

25 years: women working against fundamentalism in the UK

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An interview with Nira Yuval-Davis and Sukhwant Dhaliwal, co-editors of the new book telling the story of Women Against Fundamentalism, an organisation set up in 1989 by women of many faiths and none to work at the interface of feminism and anti-racism. The book also features a chapter by NSS honorary associate Gita Sahgal.

Deniz Kandiyoti: You have put together a [book](#) that commemorates and celebrates 25 years of [Women Against Fundamentalism](#) (WAF). What prompted you to form the collective?

Nira Yuval-Davis: Women Against Fundamentalism ([WAF](#)) was formed during the height of the [Rushdie Affair](#) in 1989, soon after the publication of The Satanic Verses when Muslim fundamentalist organisations, through their transnational networks, attempted to get the book banned, staging demonstrations and book burnings, including in the UK. Ayatollah Khomeini, then Supreme Leader of Iran, issued a fatwa authorizing the killing of Salman Rushdie.

The initial push to form WAF came from members of [Southall Black Sisters](#) (SBS) who recognised these anti-Rushdie mobilisations as the sign of a global resurgence in religious fundamentalism. They understood that the polarised responses - both the portrayals of Muslims as inherently barbaric and the support for the anti-Rushdie demonstrators on grounds of cultural sensitivity and anti-racism – were also manifestations of the problems of multiculturalist policy and practice in the UK. They also saw resurgent religion as a direct threat to the rights of women and girls. So at an International Women's Day meeting in Southall on 8th March 1989, SBS raised these concerns and issued a statement in support of Rushdie, the right to freedom of expression and the right to dissent and doubt.

SBS joined forces with Voices for Rushdie, the Iranian Women's Organisation, and Brent Asian Women's Refuge, and WAF was then founded as a feminist coalition of women from a diverse range of ethnic, national, class, professional, and religious backgrounds. We were united by our shared political values as feminists, and as dissenters within our communities and their political circles.

WAF defined fundamentalism as modern day religious political movements that made use of state machinery to consