerns and risks to their safety because of their work to promote gender equality. All the respondents have close ties with, or play leadership roles in, national or transnational organisations that work in these areas: legal aid; support for victim-survivors of violence; media, research and/or academia; advocacy (at the national, regional and global levels); and the women, peace and security sector. They all advocate for gender equality and use rights-based framings, although some use religious discourse and interpretations to advance their arguments as well.

The interviews explored how activists advance their claims in the current moment – in countries with variations in democratic strength and civic space, and where public religion, including politicised religious authorities and organisations, may be impeding progress on gender equality and driving backlash.

## 3 Global trends: democracy, civic space and politicised religion

This report explores how women's movements advocate for gender equality in light of anti-rights backlash and attacks on democracy and civic space, and how religious politics shape this backlash. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 briefly describe global trends in democracy, closing civic space and politicised religion, and how these relate to the opportunities for and objectives of women's movements. Section 3.3 situates the country cases within these global trends.

### 3.1 Democracy and civic space

Global institutions and studies have painted an alarming contemporary picture of democracy. The V-Dem *Democracy report 2023* finds that 'the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 is down to 1986 levels' (Papada et al., 2023: 6). Debates over how best to measure democratic quality notwithstanding (e.g. Little and Meng, 2023), there is broad agreement that global progress towards democratisation has, at the very least, stalled. In many contexts, instead of deepening democratisation, there are new constraints on civil liberties, a turn to illiberal and exclusionary policy-making, and contestations around the legitimacy of the electoral process (Diamond, 2015; Kandiyoti et al., 2019; Nelson, 2021).

Attacks on civic space are a common aspect of the attacks on democracy. CIVICUS (2022)

found that at least one of three repressive tactics (physical harassment and murder; negative discourses and labelling; and restrictive legislation) is used against civil society in 117 of 197 countries. Where restrictions on inclusive and deliberative spaces are imposed, this limits the 'democratic vitality' (Dryzek, 1996: 483) essential to ensuring marginalised groups, such as women, can participate in building a more democratised relationship with the state (Kabeer, 2005; Goetz, 2007).

Under conditions of political oppression and closing civic space, feminist groups have created an 'oppositional public sphere' (Dryzek, 1996: 142). Here they sustain parallel discursive spaces, thus generating the deliberative spaces that are so essential to democratic culture even under obvious constraints (Fraser, 1990; Gaventa and Barrett, 2012). As activists face restrictions at a domestic level, transnational civic spaces and feminist collaborations, especially among diaspora communities, tend to become more important (Swarr and Nagar, 2010).

### 3.2 Religion in public life and institutions

Religious beliefs remain prominent globally: as of 2010, 84% of the world population was affiliated with a religion (Pew Research Center, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of public religiosity or formal

<sup>2</sup> The percentage of population with no religious affiliation is used as an indicator of the degree of religious belief within a society. The data from Pew Research Center (2012), although somewhat dated, is the most up-to-date data which covers all our cases. No religious affiliation includes atheists, agnostics and those who do not identify with any particular religion.

secularity of constitutions, for the purposes of this research, the key consideration is the extent to which religious beliefs are politicised. In contrast to some expectations, the last few decades have seen a rise, not decline, in the political salience of religion, characterised by some as the 'de-privatisation' of religion (Phillips and Casanova, 2009; Hickerson, 2011) or 'desecularisation' (Karpov, 2010). This is not limited to Muslim-majority contexts, which are typically associated with high levels of religiosity. Notable other examples include the widening public performativity of Hinduism in India and the growth of political Evangelicalism in Latin America. Scholars note with concern related changes, such as the rise in popular acceptance of religious nationalism, reaffirmation of patriarchal gendered norms and the use of anti-western/anti-colonial discourse to justify this turn (Htun and Weldon 2018; Edstrom et al. 2023).

Htun and Weldon (2018) further conceptualise the 'political institutionalisation of religious authority' – 'the extent to which state power grants public status to religious doctrines, symbols, and ideas' and the extent to which state and religious power are fused (Htun and Weldon, 2018: 173). They find that, in contexts where religious authority is more institutionalised politically, reforms in doctrinal matters – often family laws and sexual or reproductive rights,

which invoke deeply held and often highly conservative interpretations of religion – are more difficult (Charrad, 2001; Htun and Weldon, 2018; Khan, 2018).

While secular constitutions are common, they have not become a global norm. Definitions vary, and there are many ambiguous cases, but the most cited figure is that there were 96 countries with secular constitutions as of 2022 (World Population Review, 2023). These secular constitutions vary substantially – some still include special relationships with a specific religion (e.g. acknowledging its historical influence); others include provisions to support religious practice (such as tax exemptions or allowing religion in public schools); while others explicitly place limits on the role of religion.

### 3.3 Country cases

The report focuses Global South countries in which there are active and autonomous women's movements and where diversity of cases was established through the degree and type of public religious beliefs; the secularity of the constitution; the extent to which religious power is politically institutionalised; and varieties of historical experiences and contemporary trends regarding democratic and civic freedoms. The cases are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** Summary of country cases

Country	Political regime (V-Dem Institute, 2024) <sup>3</sup>	Civic space (CIVICUS, 2022) <sup>4</sup>	Percentage of population with no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2012)
<b>Argentina</b>	Electoral democracy	Narrowed	12.2%
<b>Bangladesh</b>	Electoral autocracy	Closed	<0.1%
<b>India</b>	Electoral autocracy	Repressed	<0.1%
<b>Iran</b>	Closed autocracy	Closed	0.1%
<b>Malaysia</b>	Electoral democracy	Obstructed	0.7%
<b>Mexico</b>	Electoral democracy	Repressed	4.7%
<b>Pakistan</b>	Electoral autocracy	Repressed	<0.1%
<b>Sudan</b>	Closed autocracy	Repressed	1%

Some of the cases are established democracies, either featuring marginal backsliding (Argentina and Mexico) or substantial backsliding, arguably into autocratic regimes (India). Others are regimes that hold elections but have struggled to see progress deepening the quality of democracy (Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia). Finally, others are regimes that remain closed autocracies, having resisted democratisation pressures (Iran and Sudan). Malaysia is the only case that has seen some improvement in the quality of liberal democracy over the last decade (V-Dem Institute, 2024).

None of the cases are classed by CIVICUS as having fully open civic spaces, with Bangladesh and Iran categorised as 'closed' civic spaces – the least open. In Iran this severe closure of civic space has severely repressed the women's movement, with key senior figures in jail and

student protesters killed during the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) protests which brought tens of thousands onto the streets in protest across the country, as many arrested, and hundreds killed (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2024). The Indian Government has also targeted civic activism, silencing media and advocacy organisations seeking to protect minority Muslim rights. International non-governmental organisations and foreign-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have restricted ability to operate (with CIVICUS classing its civic space as declining from 'obstructed' to 'repressed'), impacting support for women's rights advocacy (ICJ, 2020). Argentina has also seen recent restrictions, with President Javier Milei displaying a willing disregard for civil liberties in pursuit of 'economic shock therapy', including legislation targeting protesters (Sharp and Milesi, 2024).

3 V-Dem's 'Regimes in the world' dataset categorises regimes as closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, electoral democracies or liberal democracies. Electoral autocracies hold some elections, but they are not meaningful, free and fair. Electoral democracies have meaningful, free and fair elections, but lack the individual and minority rights protections that characterise liberal democracies.

4 CIVICUS classes civic spaces on a scale (from most to least open) of: open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed.

In all the country case studies, a large majority of citizens hold religious beliefs. In most of the countries, religious affiliation is near universal. Mexico and Argentina are the only countries with notable populations with no religious affiliation and even there they remain a substantial minority. The cases also demonstrate a range of institutionalised religious bodies (such as the Shariah courts in Pakistan, Sudan, Iran and Malaysia and the Fatwa Council in Malaysia). For some, religious organisations and parties have substantial impact on the wider political culture. This includes India's

ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ideology of Hindutva, influenced by the nationalist organisation the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Islamist political parties and organisations such as the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the growing Evangelical Christian organisations in Argentina and Mexico. The growing politicisation of religion can also influence declines in civic space. For example, in South Asia, avowedly secular activists have been threatened and killed by extremists for holding 'atheist' views (Chaudhury, 2020; Kakar, 2021).



Women Life Freedom activist group gathered outside the UN headquarters to remember the one year anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini, New York City, USA, 2023. Credit: Steve Sanchez Photos/Shutterstock.com



## 4 Women's movements, civic space and demands for democracy

Feminist movements have often been at the forefront of democratic movements in many contexts. In other contexts, the demand for democratic reforms is often, but not always, at the forefront of women's claims. This chapter outlines how women's movements push for democratisation in closed autocracies (Iran and Sudan; see Sections 4.1 and 4.2) and electoral democracies with weak legitimacy (Pakistan; see Section 4.3). In all three countries, civic space is closed or repressed, and religious authority is integrated in governance structures.

Iranian women have been at the frontlines of multiple waves of civil society protests against a theocratic state in which the legal system is based on religious law and the clergy holds political power, demanding more rights for women, civil liberties and inclusive democracy. Their movement survives despite repressed civic space and with laws, policies and institutions in place that are shaped by Islamic doctrine. This context has weakened the policy impact of those voices calling for democratic reform. At the same time, it has pushed some feminists to create their own parallel deliberative spaces in anticipation of a democratic future and has clarified their calls for a secular democracy.

In Sudan, a broad-based coalition of women's civil society groups successfully mobilised to bring down a repressive and Islamist regime to initiate a democratic transition. Activists identify the failures of the democratic transition, linked to the new government's inability to deliver on reforms and bring stability to the country. These

include no change in the political settlement, the persistent exclusion of women from meaningful political participation, and the political co-optation of women's groups. The Sudanese case illustrates how feminists understand their activism as a political project to undo both gender inequality and the discrimination brought by religious laws. Backlash in the form of stalled gender reforms and growing sexual violence, exclusion from meaningful political participation and renewed violent political conflict was the price of the failed democratic project.

Pakistan is not an official theocracy nor is it in a state of widespread conflict. However, the absence of meaningful democracy has limited progress towards the goals set by its women's movement in the 1980s, which resisted gender discrimination from state-led Islamisation policies during a military regime (1977–1988) and demanded a return to democracy. Like women's rights activists in Iran and Sudan, they challenged politicised religious authority and pursued broader social justice goals based on equality of citizenry. But democratic institutions remain weak and political support for the legacy of Islamisation continues along with a rise in public religiosity. Safe deliberative spaces, free from the threat of the religious right and state surveillance, are severely curtailed, limiting women's collective action and public debate about inclusive democratic reforms.

The remainder of this chapter discusses these cases in more detail.

## 4.1 Iran

Iran has been a theocratic state with an elected civilian government, overseen by a council of clerics, since the 1979 revolution. The clerics hold unaccountable political power, rejecting both democratic principles and equality between citizens – men and women, and Muslims and non-Muslims. This structure led to a pluralistic women's movement across the 'secular-religious divide', and resistance from women and other social groups who seek democratisation (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010: 886). Women's deep engagement with public and political life, including many who challenged the state's narrow interpretation of women's rights in Islam, along with those who were secular advocates for gender equality, has been credited with starting the movement for democratic and social reform in Iran (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010).

The women's movement has been distinctly focused on rights-based advocacy against discriminatory Shariah laws. Their focus on legal reforms and civil and political rights in fact positions these activists as radical with respect to the theocratic regime (Tohidi, 2016). Post-1979, women's groups developed distinct ways to align themselves and/or confront powerful elites to advocate for reforms in personal laws, greater personal freedoms (e.g. against forced veiling), and challenge the Islamic Republic. Contemporary secular feminism derives from the state's Islamic structure and has been the focus for a wide coalition of women across the ideological spectrum (Tajali, interview).

The struggle for democratic and institutional reform achieved only intermittent political openings. A reformist government was elected (1997–2005), during which civic space opened up and debates over secularism and social reforms

began to gain currency. In 2008, under President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad (2005–2013), women organised one of the largest public protests since 1979, demanding constitutional reforms to end discrimination against women. Upon this, the government shut down women's NGOs, arresting and harassing activists, and closing media outlets (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). In the name of national security, it harshly suppressed civic space and collective action, such as the One Million Signatures campaign, a grassroots effort to push the government to eliminate discriminatory laws (Human Rights Watch, 2008), and the Green Movement protests, which involved women, students and youth who challenged the re-election of Ahmadinejad (Akbar, 2021).

US-based Iranian scholar and academic Mona Tajali explains how the politicised nature of the women's movement over decades led to its 'securitisation', which enhanced the risks for secular feminists in particular. It pushed many underground or abroad, allowing for the advancement of more moderate women who were willing to work within the framework of the state (Tajali, interview). The securitisation led to 'a clear disconnect between these religious groups and those who have been facing crackdowns for the past decades', says Tajali. Collaboration between secular feminists and religious women to advance reforms on specific issues, such as blocking a 2006 bill to make polygamy easier (Hoodfar, 2022), gave way 'to clear divisions' with pro-theocracy women with access to power who benefit 'from the social capital and status' it confers (Tajali, interview).

The women's movement supported the new 'Hope Government' of Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021), who promised to establish a ministry for women's affairs and permit women greater role in public and political life (Parsa, 2021).

The human rights lawyer Shahindokht Molaverdi was appointed to his cabinet. An advocate for Iran to join the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), she was adept at engaging with the state (Tajali, interview). She strategically used the discourse of 'gender justice', an approach 'to women's right to dignity, safety, and full participation in society' while recognising social and cultural norms, rather than the discourse of gender equality deployed by secular feminists (Tajali, 2023: 142). Soon, hard-line conservatives forced her resignation 'just because she had a feminist bone in her' (Tajali, interview). She went to prison for anti-regime propaganda, undermining national security and promoting prostitution and sexual deviancy (Mehrabi, 2020).

### Clarifying the demand for secular democracy

The Woman, Life, Freedom protests against the forced veiling of women, which began in September 2022 following the killing of Mahsa Jina Amini in custody, 'was a watershed moment' which 'completely clarified that working from within the theocratic state will not lead to any radical change', explains Tajali. Hoodfar and Tajali (2023) argue the protests are the result of widespread public disaffection with earlier attempts at reform in Iran, bringing together wide public support to demand 'substantial political and social change that is markedly secular'. Thus, the 'closure of the state' to women's voices is directly linked with a deepened secularism in the movement today, as well as in large sections of the public (Tajali, interview). A wide coalition of civil society groups called for a secular state, without religion informing laws and policies, and the end of discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities (Hoodfar and Tajali, 2023).

The government only hardened its stance in response to the threat posed by the women's movement to their grip on power. The recent declaration that mandatory veiling (hijab) laws will be enforced even more strictly, with greater presence of morality police, indicates that the state knows 'that, in the eyes of many, it's a lost battle' (Tajali, interview). More women are refusing to veil, while the government has not accounted for its clear violations of human rights in its repression of the protests (Human Rights Council, 2024).

Many feminists were disabused of the idea that new elections may bring back more women into political office to effect gradual reforms. It became clear that the state was unwilling to negotiate and that women need to focus on a transition to democracy instead. 'They decided to ensure that the women's rights protests yielded tangible results in practice because it was such a progressive, liberatory protest' (Tajali, interview).

The same group that made a 2009 charter for women's rights crafted the Iran Women's Bill of Rights, with its first draft published in 2023, together with activists from the diaspora who had been forced to flee the country after the 2009 crackdown. Although it was organised largely from the diaspora, the authors obtained input of women inside Iran, including some in prison. Its demands include a representative assembly to draft a new constitution, a secular democratic state and a comprehensive list of women's human rights. The Bill of Rights is conceived as part of a new constitution based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related conventions, and calls for women's equal representation at all decision-making levels, and social and environmental justice to build a pluralist secular democracy (Feminist Collective, 2023).



Feminists understand democratic reforms will take time because democratic institutions have deliberately been weakened. Thus, many are working on 'building parallel systems' in politics, academic spaces and women's groups, using virtual space to have important discussions and debates. 'They're doing the homework for that eventual democratic transition', explains Tajali. As Iranian feminist scholars have argued before, without 'democratic and accountable state-society structures', a religious state will rely on the repression of dissent using religious ideology and gender reforms will remain impossible (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010: 901).

## 4.2 Sudan

The Sudanese 2019 uprising saw Omar al-Bashir removed from power and the end of the Islamist regime in power for over 30 years. Global media published iconic photographs of young women leading demonstration on the streets, symbolic of the groundswell of popular protest (SIHA Network, 2021). The 2019 revolution was an outcome of the 'repression and alienation' women experienced under political Islam, 'which put enormous pressure on the women's movements to resist ... and their attempt to find their place and capacity to influence society', according to Hala Alkarib, Sudanese feminist activist and regional director of Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA).

The revolution signified women's implicit understanding that democratic reforms were imperative to achieving their rights. It mobilised a broad coalition of women, from urban to grassroots activists (SIHA Network, 2021). Alkarib notes it was grassroots women's groups, such as street vendor associations and others from conflict-affected areas, that maintained a coherent vision of their demands for political, economic

and social protection. 'They were the ones most exposed to the brutality of the legal system' under the previous regime (Alkarib, interview). Grassroots groups were joined by young women from urban areas who had been exposed to militant Islam and related violence (SIHA Network, 2021). Feminist mobilisation was instrumental to coordinating the protests and pushing for gender equality reforms, as a new generation of activists had come of age who were independent from 'patriarchal political parties' (Alkarib, interview), in contrast to the historical women's movement whose leading organisations had strong political affiliations (Ezeldeen, 2022; Thompson and Kostainen, 2023).

## Excluding women from meaningful political participation

Sudan's political elite became one driver of the backlash against the opening offered by the 2019 revolution. Transition government leadership soon attempted to co-opt the women's movement and restore the historical pattern of ensuring it was not autonomous from political parties. The Sudanese Women in Civic and Political Groups (MANSAM), an independent coalition of activists formed in 2018, played a key role in mobilising support for the revolution and ensuring women's voices were heard during the transition. It has been described as a 'last attempt' to bring together activists from a wide range of backgrounds to counter the exploitation of women members of political parties (Abbas, 2023a). The Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a coalition of different political organisations, worked with MANSAM to bring together all the women's groups that mobilised during the revolution.

MANSAM signed onto the FFC declaration to support the democratic transition. It became a civil society component in this broader coalition

but without the political influence, explains Reem Abbas, who was a former member of the coordination committee. This prevented the movement from growing independently from political actors (Alkarib, interview). Women's groups that were members of MANSAM but politically affiliated began to leave, amid growing concerns that individual women were using it to advance their personal political goals (Abbas, 2023a). A form of backlash '*before* women had the opportunity to claim rights as a social group' came from among political elites who participated in the revolution yet still expressed patriarchal attitudes and sidelined women's participation in politics (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar, 2024: 495).

The pattern of excluding women from meaningful participation in the transition was inevitable because there was no fundamental change in what Abbas terms 'the militarised political marketplace', which ensures that traditional leaders or armed men would always retain control. Leaders of the transition did not use the opportunity to change the political settlement, failing to push back against military encroachment into all sectors or challenge the authority of tribal leaders (Abbas, interview).

Women pressed on with their demands, such as that Sudan should sign CEDAW (SIHA Network, 2021). The transition government passed some reforms to limit extreme religious interpretations and discriminatory laws against women, which were not well implemented. The government was unable to resist the return of the military and it lacked sufficient international support. It could not control violence against women, nor their persecution for minor crimes (Alkarib, interview).

Civic space during the transition remained constrained and activists began to worry about surveillance and getting arrested. The grassroots women's groups who were on the frontline of

advocating for democracy and their rights were targeted by the FFC because they refused to align themselves with any political organisations (Alkarib, interview). The political coalitions used the civil society movement, and the women's groups within it, 'to add into their political capital' (Alkarib, interview). MANSAM was unable to represent the diverse interests of Sudanese women (SIHA Network, 2021). FFC viewed MANSAM as 'the women's side of the house' and discouraged its members from engaging in protests and other actions to demand accountability from the new government on its stated commitments to women's rights. The new government failed to ratify CEDAW and other international instruments, stop the persecution of women for selling alcohol and end punishments such as stoning to death, which were introduced by the previous Islamist regime. The government's failures began with its inaction on women's issues but indicated that 'the writing was on the wall' in terms of the violence that was to come (Alkarib, interview).

MANSAM brought together women who were affiliated with political parties (wings or women's groups within parties), women-led civil society organisations and civic groups, such as professional organisations, in the largest women's coalition in Sudan. It focused on overall legal reform, achieving success with the removal of the law on dress code, and working on peace talks as a priority (Abbas, interview). However, the influence of political parties undermined agreement on a minimum common platform (Abbas, 2023a). MANSAM was criticised for being used 'as a mobilising machinery for the FFC in preparations for the next stage' of political transition (Alkarib, interview).

Younger feminists and grassroots women who had come out for the revolution grew dissatisfied (Abbas, 2023a). They organised the Sudan Women Protest Platform to maintain focus on an

agenda of family law reform, access to resources and employment, sexual and gender-based violence, and legal and political system reform. FFC indicated these protests were an unnecessary disruption (Alkarib, interview).

A new military regime took power in a 2021 coup and targeted women protesters who participated in the revolution. The backlash against women

gained pace and cases of sexual violence increased dramatically (ISHR, 2022). The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) entered into conflict with the Sudanese army in 2023, recalling the earlier statement of RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo that 'anyone that doesn't fight doesn't have an opinion' (Abbas, 2023b). As Alkarib says, 'I think the backlash has been so horrific, the country's failure to attain democracy has impacted everything'.



Alaa Saleh, clad in white, leads chants during a protest in resistance against authoritarianism and the fight for democracy in Khartoum, Sudan, 2019. The image was heavily shared on social media. Credit: Lana Haroun | X.

### 4.3 Pakistan

Pakistan has become increasingly Islamised since its creation as a homeland for Muslims in 1947, with negative consequences for the rights and freedoms of religious minorities and women (Saeed, 2007; Khan, 2018; Nelson, 2021). Islam is the state religion and the constitution requires all laws to be in consonance with Shariah. A Council of Islamic Ideology advises the government to ensure law and policy conforms to Islam. Parallel Shariah courts exist to dispense justice on crimes pertaining to adultery, theft and intoxication covered by Shariah laws. The women's movement gained momentum against state-run Islamisation measures implemented under military rule (1977–1988). Its leading voice at the national level, the Women's Action Forum, called for a secular democratic state in its 1991 charter (Khan, 2018).

The struggle for democracy, spearheaded by political parties with mass membership, is a stark contrast to the top-down politics of Islamisation in Pakistan (Khan, 2018; Mufti et al., 2020). Democratic institutions are weak, while the strongest political stakeholder remains the military, meaning the country is characterised as a hybrid democracy (Adeney, 2017). Pakistani society has become more demonstratively religious after Islamisation. The public role of religion is now more broadly accepted as a norm, with militant religious organisations often enforcing their interpretation of doctrine outside of established law (Basit, 2020; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2023). Progressive political parties no longer use the term 'secular' in policy documents or public statements, for fear of being accused of the crime of blasphemy. The most popular political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, promised to build a devout society while deploying a binary framing of feminists as western, atheist and immoral and

increasing curbs on civic space and media freedoms (Talbot, 2022).

Pakistan has a long history of cultivating forces of the religious right, including the Taliban, other militant groups and more mainstream religious political parties (Khan, 2018). The legacy of Islamisation means that elected legislators have been reluctant to challenge discriminatory religious laws and policies (Nelson, 2021). The women's movement, led by a group called Women's Action Forum, spearheaded opposition to Islamisation throughout the 1980s and demanded both gender equality and democratic reforms (Khan, 2018). Working together with elected representatives, they achieved the first legislative gender quota in 2002, bringing a wave of legal reforms to address sexual violence, domestic violence, honour killings and other crimes, but they were unable to remove existing Shariah laws nor those against blasphemy (Khan and Naqvi, 2018).

The new feminist mobilisation, known as Aurat March, brings together a wide group of women representing cross-class and religious denominations, and inclusive of diverse gender identities. Partly inspired by the global #MeToo movement, its annual events since 2018 are celebrated in a widening number of urban centres on International Women's Day. The Aurat Marchers now confront growing numbers of hostile counter-marchers, requiring police protection from religious political party activists who hurl stones at them and allege they are uttering blasphemous slogans (Kamal, 2022).

Unlike the generation of activists represented by Women's Action Forum, the Aurat March is reluctant to directly challenge discriminatory religious laws, even those affecting the Christian community, for fear of offending the sentiments

of a vulnerable religious minority. Sara Malkani helped organise the first Aurat March and collaborates frequently with its Karachi-based collective. She is concerned that side-stepping some of the wider issues in Pakistani law and society allows the politicised religious lobby to wield a strong influence on entrenched doctrinal laws that remains highly exclusionary of religious minorities and resistant to progressive interpretation (Khan, 2018; Nelson, 2021). Malkani believes that Aurat March activists may not question bodies such as the Federal Shariat Court and the Council of Islamic Ideology because 'a lot of people view it as a wall', and an unwinnable battle. Instead, activists search for 'creative ways, interesting ways' to advance their claims within existing institutions and non-secular legal frameworks, in effect to 'by-pass' the wall.

Still, the distinct dangers of querying the state-led interpretation of religion include vigilante killings by mobs, militant organisations, arrests by law-enforcement agencies and more (Ispahani, 2017; Ul Mustafa, 2016). Treading carefully without directly challenging doctrine still does little to lower the risk for activists in civic space in the contemporary environment of anti-feminist backlash and religious fervour, extremist organisations, and religio-political parties.

Even as young feminists continue to make rights-based claims, Malkani wonders at what point their demands will become more political and confront the fact that Pakistan does not have a secular constitution and 'that we have a religious lobby and a conservative lobby that has claimed the entire space to interpret what Islam requires'.

As she put it, 'there's no meaningful confrontation with that problem'. The critical challenge is the closure of public debate around these questions, which has affected how feminists conceptualise the way forward. There are no longer safe deliberative spaces in which to hold meaningful conversations about Islamisation. Malkani believes that only 'if we were to have democracy in a more meaningful sense' would it be possible to find out where the people of Pakistan stand – whether they are supportive of 'secular framings' or religion 'trumps our demands for sexual equality, sexual freedom and so on'. This discussion will only be possible without fear of repercussion and in a climate of informed debate.

#### 4.4 Summary

This chapter has shown how feminist mobilisations significantly contribute to democratisation processes in three contexts where civic space is constrained and democratic institutions are weak or not inclusive of women. In Iran, women have started to create parallel deliberative spaces and plan for a democratic transition with support from diaspora activists. In Sudan, despite women's leadership role in pushing for a democratic transition in 2019, women's voices were largely sidelined and the new civil war has derailed progress. Pakistan's weak democracy and constrained civic space has also weakened feminists' unified call for democratic reforms, despite the women's movement's previous history of challenging military rule. In all three countries, politicised religious influence has constrained women's voices in civic space and not aligned with democratic reforms.

## 5 Religious politics and backlash

This chapter takes a closer look at how politically consequential religious organisations, with influence over policies, discourse and civic space, are linked to contemporary backlash to gender equality. It explores how this impacts women's gender equality claim-making in the countries discussed in this report. Findings from a wide and religiously diverse set of contexts underscore how religious politics is central to contemporary backlash against gender equality. The implications of this for women's rights strategising will be explored in Chapter 6.

Political Islam refers to the movements, institutions and ideas that bring Islamic beliefs and actors into the political sphere. This can include their entry into formal political life through electoral politics, or attempts to influence politics through armed or radical militant groups, and transnational movements (Brown, 2022). Political Islam has often impeded progressive policy reforms regarding gender. In Sudan, the legacy of Bashir's imposition of Islamist ideology and religious laws was used to stifle reforms even after the brief democratic transition begun in 2019. This legacy impeded successful gender equality reforms and their implementation during the brief, failed transition to democracy. Political Islam has grown in influence over the past 40 years in Malaysia, accompanied by a growing conservatism among the public. In Bangladesh, the influence of religious political parties and organisations on public and political life is growing, making it more difficult than ever to engage in a discussion related to women's rights and doctrinal matters.

In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism is understood by social justice advocates as anti-democratic and violative of the rights of

women and religious minorities. The current Hindu nationalist government has co-opted secular claims to deepen its targeting of religious minorities. The threat to equal citizenship rights posed by the government's ongoing discriminatory practices against religious minorities and vulnerable groups is viewed by its critics as a threat to Indian democracy and contrary to the goals of gender equality.

A key trend in public religiosity across Latin America has been 'religious switching', as adherence to the Catholic Church declines (although it remains the largest religious group) but the popularity of Evangelical Protestantism grows – having increased from 3.5% of the population in 1995 to almost 20% today (Zilla, 2018; The Economist, 2022). New religious organisations representing Evangelical Christianity are impacting discourse and policies on gender issues in both Mexico and Argentina. In both Argentina and Mexico, the rise in political influence of Evangelical Christianity and associated ultra-conservative advocacy groups has been a core component of the backlash to feminism. In both contexts, these groups have proved more aggressive in their anti-gender advocacy than the contemporary Catholic Church.

Islamic, Hindu and Christian fundamentalisms have extensive transnational reach, often reinforcing identity politics in domestic contexts. Using threats to religious freedom and discrimination against their faith as mobilising rhetoric, these actors have been shown to challenge or undermine women's equal rights.



## 5.1 Political Islam: Sudan, Malaysia and Bangladesh

The growth of the Salafi movement in Sudan influenced anti-secular and progressively more extreme positions within the Islamic military regime (1993–2019). These Salafist conservative groups engage in contestations on family law and female genital mutilation/cutting. They defend Shariah law and condemn women's rights activism as neocolonial and an attempt to westernise Muslims (Nagar and Tønnessen, 2017: 151). The regime's response to public support for secularism was repressive. During 2002 and 2003, supporters of political Islam, which included representatives of the ruling National Congress Party and official religious authorities, called for advocates of equal citizenship irrespective of race, faith or region to be excommunicated (i.e. outlawed from the faith or accused of apostasy). Those behind the campaign of intimidation were key figures of the National Congress Party, and spokespersons of the official religious establishment (Baldo, 2017: 13). With the secession of South Sudan in 2011, the regime only amplified its Islamist and anti-secular rhetoric.

Women's rights activists have consistently faced a challenge of being sidelined as 'western', sometimes tactically having to downplay their secular framings, particularly involving reform to personal or doctrinal laws. However, even reformist women who participated in government review processes and suggested minimum reforms, such as raising the minimum age at marriage to 18 and ensuring women's consent to marriage, also had limited success (Nagar and Tønnessen, 2017).

Abbas observes that, during the transition, there was some political distancing against the Sudan Council of Islamic Scholars due to its affiliation

with Bashir's regime, yet the government did not take advantage of the political opening to effect much-needed reforms: 'there were concerns that we cannot challenge this too fast' (Abbas, interview). Activists like Abbas wanted to push for reforms quickly, aware that after elections a more conservative government may potentially assume power.

The transition government, emboldened by the support of women activists and civil society protesters, finally repealed the family law that prevented women from travelling with their children without their fathers' consent, banned female genital mutilation, and promised a gender quota for the legislative assembly and to end discriminatory laws (Thompson and Kostianen, 2023). There is some debate about whether the transitional government attempted to 'de-Islamicise' the public sphere too quickly (Gikandi, 2021). The legacy of politically institutionalised religious authority impeded the implementation of these gender equality reforms during the brief, failed transition to democracy in Sudan.

The effect of Bashir's Islamist state did not end with the transition government. The widespread sexual violence, particularly during Sudan's protracted history of violent conflicts, and Shariah punishments for women accused of sexual transgressions, were key issues that the women's movement sought to address.

Instead, sexual violence and violence against women worsened. Alkarib says this indicates that, even while the state built by the Islamists 'disintegrated', the new government was still intent upon 'striking some balance'. As a result, there were still numerous cases of women being sentenced to death by stoning and of women being arrested for the illegal sale of alcohol to Muslim men.

With the transition government unable to successfully strike the balance between reform and continuity, women became an easy target of the state, and its functionaries became increasingly uncomfortable with feminist demands (Alkarib, interview). The transition government was driven less by a commitment to the gender agenda of women who had brought down the Bashir government and more by a desire to appease the international community through designing plans and programmes – without consultation with these same women, and stalling on much-needed legal reforms.

For example, the 1991 Personal Status Law for Muslims is widely understood to be based on Shariah, which makes it extremely challenging to reform, despite ongoing efforts by women, both within and outside the religious framework. The law enshrines male guardianship of the family and with it stipulates that a wife *must* obey her husband. Women have limited rights in inheritance, divorce, marriage and guardianship (Nagar and Tønnessen, 2017). They are unable to procure documentation for their children nor travel with them without a permit from their fathers. The transition government failed to comprehensively reform laws under pressure from Islamist groups who charged progressive legal reform as un-Islamic. Where they did allow reform, such as permitting women to obtain documents for their children, these were weakly implemented (Abbas, interview).

Political Islam and growing adherence to conservative interpretations of Islam are both increasing in Malaysia. While there has been a degree of social change, in which many women across the country are expressing their claim to rights, this is often within a patriarchal framework (Sisters in Islam, 2022). Rozana Isa, Executive Director of leading feminist organisation Sisters

in Islam (SIS), adds that, alongside women taking leadership positions in the world of work, there is a simultaneous rising social conservatism. This ensures women remain 'mindful about the role that they have to play to be a little bit more subservient at home to their husbands' and there remains an understanding that 'men are the providers and the protectors, so they make the decisions and women contribute to the household' (Isa, interview).

Isa says that, over the past 15 years, some political parties and groups have wanted to position Malaysia as an Islamic state, using the provision of Islam as the state religion to justify their call, even though there are also provisions to guarantee freedom of religion and respect for religious plurality in the constitution. Shariah courts, although with limited jurisdiction, compete with civil courts where cases bring out overlapping or conflicting jurisdictions. The courts are currently engaged in multiple cases 'trying to delineate the kind of laws that the state can actually enact when it comes to religious matters' (Isa, interview). To date unsuccessful, a strong Islamist legal fraternity would like to see enhanced punishments for crimes under Shariah. Isa notes that the Islamist movement is infused with a Malay and Muslim ethno-nationalism. She explains, 'the success or the superiority of the Malay race is very much tied up to the supremacy of Islam as a religion'. The failure to defend one is deemed a failure to defend the other, thus polarising the debate.

SIS can no longer work with government ministries, for example the Ministry of Women, due to Islamists' penetration of the civil service. Instead, they use the name of Musawah, a global feminist NGO, to gain access. Islamists have become 'gatekeepers in certain sectors' such that many bureaucrats no longer want to be seen with members of SIS. As a result, SIS limit outreach



to legal services to women and publishing resources to promote women's human rights (Isa, interview).

In Bangladesh, during the recent Awami League Government (2009–2024), led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, it became more difficult than ever to engage in a discussion related to women's rights and religion. Sara Hossain, who is a lawyer and honorary executive director of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Service Trust, explains that 'the political framework has shifted', with feminists losing out. First, the Jamaat-i-Islami, a party with ties to the global Muslim Brotherhood, entered into coalition with the previous Bangladesh Nationalist Party government. The next government, led by the Awami League, nurtured support from groups such as Hifazat-ul-Islam (a madrassa-based group demanding the enactment of a blasphemy law), although the Jamaat-i-Islami was not allowed to contest elections (Hossain and Jamil, 2022; Pitman, 2024). Each of these two leading parties were keen to retain support from these religio-political groups opposed to expanding gender equality policies.

Progress towards reforms of personal laws, such as matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance that derive from doctrinal interpretation, remains stalled because the voices of Muslim conservative leaders have gained influence within the judiciary and political life of the country. Family law is in the purview of secular courts, but with provisions based on and applicable to religious communities (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2022). The Supreme Court, reluctant to decide if the 1961 Muslim Family Laws Ordinances need reviewing, as feminist groups suggest, has deferred the decision to parliament, while the feminist organisation Mahila Parishad's submission to the Law Ministry to bring in a uniform family code has been pending since the 1990s.

Hossain says even though the religious right does not enjoy direct power, they wield sufficient political influence to 'inform the agenda' or 'hold back the articulation of demands or a response to demands'. Thus, it is unlikely that feminists will seek to advance on Muslim, or even Hindu, personal law reforms, 'because there's just a sense that the ground has shifted a bit underneath' (Hossain, interview). Hossain says the Jamaat-i-Islami now has a well-trained expert cadre of lawyers, too, who creatively use rights-based argumentation in the courts to advance their agenda.

This development points to the enduring resilience of secular courts. Hossain argues that, in the current environment, a focus on procedural reforms to secular laws, such as the Child Marriage Act, is more realistic. The political developments that would allow 'some incredibly secular socialist republic' were not imminent during the Awami League Government. Hossain observes that women with social capital sometimes have more space to manoeuvre than organisations and other less protected individuals, who were careful not to put their 'head above the parapet too much'. As a consequence, Bangladeshi feminist groups compromised on key issues, such as reforms to family law, to mute their confrontation with the government and ensure their organisations could remain functional. Instead, they focused on smaller, strategic procedural reforms to laws and policies that were more achievable and less politically contentious.

The challenges to progress on gender equality, however, do not come only from Islamist forces. The Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is accused of providing significant support to Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's autocratic government – undermining the democratic aspirations of people throughout

South Asia (Azim et al., 2024). This has rendered Hindus in Bangladesh, as a religious minority group, vulnerable to communalist violence in a context of rising religious and anti-government sentiments (Banerji, 2021). Activists working for Hindu personal law reform, which lags behind the limited progress made in Muslim personal laws (Karmakar, 2023), have been pressured by the Hindutva-affiliated community gatekeepers and the Awami League Government into backing off from their advocacy (Hossain, interview).

In a stunning reversal of fortune, the Awami League Government was pushed out of power after a student-led uprising in July/August 2024. Mohammed Younus, founder of the Grameen Bank and persecuted by his predecessor, was invited by the military authorities to lead the interim government (Ahmed, 2024).

## 5.2 Hindu nationalism: India

Since India's independence from British colonialist rule in 1947, public debates around whether the state should offer special protections to religious minorities, and how to protect the rights of women, have particularly challenged the relationship between religion and politics (Z. Hasan, 2010). Debates over women's rights issues were framed by these tensions, since the personal status laws of religious communities are drawn from the collective rights protected by the secular constitution (Menon, 2014: 480).

The All-India Women's Congress demanded a uniform civil code (UCC) even prior to independence, and, indeed, the new constitution stated in its principles of policy a commitment to do so. As Nivedita Menon (2014) explains, the tensions between the constitutional rights and protections offered by the state to individuals and those for religious communities posed distinct

dilemmas for feminists. While the demand for a UCC was in consonance with the constitutional objective to move towards uniformity, over time the term itself became juxtaposed in the public imagination with minority rights (Z. Hasan, 2010).

In 1985, the Indian Supreme Court delivered a favourable judgment on the Shah Bano case, in which Muslim woman Shah Bano Begum demanded maintenance from her ex-husband under the criminal procedure code. It called for a UCC to give women of all faiths the same rights. However, the government responded to concerns of male Muslim leaders and instead enacted a new law specifically denying Muslim women access to civil law in marriage and divorce. Together with its handling of the dispute over the Ayodhya religious site, the government became viewed as siding with Muslim and Hindu religious leaders, respectively, thereby seriously undermining the state's secularism (Z. Hasan, 2010). Secularism, too, became embedded in a new set of binaries, pitting uniformity/secularism/modernisation against minority rights/religious laws/tradition (Sunder Rajan, 2003).

By the 1990s, women had achieved consensus on three areas related to the original call for a UCC. These were: reform personal laws of all religious communities; push for new laws in areas not already covered by secular or religious laws (e.g. domestic violence); and work towards establishing a 'gender just' rather than 'uniform' framework of rights for all citizens (Menon, 2014: 483). In effect, the women's movement agreed on the need to reform personal laws while also advocating for gender-just laws (Z. Hasan, 2010).

The backlash to women's rights is complicated by the government's strategy to use secular policy initiatives to divide the Muslim community. First, Hindutva, the promotion of Hindu majoritarianism

nationalism by the ruling BJP government, disproportionately impacts religious minority communities. 'From citizens, they are reduced to just members of their community. And on the other side is the complete takeover of the Hindutva ideology', says Navsharan Singh, a researcher and women's and human rights practitioner in New Delhi. Activists accuse Prime Minister Modi himself of promoting communalism due to his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots, in which an estimated 1,000 people were killed while he was Chief Minister of the state (Genocide Watch, 2023).

Next, although Modi is a communalist, 'who has blood on his hands ... [he] has become now [seen as] the defender of women's rights, Muslim women's rights', says Singh. He did this by undercutting the secular civil society support for religious minorities and bringing in the UCC. By promising to save Muslim women from discriminatory cultural and religious practices, the government is perceived to be 'faking concern' for Muslim women, without building consensus from within the community itself and undermining their constitutional protections to freedom of religion and culture (Sarkar, 2023).

This co-opting of 'secularism', Singh notes, only partially worked through increased support for Modi among Muslim women. She says 'there is now a heightened consciousness' among the public that has had a restraining effect. For example, in 2022, when Hindutva actors targeted Muslim women by setting up 'mock-auctions' online, posting individuals' names and photos, they turned to the courts (Sen and Jha, 2024). Deploying online and in-person slurs, threats and attacks, the othering of Muslim women condoned and fuelled by BJP extremists continues (S. Ahmed, 2023).

India is now grappling with what Chandhoke (2017: 22) terms a 'combination of formidable religious and overwhelming political power'. The current threat to freedom of conscience and expression provides the majoritarian religious group the opportunity to use coercive state power to legitimise its discriminatory practices against minority religious groups. The threat to equal citizenship rights undermines the very basis of democracy (ibid., 2017).

### 5.3 Evangelical Christianity: Argentina and Mexico

In Argentina, new President Javier Milei's attacks on civil liberties have come together with a backlash against feminism. Milei has described feminism as the 'enemy', talked about 'the murderous agenda of abortion' and closed the Ministry for Women, Gender and Diversity (Atlas of Wars, 2023; DW News, 2024; Peker, 2024). Part of this backlash against feminism has been linked to the growing influence of Evangelical groups and their connections with ultra-conservative groups, a trend also seen elsewhere in Latin America (Morán Faúndes, 2018; Sotelo and Arocena, 2021). Influenced by the Evangelical movement in the United States, Evangelicals in Argentina tend to be more conservative than Catholics on social issues and have opposed various feminist agendas (Zilla 2018; Ramirez, 2020). Sotelo and Arocena (2021: 179) describe the 'great objective' of Evangelicals in the Latin American political arena as being:

to weaken the new rights agenda towards the LGBT movements, legal abortion, equal marriage, to go against the so-called 'gender ideology' and to propose a supposed law of God over legal law.

The feminist activists interviewed suspect that much of the growing influence of Evangelical groups comes through their political connections and financing, with many reportedly financing politicians' electoral campaigns and 'smear campaigns' against those in favour of legal abortion (anonymous activist, interview). Datta (2021: 13) has analysed this phenomenon in Europe, where he identifies 'dark money from the US Christian Right' as providing the financial backing for much anti-gender activism.

An activist interviewed described her perceptions in Argentina:

What Evangelical groups have is a lot of money ... and a lot of power through money. So, they finance legislators' campaigns, finance communication campaigns and finance attacks.

In Mexico, too, socially conservative Evangelicals provided an important part of the base that brought President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to power, with the Evangelical Solidarity Encounter Party part of the ruling alliance alongside López Obrador's National Regeneration Movement ('Morena') (Rojas, 2022). Despite Morena being a left-wing movement, President López Obrador's populist ruling approach often speaks to more conservative ideologies, including through an emphasis on 'moral renewal' of society, perhaps partly influenced by this Evangelical base of support (Olson, 2020).

The interviewees in both Mexico and Argentina expressed a sense that Evangelical advocacy groups cross lines that Catholic groups do not with regards to anti-gender activism, with Evangelicals and linked conservative groups pursuing more aggressive counter advocacy and often digital harassment (anonymous activist, Pérez-Pazos, interviews). An Argentine activist interviewed also

describes a campaign from Evangelical groups to encourage people not to watch a fictional Netflix series about an Evangelical pastor, co-written by Claudia Piñeiro, a renowned Argentine author prominent in abortion rights campaigns. The interviewee suggests that this kind of campaign is not something you would imagine from the contemporary Catholic Church in Argentina (at least not in a concerted, public manner). While feminist activists in both countries (anonymous activist, Pérez-Pazos, interviews) describe collaboration with elements of the Catholic Church (see Section 6.2), Evangelicals remain stern opponents of gender equality.

## 5.4 Transnational implications

The transnational movement of political Islam has had intricate and long-lasting impact on women's rights since the 1970s. The spread of Wahhabi Islam across the Muslim world is well documented. The Salafist movement, too, has transformed the politics of Muslim-majority countries (N. Hasan, 2010; Arat, 2016; Khan, 2018).

The rise of Hindutva politics is already evidencing cross-border implications. In Bangladesh, a new Hindu extremist group, the Hindu Mahajot, or Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance, claims to be the victim of Islamic fundamentalism and demands financial resources and greater political representation (Singha, 2021). Hossain says it is suspected of receiving funding and political support from India. Ironically, groups associated with it are lobbying against equal rights in the Hindu personal laws, when a UCC already exists in neighbouring India. Hindu women activists working for personal law reform have been intimidated by the Hindutva-affiliated gatekeepers to their community, along with the recent Awami League government, into backing off from their advocacy (Hossain, interview).

After the government's recent overthrow, a leading feminist scholar and activist joined an appeal with others from the region, asking the Indian government to refrain from interfering in Bangladesh's democratisation process by promoting false information about anti-Hindu activities (Azim et al., 2024).

Evangelical churches and associated 'religious right' advocacy groups influential in anti-gender activism in Mexico and Argentina also have transnational links, in particular with the US Evangelical movement (Zilla, 2018). Datta (2021) documents how US 'Christian right' organisations both train and advise anti-gender advocacy groups abroad, with a set of 'mega donors' from the US also providing funding to anti-rights groups internationally.

The rise of religious fundamentalism in politics has transformed the landscape of activism for women's rights globally – and not just within these organisations' countries, where they exercise direct political power. The connections among diaspora communities are strong, and migrant communities in western countries often gain strength from religious influences as they contend with xenophobia and racisms in their adopted homes. As Pragna Patel argues, the rise of religious identity among Muslim communities in the UK was a response to the impact of Islamic fundamentalism emanating from countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia from the 1980s onwards. Today in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (UK), many women among the large Bangladeshi migrant community have adopted the Saudi-style veil, as indeed in other Muslim contexts (Riaz, 2013).

Religious organisations form coalition groups and provide services to women. Patel trained as a

lawyer and was a founding member of the Southall Black Sisters and the global network Women Against Fundamentalism (Katz, 1995). She believes these religious groups aim to control their local constituencies, contain women, and promote a homogenous Muslim, Hindu or Sikh identity, defined in illiberal, fundamentalist terms, yet they have gained state recognition for their efforts as the UK adopted 'multi-faithism' as official policy (Patel, 2008). Muslim fundamentalists in the UK who call for more faith-based schools and laws to accommodate their religious values frame this as an issue of freedom of religion, while feminist critics see it as the imposition of a rigid and conservative faith upon individuals, particularly girls (Cowden et al., 2024). 'These demands were anti-rights and anti-democracy, with women being the first casualties', says Patel. Today we see Asian women's shelters and organisations with names that represent their religion, rather than secular identity, she says, and the political left in Britain is unable to respond effectively to the challenge posed by religious fundamentalism. Critically, and even outside the UK and across South Asia, 'secularism and the idea of secular feminism have become dirty words' (Patel, interview).

## 5.5 Summary

This chapter shows the transnational impact of politicised religion, extending globally, even into contexts like the UK, where the impact on women's activism in some communities reveals the de-secularisation of their claims and discourse. Feminist mobilisations are contending with the long legacy of political Islam, the rise of Hindu nationalism and Evangelical Christianity, which is challenging secular principles and undermining commitments to women's equal rights and inclusive democracy.

## 6 Movement strategies

The interviewed activists identified a number of useful strategies to protect, and resist further erosion of, their rights as they contend with challenges to democracy and a backlash to gender equality that is often fuelled by politicised religion. This chapter shows how important collective action remains to advance women's gender equality goals. Contemporary challenges to democracy and civic space are providing opportunities for new alliances with other social justice movements, and even with progressive religious organisations on certain issues. Women's mobilisations are most able to confront politicised religious authority and its detrimental effects on gender rights when the state is committed to secularism and the provision of civil courts and justice systems.

### 6.1 Collective action

Collective action remains a key strategy for women to advance gender equality claims and push for civic spaces themselves to remain open and inclusive. Large public mobilisations are an integral feature of the feminist movement in Mexico and have been able to influence and push for progress, even on doctrinal issues such as the decriminalisation of abortion.

Mexico City set a precedent as the first jurisdiction to legalise abortion in 2007, with, after a gap of 12 years, some other states following. The breakthrough moment came in 2021, with the Supreme Court ruling that to criminalise abortion was unconstitutional (Taylor, 2023). Feminist collective action has been key at all stages, with large-scale public mobilisations often a demonstration of solidarity across different feminist groups and part of a

broader *Marea Verde* (Green Tide) movement for abortion rights, with demands for legalisation starting in Argentina and spreading across Latin America (Tamés, 2023). The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court credited these activists, and their 'legitimate demands', as influential in the landmark 2021 ruling (Kitroeff, 2022). As state-level legalisation has been slow, feminist movements have deployed legal strategies and continued to march (Tamés, 2023; Ramos, 2024).

Feminist movements thus rely on a civic space that is sufficiently open to allow for such mobilisations, although this also allows for counter-mobilisations (Ruibal, 2014). Pérez-Pazos, a Mexican feminist and urban planner researcher, describes an abortion rights march and counter advocacy:

We had pro-life contingents next to us ... and while we sang, we jumped, we hugged each other, what they did around us was kneeling, they were praying, because they believe in something different than us.

For feminists like Pérez-Pazos, such confrontations with opposing views illustrate the significance of an open and inclusive secular public sphere.

Historically in Argentina, as across much of Latin America, women played a central role in pro-democracy struggles. In response to military abuses, organisations which initially focused on women's rights became key elements of larger movements to defend human rights (Jelin, 1994; Waylen, 2000). At times, this included collaboration with elements of the Catholic Church, which, under the influence of



liberation theology, became explicitly involved in politics, advocating for the rights of the poor and protection of human rights (Hale, 2018; Philpott, 2007). The election of President Milei in 2023 has brought new threats to civic space and economic security. Today, influential movements such as *Ni Una Menos* (not one [woman] less) similarly aim for broad coalitions, using a pluralist approach and framing feminist struggles as social justice struggles to mobilise broad segments of the public.

In countries where civic space does not encourage public debate and dissent, it has been more challenging for women to advance their claims and build public support through collective action. In Malaysia, SIS advocate for the recognition of gender equality within Islam, and contend this requires a neutral secular state and democratic dispensation, 'to guarantee a dialogic public civil space defined above all by tolerance' (Reilly, 2017: 489). A rights-based critique against religiously enforced gender discrimination, for example argues that forced hijab denies Muslim women the right of choice, moral autonomy and personal independence (Othman, 2006). However, the promotion of women's rights as related to Islam opens women to charges of sedition because the Sultan of Malaysia is both head of state and its religion, thus effectively curbing the safe deliberative practice so essential to a healthy civic space (Isa, interview).

Where states have mixed commitments to secularism, women's movements have demonstrated mixed success in countering challenges to the separation of religion from politics. In Bangladesh, when a succession of military rulers introduced reforms to increase religious authority by, for example, removing secularism as a constitutional principle, lifting the

ban on religious political parties, and declaring Islam to be the state religion (Malik, 1995; Chowdhury, 2010), women's groups led public protests in 1988 claiming that religion should remain in the private, not public, sphere (Nazneen, 2018). They won a Supreme Court ruling to restore the principle of secularism, but religious groups accused women's rights activists of being agents of western imperialists and undermining Islam (Nazneen, 2018). With the 2009 elections, a more progressive government allowed feminists to advance some progressive legislation, but under pressure from the extremist religious organisation Hifazat-ul-Islam, it refused to support the Supreme Court's ruling to remove Islam as the state religion (Nazneen and Masud, 2017).

## 6.2 Women's rights activists build new alliances

Women's rights activists are building new alliances amid backlash and constraints on civic space, thus ensuring they still engage in collective action for gender equality. These alliances may be at the local, national or transnational level, and sometimes even include some progressive religious groups.

### Social justice mobilisations

Women join grassroots social justice mobilisations in shared resistance to the erosion of democracy and rise of religion in politics. The election of President Milei in October 2023 significantly altered the landscape for women's movements in Argentina and brought them into allyship with additional civic movements and interest groups. These groups in turn have been able to benefit from the mobilisation capacity of *Ni Una Menos* (see Box 1).

### Box 1 *Ni Una Menos*: a broad-based coalition against gender-based violence

The *Ni Una Menos* movement began from public outrage in Argentina at the femicide of a teenage girl. A tweet from journalist Marcela Ojeda acted as a spark, roughly translated as: 'Businesswomen, athletes, actresses, they are killing us, are we not going to do anything?'. Social media was used to coordinate a mass protest against persistent gender-based violence within a few weeks. Organisers of the first march say the aim was to build a broad movement which brought together diverse groups to combat gender-based violence, with the goal 'to try and reach all ages, all sectors and the entire country' (anonymous activist, interview). The initial march mobilised more than 200,000 in Buenos Aires alone.

The *Ni Una Menos* movement grew to integrate advocacy and mobilisation for more controversial rights issues beyond gender-based violence. It is a key part of the Green Tide movement for reproductive justice, popularising the use of green scarves as a symbol for the right to legalised abortion. This inspired other regional spin-offs across Latin America, including in Mexico. In Argentina, *Ni Una Menos* protests led to the creation of a Ministry for Women, Gender and Diversity and became a catalyst for the legalisation of abortion in 2020 (Daby and Moseley, 2022).

The influence of *Ni Una Menos* illustrates the value of feminist mobilisations building broad coalitions. From the outset, the movement aimed to use explicitly pluralist discourses and strategies and collaborated with other movements. An activist interviewed explained the intention that 'anyone could use *Ni Una Menos*', including feminists along with those who had never been activists. Its decentralised structure has allowed the movement to integrate different interest groups. The interviewee described how, when the movement shifted to focus on the legalisation of abortion, its decentralised structure allowed it to integrate different interest groups, include actors, journalists and lawyers (anonymous activist, interview). This enables distinct groups to maintain space under the banner of *Ni Una Menos*.

The severity of President Milei's economic reforms, cuts to public services and increasing poverty rates have brought social and economic justice issues to the forefront of feminist advocacy (anonymous activist, interview). Milei has also threatened civic space and an independent media, introducing measures to allow for easier prosecution of protestors and closing Latin America's leading Spanish-language news agency (Sharp and Milesi, 2024). Feminist movements have played an important role in opposing Milei's reforms, including with

the Confederation of Workers and in defense of the public university, as well as through a women-led counter-mobilisation (Lambertucci and Centenera, 2023). The activist interviewed explained that when the government is pursuing a 'transversal' attack on 'everything that has to do with human rights and the rights to survival' it is necessary for feminists to be allies to broader movements. As the response to Milei demonstrates, it is the most pressing issues of the time, along with the related political constellations, that configure the allies for



feminist movements. Where these pressing issues are broader questions of social and economic justice, this may include atypical allies from religious groups (a topic returned to in Section 6.2.2).

In India, the ascent of Hindu nationalism since the 1980s seeks to undo the accommodations to religious plurality offered by the constitutionally secular state. Hindu nationalism seeks to provide, in effect, an 'anti-secular alternative' (Hasan, 2010:

943). Public support for the BJP and the ideology of Hindutva is transforming the national imaginary into an exclusionary new majoritarian national identity (Needham et al., 2007; Anand and Lall, 2022; Jayal, 2022). Muslim women in Delhi became the public face of protest to the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act and a new national register of citizens. They built coalitions with other poor communities to respond to the Hindu nationalist attack on rights, as discussed in Box 2.

### **Box 2 Women's movement alliances with new grassroots mobilisations: Indian response to Hindu nationalism**

The 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act provides access to Indian citizenship for victims of religious persecution who arrived in the country before 2015, but excludes Muslims. The new National Register of Citizens requires documentary evidence of ancestry to permit registration as an Indian citizen, disproportionately disenfranchising women and poor and marginalised communities (Choudhury Lahiri, 2021).

Muslim women in Delhi gathered in Shaheen Bagh and became the public face of protest to both these laws. Most were involved in contentious politics for the first time. They asserted their rights to engage in the public sphere, assert their Muslim identity and also claim their citizenship of India at the same time (Rai, 2020; Choudhury Lahiri, 2021). Lasting over 100 days, their protests became the longest intergenerational sit-in demonstrations in India since independence (Chopra, 2021). Their 'popular constitutionalism' featured mass recitations of the constitution's preamble, affirming the secular and democratic nature of the Republic of India. Women were attempting to 'reshape citizenship' by defending the secular constitution and rejecting 'Islamophobic and exclusionary populist nationalism' (Rai, 2020: 271).

Soon after, in 2020–2021, the Farmers' Movement (Kisan Andolan), emerged in protest triggered by the government's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to impose restrictive laws favouring corporate rights over agrarian workers (Singh, 2022). Its roots lay in the agrarian crisis in rural India caused by landlessness, rising costs, farm debt, unemployment, environmental degradation and a wave of farmers' suicides (Singh, interview). The protests mobilised thousands of women, who joined the men in their communities in a protest of two million people in the capital, Delhi, where their peaceful encampment lasted one year (Singh, 2022).

## Box 2 Women's movement alliances with new grassroots mobilisations: Indian response to Hindu nationalism (continued)

Singh believes that the women's protests and Kisan Andolan gave the predominately urban-based Indian women's movement a key lesson in how to build alliances. Protesting farmers, university students, the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan and the National Women's Association all came to show their support for the protestors of Shaheen Bagh (Chopra, 2021). Understanding that the current government is systematically disenfranchising the poor 'section by section' – Adivasi (indigenous tribes), Dalit (scheduled castes), farmers or Muslim, Singh explains:

The dots were joined between how the agenda of Hindutva, of lynching, of banning cow slaughter, how these various laws and policies were, in fact, disenfranchising citizens, Muslim citizens, and how the citizenship law actually disenfranchised more powerfully the women. (Singh, interview)

In Iran, women's groups are building new alliances of solidarity in the face of severe state repression, now that opposition groups are 'doing the homework for that eventual democratic transition' themselves, says Tajali. New shared interests have emerged, for example with Kurdish women and the LGBTQI+ community, both of whom experience ongoing oppression in the country. Kurdish women in Iran have had a more hostile engagement with the Iranian state, which denies them, as Sunni Muslims, the protection offered to religious minorities, and discriminates against them based on ethnicity and their political organisations demanding greater autonomy (Yildiz and Taysi, 2007). The slogan *jin, jîyan, azadî* (woman, life, freedom) was originally a Kurdish protest slogan (Gupta, 2023), evocatively rendered into Persian, *zan, zindagi, azadi*, in the wake of the custodial killing of a Kurdish woman, Mahsa Jina Amini, in Iran, and the ensuing WLF protests across the country. A group of activists from inside and outside Iran published a manifesto in 2023 to complement the 'Rainbow Wave' of LGBTQI+ protestors who participated in the WLF movement. They, too, demand an end to the 'apartheid regime

of sex and gender' as part of the struggle against patriarchy, expressing solidarity with ongoing resistance against the 'tyranny and autocracy' of the regime, exhibited through student protests and union and labour strikes, while demanding an end to all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexuality (Bidarzani, 2023).

### Allyship with religious authorities

Feminists may be able to develop allyship with religious authorities on specific goals depending on country contexts. On non-doctrinal issues, religious groups in Mexico are often not opponents (and sometimes allies) of feminists. Marcela Oropa (interview), the founder of Defensoras Digitales and part of the Ley Olimpia movement, contrasts abortion rights activism with activism against digital harassment. Frente Nacional para la Sororidad (National Front for Sisterhood) advocated for an 'Olimpia Law' against digital harassment, inspired by the experiences of Olimpia Coral Melo, who had been a victim of dissemination of non-consensual sexual images (Carrillo, 2022;

Oropa et al., 2024; Pearson, 2020). The main opposition to the law came from 'freedom of expression' advocacy groups (Suarez Estrada, 2022). In contrast to abortion issues, the lack of engagement of religious authorities (either collaborative or oppositional) was notable. Pérez-Pazos (interview) also describes devout Catholics who, while offering strong opposition on abortion rights, support feminist advocacy against gender-based violence. The mostly secular political settlement allows for relations between feminists and religious groups today to be largely issue-dependent, without invoking fundamental disputes over the role of religion in policy processes.

In Argentina, feminists built coalitions with religious groups based on specific issues, for example with progressive elements of religious groups supportive on women's rights demands. The influence of many feminist movements, both in terms of progress with regards to women's rights and in resisting anti-rights backlash, has come from their ability to build broad coalitions to advance particular causes (Anderson, 2022). The activists interviewed in both Mexico and Argentina have been able to work on advancing reproductive rights with Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide), a pro-abortion group active since the 1990s and inspired by 'Catholics for Choice' in the US (Ngo, 2021; Hernández, 2023).

Collaborations can also result from particular political constellations allying religious groups with feminists resisting attacks on democracy and civic space, or on broader social justice issues. For example, as described in Section 6.2.1, feminists in Argentina have found themselves allying with the Catholic Church, which 'comes out to question poverty in the country' (anonymous activist, interview) in resistance against President Milei's

drastic economic reforms, even though it holds opposing views on reproductive rights. As an Argentine activist interviewed summarised:

Today we find ourselves in a very particular moment in Argentina because everything is turned upside down, so we the feminists find ourselves retweeting what the Catholic Church says.

As the *Ni Una Menos* movement demonstrates, 'there is something very positive about secular feminism having the capacity to build with religions, including the Catholic religion' (anonymous activist, interview). How feminists frame their activism in order to build such coalitions is often strategic, based on recognising the need to garner sufficient public support. Similarly, religious actors deploy 'strategic secularism' in arenas where religious arguments carry less weight (Morán Faúndes, 2018; Vaggione, 2018; Reuterswärd, 2021). However, this collaboration is only possible with certain religious groups and on certain issues where there is accordance. In Argentina, the close association between the Evangelical Church and far-right conservative groups has made it a key opponent to progress in women's rights, such that the interviewee suggested that feminist collaboration with progressive Catholic groups becomes even more important in resisting Evangelical-linked feminist backlash.

## Transnational activism

The constraints to civic space in the country cases have ensured that transnational and diaspora networks are vital to advancing gender equality as a human right. Women's voices from the diaspora ensure that the struggles of their fellow citizens are not forgotten by the international community. Thus, a virtual civic space creates a sense of community providing knowledge and resources for feminists.

The civil war in Sudan (2023–) has forced many leading feminist activists to flee their country. Reem Abbas is now in exile in Egypt, where she continues with research and writing, speaking in webinars and meetings, mentoring feminists and conducting trainings, ‘doing anything that I can do’ (Abbas, interview). Iranian feminists continue their advocacy from the diaspora to craft the Bill of Rights discussed in Section 4.1. Perhaps one of the most powerful outcomes of the WLF protests was the birth of a ‘global Iran’, as millions of diaspora Iranians supported and followed the uprising in real time, achieving a closeness on both sides that was unprecedented (Bayat, n.d.).

Transnational feminist groups are critical platforms to advance women's rights claims at the international level whilst also providing support to feminists within their own countries. This report has referred to some of these organisations, such as SIHA in the Horn of Africa. SIS in Malaysia benefit from the resources and global advocacy work of Musawah, a Muslim transnational feminist organisation. Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML; see Box 3), where Mona Tajali plays a leadership role, has a global reputation for providing research resources and training to support feminists in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and Asia since its inception in the 1980s.

### Box 3 The transnational campaign for recognition of the crime of gender apartheid

Women Living Under Muslim Laws members are scholars and activists drawn from all contexts where Muslims reside. It was among the first to campaign for the recognition of gender apartheid in Iran in the 1980s, a campaign which now includes Afghanistan as the second country (WLUML, 2023). It has taken many years for Iranian feminists within the country to recognise the system of gender apartheid. In 2023, the human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Narges Mohammadi wrote a letter from prison outlining the 19 laws and policies in her country that constitute gender apartheid (Mohammadi, 2024).

Iranian activists work together with international actors and agencies, such as UN Women, and Afghanistan's feminists to push the international community to recognise gender apartheid (UN Women, 2023). As Mona Tajali (interview) says:

They're thinking of it as yet another tool to address Iran's backlash, and also recognising that the pressures from international community has been very limited when it comes to gender persecution ... And they're saying that if it helps for Iranians and Afghans to come together, then let's do so.

Legal scholar Karima Bennouna, who crafted the argument for gender apartheid's legal recognition, is a former council member of WLUML. Tajali is currently director at the WLUML Feminist Transnational Leadership Institute, which brings young women across the region together, beginning with virtual meetings and moving on to in-person gatherings, to build solidarity and collective action ‘considering the interconnectedness of issues across borders’ (Tajali, interview).

Transnational solidarities are necessary to counter the influence of extremist nationalist and religious political ideologies because they, too, have transnational reach. Pragna Patel believes international recognition of Afghanistan and Iran as gender apartheid regimes would also support women in minority communities within the UK to resist 'fundamentalist pressures'. She has observed how the South Asian diaspora in the UK has been impacted by Hindutva politics, Sikh nationalism, the spread of Salafist religious movement, and political Islam influenced by the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia and even Pakistan (Patel, interview). Minority women have to grapple with religious fundamentalism as well as gatekeepers who represent their faith communities with a 'conservative and even misogynist and homophobic religious agenda' (Patel, 2008: 18). Transnational solidarities would support women to recognise the political imperatives behind identity-based politics and the dangers of religious fundamentalism, and share resistance strategies (Patel, interview).

### 6.3 Using secular institutions to counter politicised religious authority

ODI Global research and interviews underscore the enduring value of secular state structures and civil courts for women's rights activists who have to contend with politicised religious authorities.

Where states are sufficiently secular, feminists can advocate for women's rights without always challenging the political power of religious authorities. Mexico has a long history of the separation of church and state, and greater scepticism regarding the use of religious arguments in public policy – which has contributed to more progressive policy outcomes (Amuchástegui et al., 2010; Blancarte, 2023).

Feminist movements rely on a relatively open civic space (for women's rights advocacy) and civic institutions to advance their claims – and have made progress even on doctrinal issues disputed by religious groups. The sustained secular political settlement allows for relations between feminists and religious groups today to be largely issue-dependent, without invoking fundamental disputes over the role of religion in policy processes. For example, in debates about emergency contraception, feminist groups grounded their advocacy in public support for secular politics, arguing that their opponents were improperly '[allowing] religious notions to inform public policymaking' (Amuchástegui et al., 2010: 997). Nonetheless, contestations between feminists and religious groups remain on doctrinal issues (e.g. abortion and divorce) that challenge deeply held religious beliefs and where the Catholic Church is more forceful in defending its space in the public sphere (Htun and Weldon, 2018). Reuterswärd (2021) explains how restrictive abortion reform failed in one state while in another it succeeded because anti-abortion movements had better access to political and economic elites through the church.

Activists describe the value of developing new feminist narratives, a broader framing for advocacy goals and more pluralist discourse to meet the challenges of the current moment. In Argentina and Mexico, activists employ pluralist approaches and strategically frame their activism to garner broader public support and build coalitions. This can involve avoiding foregrounding secular language which may provoke the Catholic Church or Evangelical groups. *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina framed its advocacy around abortion rights as a social justice issue (e.g. emphasising the health risks of unregulated abortions). This successfully allowed activists to limit more contentious debates with

religious authorities around defining start of life in terms of the viability of the foetus (Daby and Moseley, 2022) – in contrast to previous more confrontational approaches – allowing them to garner a broader coalition of support (Borland, 2004; Sutton and Borland, 2013; Daby and Moseley, 2022).

SIS in Malaysia use a mixture of religious and secular framings in their advocacy. They issue press statements to protest against violations of women's rights, but quote from hadith, religious sayings, or the Quran where it is relevant and a progressive interpretation is merited. Otherwise SIS rely on human rights principles and rights that have been enshrined in international instruments like the Convention on the Rights of the Child or CEDAW (Isa, interview). In 2017, they decided to expand their focus on women to include young men, to avoid attracting negative state, and public, backlash (Isa, interview).

Civil courts both protect existing rights and can be effectively used to advance gender justice in the face of rising politicised religion. This point is illustrated using the example of women's successful opposition to the use of fatwas, or Muslim religious edicts, to violate women's human rights in two country contexts, Malaysia and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, local village elders and traditional/informal councils suddenly accelerated their practice of issuing fatwas against perceived transgressions by women and girls in the 1990s. One interpretation of this surge is that it was linked to unwelcome social change in the rural areas brought by the growth of women's NGOs (Shehabuddin, 1999). A group of feminist organisations (including Ain-o-Salish Kendra, Mahila Parishad, Nijera Kori and BLAST) went to court. They successfully argued that the law already had procedures to address fatwas and that the law did allow for punishments, such as

the flogging of a young girl (Supreme Court of Bangladesh, 2015). Hossain, a barrister at the Supreme Court, recalls that, as petitioners, these groups strategically shifted the argument from freedom of religion 'to being about freedom from cruel and degrading treatment and access to justice' (interview).

Even though women successfully used the courts to protect their rights in one Muslim context, decades later, the same use of religious authority emerged in another. In Malaysia, activists turned to the courts to challenge the practice of issuing fatwas, this time by a state body. During the 1980s, the Malaysian government led a project of Islamisation that strengthened the Shariah judicial and legal system (Reilly, 2017: 352). These reforms brought women's groups into direct contestation with religious authorities over defining the 'right Islam' (Othman, 2006: 341). In 2014, SIS were targeted with a fatwa by the Fatwa State Committee and State Religious Council (Khattab, 2019). SIS has fought an extensive legal battle in courts against the fatwa which is still ongoing.

The courts have proved essential in other instances, upholding the supremacy of civil law over Shariah, indicating that in cases involving gender issues and religious interpretations, civil law still prevails (Rachman, 2024). When a man was charged in the Selangor Shariah High Court for homosexual intercourse in 2019, the court ruled in this high-profile case that the law was 'unconstitutional and illegal', because criminal offences are already addressed by federal laws (N.M. Ahmed, 2023: 100). In 2024, a woman filed a petition with the federal court challenging the constitutional validity of the new Shariah laws passed by the legislative assembly in her state, Kelantan. The court ruled in her favour, and again stated that the federal laws sufficed (Jani et al., 2024).



## 6.4 Summary

This chapter has identified key strategies, drawing on interviews with activists and scholarly literature, to counter the current challenges to advancing gender equality. Collective action remains a key strategy for women to advance their claims while simultaneously pushing for civic spaces themselves to remain open and inclusive. In contexts where civic space is increasingly constrained, women's movements are building new alliances with social justice struggles in shared resistance to the erosion of democracy and rise of religion in politics, with possibilities for allyship with progressive religious authorities on specific goals. Constraints to civic space mean that transnational and diaspora activism is essential to advance gender equality as a human right.

A state's commitments to secular principles remain critical to support women in countering the political power of religious authorities. Where states are sufficiently secular, women can advocate for their rights without always challenging religious authorities. If states have even mixed commitments to secularism, women's movements have demonstrated some success in countering challenges to the separation of religion from politics. Civil courts both protect existing rights and can be effectively used to advance gender equality in the face of rising politicised religion, particularly the influence of doctrine on law. Finally, ongoing backlash necessitates that activists deploy strategic framings to counter politicised religious groups.



Banner calling for the separation of Church and State near the National Congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina on March 9, 2020. Credit: Carolina Jaramillo/Shutterstock.com



## 7 Conclusion

This report explores how women's rights activists in the Global South are grappling with a concerted backlash to feminism, often strongly influenced by politicised religion and as part of broader attacks on democracy and civic space. The research found that feminists continue to advocate for meaningful democratic reforms with the implicit understanding that these are essential to advancing their claims, even if not all activists are at the forefront of political reform movements. Support from transnational feminist organisations and diaspora activists enables the claims of women to be heard internationally and supports them to develop and refine their advocacy agenda.

The women's movements discussed here, from Sudan to Iran to Malaysia, three South Asian countries and two in Latin America, have had a historical role to play in pushing for democratic reforms. Where these transitions have failed or never started, there is a direct heightened risk to the security of women. This is because an unaccountable government is either unwilling to guarantee their rights, as in Iran and Sudan, or it is unable to protect them from extremist forces that threaten their safety in civic spaces and public life, as in Pakistan. The founders of SIS encouraged Muslim women to use religious interpretation to resist authoritarianism and reclaim 'the space for substantive democracy and justice' (Othman, 2006: 347), and it was a state-run religious authority which tried to silence SIS women with a fatwa.

Open civic space, as a key feature of democracy and democratic reform, emerges as critical for women's activism to survive and succeed. The risks to activists are heightened where civic space is almost completely closed, as in Iran, or closing, as in India and Pakistan. Resisting this closure,

however, means that women's movements are adapting creatively to ensure their claims can still be advanced. The research shows how they widen their coalition-building, use strategic framings, and even consider allyship with religious organisations on specific issues.

Feminists rely heavily on secular institutions, such as secular legal and constitutional frameworks, to advance their claims and hold back the rising influence of politicised religion. Even where a state's secular commitments are weakening, secular laws and civil courts are a critical defence against ongoing backlash, as these commitments acknowledge equal rights for men and women. Importantly, in contexts where the secular commitment itself is not under challenge, as in Mexico, and civic space permits relatively open deliberation, feminists have much greater opportunity to protect or even advance gender equality in the face of backlash.

However, in many countries discussed in this report, political secularism has faded from the forefront of feminist activism. In part, this is because the risks of calling for more overtly secular states are very high, especially when civic space is increasingly insecure and politicised religion is powerful. The contemporary women's movement in Pakistan is not calling directly for a secular state, although the older generation stands by its demand for a secular state and against discriminatory religious laws.

Similarly, in Malaysia and Bangladesh, pushing the state to become more fully secular, as in removing Islam as the state religion, is not a priority for women's movements. In contrast, many Iranian feminists are explicitly calling for a secular democratic state, even though the risks are

extremely high for those inside Iran who make these claims. They are supported by the opportunities afforded from diaspora activism and more open transnational civic spaces. One interpretation of this delicate navigation is that, in practice, secularism remains the basis for rights-based claim-making even though political secularism, to be achieved through state reform, is less of a focus for women in many (but not all) contexts.

In most of the countries discussed here, religious forces opposed to gender equality in laws and policies are not new at all, but strategising to counter them is proving more challenging than ever before. This is due to new influences (e.g. Evangelical Christianity and the rise of Hindutva), the hardening of politicised religious authority within state power structures, the long legacy of Islamisation policies and deepening risks of open deliberation in civic spaces.

Going forward, to enable feminists to challenge backlash to gender equality, it is essential to maintain open civic spaces with reduced influence of politicised religion inhibiting women's claims. The examples of Mexico and Argentina indicate how successful feminist strategising remains possible. Open civic spaces allow women's groups to build broader coalitions to successfully navigate the forces of backlash and advance their claims, which sometimes include those with more progressive religious groups. Where there is a closer relationship between politicised religion and government, this kind of collaboration with religious organisations is less likely. This can be seen in Pakistan and Bangladesh, for instance, where feminists are wary of working with religious organisations due to their history of aligning with non-democratic governments, influencing anti-rights policies and creating an unsafe environment for women and human rights activists in civil society.

## 7.1 Recommendations for further research

A future research agenda needs to include further examination of the challenges to feminist voices being taken on board during processes of political reform, to ask why their exclusion is linked with extreme forms of backlash when democratic institutions break down. Is backlash to feminism in the context of democratic decline, or failures of democratisation, a predictor of further political decline? Democratisation does not necessarily bring an end to the influence of politicised religion, as seen in the Muslim contexts discussed. And in India, politicised religion through formal electoral democracy is leading to a reframing of the national ideology in terms of majoritarian Hinduism (Sahgal, 2020). Women's movements, and the coalitions they work with, need to remain engaged in internal and global debates around the value of human rights framings to counter backlash and politicised religion and offer their visions for how this helps to build more inclusive democracies.

While this report has focused on women's rights activists that primarily use rights-based framings, it includes some who try to engage in interpretation of doctrine. Alliances between women who work across the religious/secular divide are limited, and may be fleeting, as seen in Iran, or issue-specific (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar, 2024), leading to the prominent use of Musawah and SIS as an example in the literature (Reilly, 2017; Htun and Weldon, 2018). Scholars nonetheless note the need to develop and further build collaborations, for example to face the challenges to both secularism and religious minority rights in India together (Hasan, 2010; Rai, 2020).

In states where secularism is formally institutionalised, secular feminists who demand a diminished role of religion in policy influence

remain, but are possibly less prominent within mainstream feminist discourse. In Latin American contexts, for instance, this is evident by the emergence of strong rights-based campaigns on specific issues rather than explicitly secular framings of claims. In Muslim-majority countries, the prominence of Shariah laws, often administered through state institutions, raises secularism as a political claim more prominently among secular feminists (e.g. in Sudan and Pakistan) and some Islamic feminists as well (e.g. in Malaysia) (Othman, 2006; A. Khan, 2018; Tønnessen and Al-Nagar, 2024).

Women's movements, and feminists in particular, are under increasing pressure to adapt strategically to survive. Future research must remain sensitive and connected to local contexts where religion and politics combine to force regression on gender equality and democracy. Advancing the voices of activists through sharing their lessons and strategies remains a crucial area where research can continue to provide evidence for the vital role that women's movements play in building enduring and inclusive democracies.

# References

---

- Abbas, R.** (2023a) 'Men fighting, women breaking up: Sudanese women's movements, the wing of the patriarchy?'. *African Arguments*, 13 April (<https://africanarguments.org/2023/04/men-fighting-women-breaking-up-sudanese-womens-movements-the-wing-of-the-patriarchy>)
- Abbas, R.** (2023b) 'Money is power: Hemedti and the RSF's paramilitary industrial complex in Sudan'. *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 26 July (<https://timep.org/2023/07/26/money-is-power-hemedtiand-the-rsfs-paramilitary-industrial-complex-in-sudan>)
- Adeney, K.** (2017) 'How to understand Pakistan's hybrid regime: the importance of a multidimensional continuum' *Democratization* 24(1): 119–137 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1110574>)
- Ahmed, N.M.** (2023) 'Jurisdictional conflict between Syariah and civil laws in Iki Putra case: the way forward for Malaysian legal system'. *Seminar Antarabangsa Islam Dan Sains SAIS 2023*, Persatuan Kakitangan Akademik, pp. 95–107
- Ahmed, R.** (2024) 'Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus to head Bangladesh's interim government'. *The Guardian*, 7 August ([www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/07/muhammad-yunus-bangladeshinterim-government-pm-sheikh-hasina](http://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/07/muhammad-yunus-bangladeshinterim-government-pm-sheikh-hasina))
- Ahmed, S.** (2023) 'In Narendra Modi's India, Hindu nationalists celebrate violence against minority women'. *Jacobin*, 12 June (<https://jacobin.com/2023/12/bjp-india-far-right-gender-violence>)
- Akbar, A.** (2021) 'The Green Movement in Iran: reformist roots and objective' *Protest* 1(1): 29–53 (<https://doi.org/10.1163/2667372X-01010002>)
- Amuchástegui, A., Cruz, G., Aldaz, E. and Mejía, M.C.** (2010) 'Politics, religion and gender equality in contemporary Mexico: women's sexuality and reproductive rights in a contested secular state' *Third World Quarterly* 31(6): 989–1005 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502733>)
- Anand, K. and Lall, M.** (2022) 'The debate between secularism and Hindu nationalism: how India's textbooks have become the government's medium for political communication' *India Review* 21(1): 77–107 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2021.2018203>)
- Anderson, C.F.** (2022) 'Legalising abortion in Argentina: social movements and multi-party coalitions' *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 14 (2): 143–165 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X221100274>)
- Arat, Y.** (2016) 'Islamist women and feminist concerns in contemporary Turkey: prospects for women's rights and solidarity' *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 37(3): 125–150 (<https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.37.3.0125>)
- Arat, Y.** (2022) 'Democratic backsliding and the instrumentalization of women's rights in Turkey' *Politics & Gender* 18(4): 911–941 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000192>)
- Atlas of Wars** (2023) 'Argentina run-off: conservatives up against the far right'. *Atlas of Wars*, 25 October ([www.atlasofwars.com/argentina-run-off-conservatives-up-against-the-far-right](http://www.atlasofwars.com/argentina-run-off-conservatives-up-against-the-far-right))
- Azim, F., Dixit, K.M., Gunasekara, L., Hasan, M. and Pyakurel, S.** (2024) 'A wake-up call for Delhi from Colombo, Dhaka and Kathmandu'. *The Wire*, 9 August (<https://thewire.in/south-asia/a-wake-upcall-for-delhi-from-colombo-dhaka-and-kathmandu>)

- Baldo, S.** (2017) *Radical intolerance: Sudan's religious oppression and embrace of extremist groups*. Washington DC: The Enough Project (<https://enoughproject.org/reports/radical-intolerance-sudans>)
- Banerji, A.** (2021) 'How rising majoritarianism affects India–Bangladesh relations'. South Asian Voices, 23 November (<https://southasianvoices.org/how-rising-majoritarianism-affects-india-bangladeshrelations>)
- Basit, A.** (2020) 'Barelvi political activism and religious mobilization in Pakistan: the case of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP)' *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21(3): 374–389 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2020.1812395>)
- Batliwala, S.** (2012) *Changing their world: concepts and practices of women's movements*. 2nd edn. Toronto; Mexico City; Cape Town: Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) (<https://issuu.com/awid/docs/changing-their-world-2nd-ed-eng?e=2350791/3186048>)
- Bayat, A.** (2024) 'Revolution with Asef Bayat.' Podcast interview with Nahid Siamdoust. *Women, Life, Freedom: All In On Iran*. Accessed 15 August 2024 (<https://podcasts.la.utexas.edu/woman-life-freedom-podcast/podcast/revolution-with-asef-bayat>)
- Beer, C. and Cruz-Aceves, V.D.** (2018) 'Extending rights to marginalized minorities: same-sex relationship recognition in Mexico and the United States' *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 18(1): 3–26 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/1532440017751421>)
- Bidarzani** (2023) 'Manifesto of the LGBTIAQ+ community of Iran and Afghanistan'. Awakening: Feminist site, 220 February 2024 (<https://bidarzani.com/44419>)
- Biroli, F. and Caminotti, M.** (2020) 'The conservative backlash against gender in Latin America' *Politics & Gender* 16(1): E1 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000045>)
- Blancarte, R.** (2023) *Populism, religion, and secularity in Latin America and Europe: a comparative perspective*. Working Paper 27, CASHSS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities' series. Leipzig University, Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (CASHSS) (<https://doi.org/10.36730/2020.1.msbwbm.27>)
- Borland, E.** (2004) 'Cultural opportunities and tactical choice in the Argentine and Chilean reproductive rights movements' *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 9: 327–339 (<https://doi.org/10.17813/mai.9.3.h21v5383812780j5>)
- Brown, N.** (2022) 'From political Islam to the politics of Islam' *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 44: 44–49 ([www.thecaireview.com/essays/from-political-islam-to-the-politics-of-islam](http://www.thecaireview.com/essays/from-political-islam-to-the-politics-of-islam))
- Carrillo, A.Z.** (2022) 'Olimpia Law and legislation against digital violence in Latin America'. Mexican Centre for International Relations, 1 November (<https://cemerri.org/en/art/a-ley-olimpia-legislacionesviolencia-digital-latam-kv>)
- Center for Human Rights in Iran** (2024) 'A quiet revolution continues in Iran two years after the woman life freedom uprising'. 11 September (<https://iranhumanrights.org/2024/09/a-quiet-revolution-continues-in-iran-two-years-after-the-woman-life-freedom-uprising>)
- Chandhoke, N.** (2017) *Rethinking pluralism, secularism and tolerance: anxieties of coexistence*. CSLG Working Paper 23. Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (<https://jnu.ac.in/sites/default/files/u63/23-Neera%20Chandhoke.pdf>)
- Charrad, M.M.** (2001) *States and women's rights: the making of postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*. Oakland CA: University of California Press

- Chaudhury, D.R.** (2020) 'The resilience of secularism in Bangladesh' *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 15(3): 254–258 ([www.jstor.org/stable/e48507535](http://www.jstor.org/stable/e48507535))
- Chopra, D.** (2021) 'The resistance strikes back: women's protest strategies against backlash in India' *Gender & Development* 29(2–3): 467–491 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2021.1981698>)
- Choudhury Lahiri, S.** (2021) 'Women's struggles over religion and citizenship in contemporary India' *Contemporary South Asia* 29(2): 281–287 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2021.1915245>)
- Chowdhury, I.A.** (2010) *Bangladeshi courts: reaffirmation of democratic and secular norms*. ISAS Insights No. 113. Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore ([www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/113-bangladeshi-courts](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/113-bangladeshi-courts))
- CIVICUS** (2022) *People power under attack 2022*. CIVICUS Monitor Report. Johannesburg (<https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings>)
- Cowden, S., Durand, R. and Patel, P.** (2024) 'The Michaela School ruling: religion, education and "British values"'. *Feminist Dissent*, 29 June (<https://feministdissent.org/blog-posts/the-michaela-school-ruling-religion-education-and-british-values>)
- Daby, M. and Moseley, M.W.** (2022) 'Feminist mobilization and the abortion debate in Latin America: lessons from Argentina' *Politics & Gender* 18(2): 359–393 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000197>)
- D'Angelo, S., Marcus, R., Khan, A. and Homonchuk, O.** (2024) *Whose hands on our education? Identifying and countering gender-restrictive backlash*. ALIGN Report. London: ODI Global ([www.alignplatform.org/resources/report-whose-hands-our-education-countering-backlash](http://www.alignplatform.org/resources/report-whose-hands-our-education-countering-backlash))
- Datta, N.** (2021) *Tip of the iceberg: religious extremist funders against human rights for sexuality and reproductive health in Europe, 2009–2018*. Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) ([www.epfweb.org/node/837](http://www.epfweb.org/node/837))
- Diamond, L.** (2015) 'Facing up to the democratic recession' *Journal of Democracy* 26(1): 141–155 (<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>)
- Dryzek, J.S.** (1996) 'Political inclusion and the dynamics of democratization' *The American Political Science Review* 90(3): 475–487 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/2082603>)
- DW News** (2024) 'Argentina's Milei cozies up to Trump on US visit'. Deutsche Welle, 25 February ([www.dw.com/en/argentinas-milei-cozies-up-to-trump-on-us-visit/a-68366825](http://www.dw.com/en/argentinas-milei-cozies-up-to-trump-on-us-visit/a-68366825))
- Edstrom, J., Khan, A., Greig, A. and Skinner, C.** (2023) 'Grasping patriarchal backlash: a brief for smarter countermoves'. *Countering Backlash Briefing* 1. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies (<https://doi.org/10.19088/BACKLASH.2023.002>)
- El Nagar, S. and Tønnessen, L.** (2017) *Family law reform in Sudan: competing claims for gender justice between sharia and women's human rights*. CMI Report R 2017:5. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute (<https://open.cmi.no/cmi-xmlui/handle/11250/2475478>)
- Ezeldeen, M.** (2022) 'Sudanese women activism: challenges, impact and prospects' *Ahfad Journal* 39(2): 23–38 ([https://primo.lib.umn.edu/permalink/01UMN\\_INST/oqqrhb/cdi\\_proquest\\_journals\\_2769626818](https://primo.lib.umn.edu/permalink/01UMN_INST/oqqrhb/cdi_proquest_journals_2769626818))
- Feminist Collective** (2023) 'Iran Women's Bill of Rights: Feminist Collective's proposal for "Women, Life, Freedom"'. Feminist Collective IRWBR, 8 March ([www.iwbr.org/general-9-1](http://www.iwbr.org/general-9-1))
- Fraser, N.** (1990) 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy' *Social Text* 25(26), 56–80 ([www.jstor.org/stable/j220058](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j220058))



- Gaventa, J. and Barrett, G.** (2012) 'Mapping the outcomes of citizen engagement' *World Development* 40(12): 2399–2410 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2012.05.014>)
- Genocide Watch** (2023) 'The 2002 Gujarat genocidal massacres'. Genocide Watch ([www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/the-2002-gujarat-genocidal-massacres](http://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/the-2002-gujarat-genocidal-massacres))
- Gikandi, H.** (2021) 'After the revolution, a secular Sudan?'. *The World from PRX*, 21 July (<https://theworld.org/stories/2021-07-21/after-revolution-secular-sudan>)
- Goetz, A.M.** (2007) 'Gender justice, citizenship and entitlements: core concepts, central debates and new directions for research' in M. Mukhopadhyay and N. Singh (eds.) *Gender justice, citizenship, and development*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre (IDRC), pp. 15–57
- Goetz, A.M.** (2020) 'The new competition in multilateral norm-setting: transnational feminists and the illiberal backlash' *Daedalus* 149(1): 160–179 ([https://doi.org/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_01780](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01780))
- Gupta, R.** (2023) 'Before Iran, the Kurdish feminist revolution' *New Internationalist*, 23 February (<https://newint.org/immersive/2023/02/23/iran-kurdish-feminist-revolution>)
- Hale, C.W.** (2018) 'Religious institutions and collective action: the Catholic church and political activism in indigenous Chiapas and Yucatán' *Politics and Religion* 11(1): 27–54 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048317000426>)
- Hasan, N.** (2010) 'The failure of the Wahhabi campaign: transnational Islam and the Salafi madrasa in post-9/11 Indonesia' *South East Asia Research* 18(4): 675–705
- Hasan, Z.** (2010) 'Gender, religion and democratic politics in India' *Third World Quarterly* 31(6): 939–954 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502726>)
- Hernández, M.T.** (2023) 'Catholic activists in Mexico help women reconcile their faith with abortion rights'. AP News, 16 December (<https://apnews.com/article/catholic-abortion-rights-mexico-women-activists-9fb01d8d2f4376f27f9c693f7548c533>)
- Hickerson, E.** (2011) *Religion, politics and gender equality*. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- Holmes, R.** (2024) 'Feminist responses to “norm-spoiling” at the United Nations'. ALIGN Briefing Note. London: ODI Global ([www.alignplatform.org/resources/feminist-responses-norm-spoiling-united-nations](http://www.alignplatform.org/resources/feminist-responses-norm-spoiling-united-nations))
- Hoodfar, H.** (2022) *Against all odds: the building of a women's movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. WLUML Working Paper. London: Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) ([www.wluml.org/2022/01/10/against-all-odds-the-building-of-a-womens-movement-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran](http://www.wluml.org/2022/01/10/against-all-odds-the-building-of-a-womens-movement-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran))
- Hoodfar, H. and Sadr, S.** (2010) 'Islamic politics and women's quest for gender equality in Iran' *Third World Quarterly* 31(6): 885–903 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.502717>)
- Hoodfar, H. and Tajali, M.** (2023) 'Iranian protesters are making demands in charters and bills of rights'. *The Conversation*, 16 March (<http://theconversation.com/iranian-protesters-are-making-demands-in-charters-and-bills-of-rights-201543>)
- Hossain, J. and Jamil, I.** (2022) 'Equality in contention: exploring the debates of gender-equal inheritance rights in Bangladesh' *Public Administration and Policy* 25(3): 323–335 (<https://doi.org/10.1108/PAP-08-2021-0049>)



- Htun, M.** (2009) 'Life, liberty, and family values: church and state in the struggle over Latin America's social agenda' in F. Hagopian (ed.) *Religious pluralism, democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America*. Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 335–364 (<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj78r9.14>)
- Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L.** (2018) *The logics of gender justice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- Human Rights Commission of Pakistan** (2023) *State of human rights in 2022*. Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (<http://hrqp-web.org/hrqpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-State-of-human-rights-in-2022.pdf>)
- Human Rights Council** (2024) *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran*. UN Doc. A/HRC/55/67. New York: United Nations General Assembly (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/008/67/pdf/g2400867.pdf>)
- Human Rights Watch** (2008) 'You can detain anyone for anything': Iran's broadening clampdown on independent activism'. Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org/report/2008/01/06/you-can-detain-anyone-anything/irans-broadening-clampdown-independent-activism](http://www.hrw.org/report/2008/01/06/you-can-detain-anyone-anything/irans-broadening-clampdown-independent-activism))
- Hunter, W. and Power, T.J.** (2019) 'Bolsonaro and Brazil's illiberal backlash' *Journal of Democracy* 30(1): 68–82 (<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0005>)
- ICJ – International Court of Justice** (2020) 'India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act: a tool to silence Indian civil society organizations'. ICJ Briefing Paper. The Hague: International Court of Justice ([www.icj.org/resource/india-repressive-law-on-foreign-contributions-stifles-ngos-must-be-revised-or-scrapped](http://www.icj.org/resource/india-repressive-law-on-foreign-contributions-stifles-ngos-must-be-revised-or-scrapped))
- ISHR – International Service for Human Rights** (2022) 'On first anniversary of coup: Sudan must end systemic violence against women'. ISHR, 25 October (<https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/on-first-anniversary-of-coup-sudan-must-end-systemic-violence-against-women>)
- Ispahani, F.** (2017) *Purifying the land of the pure: a history of Pakistan's religious minorities*. Oxford University Press.
- Jani, H.M., Hashim, W.M.W. and Zaman, L.K.** (2024) 'The aftermath of Nik Elin: does it affect the position of the Malaysian Syariah Court?' *International Journal Of Law, Government and Communication* 9(36): 36 (<https://gaexcellence.com/index.php/ijlgc/article/view/565>)
- Jayal, N.G.** (2022) 'Reinventing the republic: Faith and citizenship in India' *Studies in Indian Politics* 10(1):14–30 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/23210230221082799>)
- Jelin, E.** (1994) '¿Ante, de, en, y? Mujeres, derechos humanos' *América Latina Hoy* 9 (<https://doi.org/10.14201/alh.2305>)
- Kabeer, N.** (2005) 'Introduction: the search for inclusive citizenship: meanings and expressions in an inter-connected world' in N. Kabeer (ed.) *Inclusive citizenship: meanings and expressions*. London: Zed Books, pp. 1–27
- Kakar, A.H.** (2021) 'Student's lynching for blasphemy still haunts Pakistani university'. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14 April ([www.rferl.org/a/student-lynching-for-blasphemy-still-haunts-pakistaniuniversity/31203447.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/student-lynching-for-blasphemy-still-haunts-pakistaniuniversity/31203447.html))
- Kamal, D.R.** (2022) 'Networked struggles: placards at Pakistan's Aurat March' *Feminist Legal Studies* 30(2): 219–233 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-021-09480-4>)

- Kandiyoti, D., Al-Ali, N. and Poots, K.S.** (2019) 'Introduction – beyond women, Islam and the state: situating the politics of gender in a new century' in D. Kandiyoti, N. Al-Ali and K.S. Poots (eds.) *Gender, governance and Islam*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 1–17 ([www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvrs9192.4](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvrs9192.4))
- Karmakar, K.K.** (2023) 'Hindu personal laws in Bangladesh: challenges and prospects of women's rights' *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities* 6(3): 2540–2565 (<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4551725>)
- Karpov, V.** (2010) 'Desecularization: a conceptual framework' *Journal of Church and State* 52(2): 232–270 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csq058>)
- Katz, S.** (1995) 'The rise of religious fundamentalism in Britain: the experience of Women Against Fundamentalism' *Gender & Development* 3(1): 42–43 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/741921763>)
- Khan, A.** (2018) *The women's movement in Pakistan: activism, Islam and democracy*. London: I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury Publishing
- Khan, A. and Naqvi, S.** (2018) *Women in politics: gaining ground for progressive outcomes in Pakistan*. IDS Working Paper 519. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies (<https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/14155>)
- Khattab, A.** (2019) 'Malaysia: High Court ruling on Sisters in Islam threatens rights to freedom of expression and of religion or belief'. International Commission of Jurists, 10 September ([www.icj.org/malaysia-high-court-ruling-on-sisters-in-islam-threatens-rights-to-freedom-of-expression-and-of-religion-or-belief](http://www.icj.org/malaysia-high-court-ruling-on-sisters-in-islam-threatens-rights-to-freedom-of-expression-and-of-religion-or-belief))
- Kitroeff, N.** (2022) 'How Mexico's top justice became an abortion rights champion'. The New York Times, 9 July ([www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/world/americas/mexico-abortion-chief-justice.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/world/americas/mexico-abortion-chief-justice.html))
- Lambertucci, C. and Centenera, M.** (2023) 'Argentina's feminist movement mobilizes against Javier Milei'. EL PAÍS English, 19 September (<https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-09-29/argentinas-feminist-movement-mobilizes-against-javier-milei.html>)
- Little, A. and Meng, A.** (2023) 'Measuring democratic backsliding' *Political Science & Politics* 57(2): 149–161 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300063X>)
- Madhok, S.** (2021) *Vernacular rights cultures*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108961844>)
- Malik, S.** (1995) 'Recent case law on custody and second marriage in Bangladesh: a trend towards secularisation of the legal system?' *Verfassung Und Recht in Übersee/Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 28(1): 103–125
- McEwen, H. and Narayanaswamy, L.** (2023) *The international anti-gender movement: understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection*. UNRISD Working Paper. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development ([www.unrisd.org/en/library/publications/the-international-anti-gender-movement-understanding-the-rise-of-anti-gender-discourses-in-the-conte](http://www.unrisd.org/en/library/publications/the-international-anti-gender-movement-understanding-the-rise-of-anti-gender-discourses-in-the-conte))
- Mehrabi, E.** (2020) 'Former Vice President sentenced to 28 months in prison'. Iranwire, 6 December (<https://iranwire.com/en/features/68235>)
- Menon, N.** (2014) 'A uniform civil code in India: the state of the debate in 2014' *Feminist Studies* 40(2): 480–486

- Mohammadi, N.** (2024) 'Gender apartheid must be declared a crime'. Nobel Peace Center, 25 January ([www.nobelpeacecenter.org/en/news/gender-apartheid-must-be-declared-a-crime](http://www.nobelpeacecenter.org/en/news/gender-apartheid-must-be-declared-a-crime))
- Morán Faúndes, J.M.** (2018) 'Religión, secularidad y activismo héteropatriarcal: ¿qué sabemos del activismo opositor a los derechos sexuales y reproductivos en Latinoamérica?' *La ventana. Revista de estudios de género* 5(47): 97–138
- Mufti, M., Shafqat, S. and Siddiqui, N.** (eds.) (2020) *Pakistan's political parties: surviving between dictatorship and democracy*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press (<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10crdtk>)
- Nazneen, S.** (2018) 'Binary framings, Islam and struggle for women's empowerment in Bangladesh' *Feminist Dissent* 3: 194–230 (<https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n3.2018.294>)
- Nazneen, S. and Masud, R.** (2017) *The politics of promoting gender equity in Bangladesh*. ESID Working Paper 76. Manchester, UK: Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID), University of Manchester ([www.effective-states.org/working-paper-76](http://www.effective-states.org/working-paper-76))
- Needham, A.D., Sunder Rajan, R., Tejani, S., and Richman, P.** (eds.) (2007) *The crisis of secularism in India*. Durham NC: Duke University Press (<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/suss/detail.action?docID=1169343>)
- Nelson, M.J.** (2021) 'Regime types, regime transitions, and religion in Pakistan' in M. Cammett and P. Jones (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of politics in Muslim societies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 115–142 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190931056.013.18>)
- Ngo, H.C.** (2021) 'The Church, governance, and women's rights in Argentina'. LSE Social Policy Blog, 1 February (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/socialpolicy/2021/02/01/the-church-governance-and-womens-rights-in-argentina>)
- Office of International Religious Freedom** (2022) *2022 report on international religious freedom*. Washington DC: United States Department of State Report ([www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh](http://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh))
- Olson, M.** (2020) 'Blurring the division between church and state in AMLO's Mexico'. North American Congress on Latin America, 10 February (<https://nacla.org/news/2020/02/10/Church-and-State-AMLO-Mexico>)
- Oropa, M.H., García, P.I.C., Chávez, I.C., et al.** (2024) *Violencia sexual digital contra las mujeres en México: El papel de Ley Olimpia en la transformacion de los mandatos de género que la sostienen*. ALIGN Report. London: ODI Global ([www.alignplatform.org/resources/report-digital-sexual-violence-against-women-mexico-olimpia-law](http://www.alignplatform.org/resources/report-digital-sexual-violence-against-women-mexico-olimpia-law))
- Othman, N.** (2006) 'Muslim women and the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism/extremism: an overview of Southeast Asian Muslim women's struggle for human rights and gender equality' *Women's Studies International Forum* 29(4): 339–353 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2006.05.008>)
- Papada, E., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F. et al.** (2023) *Democracy report 2023: defiance in the face of autocratization*. V-Dem Institute Report ([www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports](http://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports))
- Parsa, F.** (2021) 'After eight years as Iran's president, what is Rouhani's record on women's rights?' *My Stealthy Freedom*, 13 June ([www.mystealthyfreedom.org/after-eight-years-as-irans-president-what-is-rouhanis-record-on-womens-rights](http://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/after-eight-years-as-irans-president-what-is-rouhanis-record-on-womens-rights))
- Patel, P.** (2008) 'Faith in the state? Asian women's struggles for human rights in the U.K.' *Feminist Legal Studies* 16(1): 9–36 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-007-9076-8>)

- Pearson, T.** (2020) 'Mexicans building a feminist Internet face challenges'. openDemocracy, 12 February ([www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/mexicans-building-a-feminist-internet-face-challenges](http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/mexicans-building-a-feminist-internet-face-challenges))
- Peker, L.** (2024) 'Women's rights are disappearing in Argentina. Don't be complacent – yours could be next to go'. The Guardian, 23 January ([www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/23/women-rights-argentina-javier-milei-anti-feminist](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/23/women-rights-argentina-javier-milei-anti-feminist))
- Pew Research Center** (2012) *The global religious landscape: a report on the size and distribution of the world's major religious groups as of 2010*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center ([www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec))
- Phillips, A. and Casanova, J.** (2009) *A debate on the public role of religion and its social and gender implications*. Gender and Development Programme Paper 5. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and Heinrich Boell Stiftung (<https://ng.boell.org/en/2010/06/04/debate-public-role-religion-and-its-social-and-gender-implications>)
- Philpott, D.** (2007) 'Explaining the political ambivalence of religion' *The American Political Science Review* 101(3): 505–525
- Pitman, A.** (2024) 'A Bangladesh in transition does not need a resurgent Jamaat-e-Islami'. Scroll.In, 16 August (<https://scroll.in/article/1072110/a-bangladesh-in-transition-does-not-need-a-resurgent-jamaate-islami>)
- Rachman, J.** (2024) 'Court victory disturbs Malaysia's balancing act on Islamic law'. Foreign Policy, 15 August (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/12/court-victory-disturbs-malysias-balancing-act-on-islamic-law>)
- Rai, S.M.** (2020) 'Feminist Dissent: Shaheen Bagh, citizens and citizenship' *Feminist Dissent* 5: 265–274
- Ramírez, G.A.** (2020) '*Ideología de género*', lo 'post-secular', el fundamentalismo neopentecostal y el neointegrismo Católico: la vocación anti-democrática. Asociación Brasileña Interdisciplinar de SIDA Report (<https://salutsexual.sidastudi.org/es/registro/a53b7fb37d3224a5017e059833e60302>)
- Ramos, R.** (2024) 'Winning the fight for reproductive rights in Mexico'. Open Society Foundations, 15 February ([www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/winning-the-fight-for-reproductive-rights-in-mexico](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/winning-the-fight-for-reproductive-rights-in-mexico))
- Reilly, N.** (2017) 'Recasting secular thinking for emancipatory feminist practice' *Social Compass* 64(4): 481–494 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768617727484>)
- Reuterswärd, C.** (2021) 'Pro-life and feminist mobilization in the struggle over abortion in Mexico: church networks, elite alliances, and partisan context' *Latin American Politics and Society* 63(3): 21–45 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2021.21>)
- Riaz, A.** (2013) *Islam and identity politics among British Bangladeshis: a leap of faith*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press
- Roces, M. and Edwards, L.** (eds.) (2010) *Women's movements in Asia: feminisms and transnational activism*. Routledge (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203851234>)
- Roggeband, C. and Krizsan, A.** (2019) *Democratic backsliding and backlash against women's rights: understanding the current challenges for feminist politics*. UN Women Background Paper for Expert Group Meeting
- Rojas, J.D.** (2022) 'AMLO and Mexico's fourth transformation' *American Affairs Journal* IV(4) (<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2022/11/amlo-and-mexicos-fourth-transformation>)

- Ruibal, A.** (2014) 'Feminismo frente a fundamentalismos religiosos: mobilização e contramobilização em torno dos direitos reprodutivos na América Latina' *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política* 14: 111–138 (<https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-335220141405>)
- Saeed, S.** (2007) 'Pakistani nationalism and the state marginalisation of the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan' *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7(3): 132–152 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2007.tb00166.x>)
- Sahgal, G.** (2020) 'Hindutva past and present: from secular democracy to Hindu rashtra' *Feminist Dissent* 5: 19–49 (<https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n5.2020.757>)
- Sanders, R.** (2018) 'Norm spoiling: undermining the international women's rights agenda' *International Affairs* 94(2): 271–291 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy023>)
- Sarkar, S.** (2023) 'Will Modi's uniform civil code kill Indian "secularism"?'. Al Jazeera, 16 August ([www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/8/17/will-a-uniform-civil-code-end-indian-secularism](http://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/8/17/will-a-uniform-civil-code-end-indian-secularism))
- Scheele, C.** (2020) 'Beyond the Beijing Declaration – assessment and main challenges'. European Institute for Gender Equality, 4 March (<https://eige.europa.eu/newsroom/director-corner/beyond-beijing-declaration-assessment-and-main-challenges>)
- Sen, R. and Jha, S.** (2024) 'Women under Hindutva: misogynist memes, mock-auction and doxing, deepfake-pornification and rape threats in digital space' *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (<https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241257686>)
- Sharp, S. and Milesi, C.** (2024) '100 days of President Milei: Argentine democratic resilience under threat?' ODI Global, 22 March (<https://odi.org/en/insights/100-days-of-president-milei-argentine-democratic-resilience-under-threat>)
- Shehabuddin, E.** (1999) 'Contesting the illicit: gender and the politics of fatwas in Bangladesh' *Signs* 24(4): 1011–1044
- SIHA Network** (2021) *At the dawn of post-revolutionary Sudan: a reflection on the dynamics of the women's movement*. SIHA Network Report. Kampala: Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa ([https://issuu.com/halayassin/docs/at\\_the\\_dawn\\_of\\_post-revolution\\_sudan\\_web](https://issuu.com/halayassin/docs/at_the_dawn_of_post-revolution_sudan_web))
- Singh, B.P.** (2022) 'Kisan Andolan in India (2020–21): primacy of the political' *Sikh Formations* 18(1–2): 150–169 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2022.2082141>)
- Singha, R.** (2021) 'We want model Hindu temples in every upazila and holiday in Ratha Yatra: Bangladesh Hindu Mahajot'. Struggle for Hindu Existence, 20 June (<https://hinduexistence.org/2021/06/21/we-want-model-hindu-temples-in-every-upazila-and-holiday-in-ratha-yatra-bangladesh-hindu-mahajot>)
- Sisters in Islam** (2022) *Highlights of the Muslim youth survey 2022*. Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Sisters in Islam ([https://sistersinislam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Highlights-of-Muslim-Youth-Survey-2022\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://sistersinislam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Highlights-of-Muslim-Youth-Survey-2022_Full-Report.pdf))
- Sotelo, M.V. and Arocena, F.** (2021) 'Evangelicals in the Latin American political arena: the cases of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay' *SN Social Sciences* 1(7): 180 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00179-6>)
- Suarez Estrada, M.** (2022) 'Feminist struggles against criminalization of digital violence: lessons for internet governance from the Global South' *Policy & Internet* 14(2): 410–423 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.277>)



- Sunder Rajan, R.** (2003) *The scandal of the state: women, law and citizenship in postcolonial India*. Durham NC: Duke University Press
- Supreme Court of Bangladesh** (2015) *Summary of judgment civil appeal nos. 593-594 OF 2001*. Appellate Division, 25 January ([www.blast.org.bd/content/report/Fatwa-Case-Summary-english.pdf](http://www.blast.org.bd/content/report/Fatwa-Case-Summary-english.pdf))
- Sutton, B. and Borland, E.** (2013) 'Framing abortion rights in Argentina's Encuentros Nacionales de Mujeres' *Feminist Studies* 39(1): 194–234
- Swarr, A.L. and Nagar, R.** (2010) *Critical transnational feminist praxis*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press
- Tajali, M.** (2023) "'Gender justice" versus "gender equality"' *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 19(2): 141–166 (<https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-10462312>)
- Talbot, I.** (2022) 'Pakistan's hybrid regime: growing democratization, or increased authoritarianism?' in S. Widmalm (ed.) *Routledge handbook of autocratization in South Asia*, 1st edn. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, pp. 141–150 ([www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003042211-15/pakistan-hybrid-regime-ian-talbot](http://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003042211-15/pakistan-hybrid-regime-ian-talbot))
- Tamés, R.** (2023) 'Mexican state becomes 12th to decriminalize abortion'. Human Rights Watch, 6 September ([www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/06/mexican-state-becomes-12th-decriminalize-abortion](http://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/06/mexican-state-becomes-12th-decriminalize-abortion))
- Taylor, L.** (2023) 'Abortion is decriminalised in Mexico as "green wave" sweeps the region' *BMJ* 382: 2060 (<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p2060>)
- The Economist** (2022) 'Latin America is becoming more secular'. The Economist, 16 April ([www.economist.com/the-americas/2022/04/16/latin-america-is-becoming-more-secular](http://www.economist.com/the-americas/2022/04/16/latin-america-is-becoming-more-secular))
- Thompson, S. and Kostianen, E.** (2023) 'The long journey of Sudanese women from the margins of politics to influential roles in official processes'. CMI Insight Paper. Helsinki/Brussels: CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (<https://cmi.fi/2023/06/09/cmi-insight-the-long-journey-of-sudanese-women-from-the-margins-of-politics-to-influential-roles-in-official-processes>)
- Tohidi, N.** (2016) 'Women's rights and feminist movements in Iran' *Sur – International Journal on Human Rights* 24 (<https://sur.conectas.org/en/womens-rights-feminist-movements-iran>)
- Tønnessen, L. and Al-Nagar, S.** (2024) 'Women, revolution, and backlash: igniting feminist mobilization in Sudan' *Politics & Gender* 20(2): 495–500 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000708>)
- Ul Mustafa, A.** (2016) 'Proposed procedural amendments to check misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan' (<https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2957077>)
- UN Women** (2023) Expert Group Meeting on international strategies and tools to address the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan. UN Women Afghanistan Country Office ([www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/expert-group-meeting-report-international-strategies-and-tools-to-address-the-situation-of-women-and-girls-in-afghanistan-en.pdf](http://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/expert-group-meeting-report-international-strategies-and-tools-to-address-the-situation-of-women-and-girls-in-afghanistan-en.pdf))
- Vaggione, J.M.** (2018) 'Sexuality, law, and religion in Latin America: frameworks in tension' *Religion and Gender* 8(1): 14–31 (<https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10246>)
- V-Dem Institute** (2024) 'The V-Dem dataset'. Electronic dataset, V-Dem Institute ([www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset](http://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset))

- Waylen, G.** (2000) 'Gender and democratic politics: A comparative analysis of consolidation in Argentina and Chile.' *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 32(3): 765–793 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X00005939>).
- Waylen, G.** (2007) *Engendering transitions: women's mobilization, institutions, and gender outcomes*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- WLUML – Women Living Under Muslim Laws** (2023) 'Naming and ending gender apartheid'. WLUML, 19 September ([www.wluml.org/2023/09/19/naming-and-ending-gender-apartheid](http://www.wluml.org/2023/09/19/naming-and-ending-gender-apartheid))
- World Population Review** (2023) 'Secular countries 2023'. Webpage. World Population Review (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/secular-countries>)
- Yildiz, K. and Taysi, T.B.** (2007) *The Kurds in Iran: the past, present and future*. London: Pluto Press (<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs3mr>)
- Zilla, C.** (2018) 'Evangelicals and politics in Latin America'. SWP Comment 46. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs ([www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/evangelicals-and-politics-in-latin-america-1](http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/evangelicals-and-politics-in-latin-america-1))



# Appendix 1 List of interview participants

---

**Reem Abbas** is a journalist and former member of the MANSAM coalition in Sudan.

**Hala Alkarib** is a Sudanese activist and regional director of SIHA.

**Maria Fernanda Pérez-Pazos** is a Mexican political analyst, feminist urban planner researcher and runs the *Feminismos en plural* podcast.

**Sara Hossain** is a lawyer and honorary executive director of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Service Trust.

**Rozana Isa** is executive director of Sisters in Islam in Malaysia.

**Sara Malkani** is a lawyer and member of the Aurat March feminist collective in Pakistan.

**Marcela Oropa** is the founder of Defensoras Digitales and part of the Ley Olimpia movement in Mexico.

**Pragna Patel** is a lawyer and founding member of the Southall Black Sisters in the UK.

**Navsharan Singh** is a researcher and women's and human rights practitioner based in New Delhi, India.

**Mona Tajali** is associate professor at Agnes Scott College in the US and board member of Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

An Argentine women's rights activist and organiser of *Ni Una Menos* marches, who requested to be anonymised.



**ODI Global**

---

ODI Global advises leaders  
on driving positive change.  
We turn bold ideas, evidence,  
and broad expertise into  
actionable strategies for  
a more resilient, just and  
equitable future.

---

---

**ODI Global**

203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ, UK  
+44 (0)20 7922 0300  
[info@odi.org](mailto:info@odi.org)

[odi.org](https://odi.org)  
[linkedin.com/company/odi](https://linkedin.com/company/odi)  
[bsky.app/profile/odi.global](https://bsky.app/profile/odi.global)

---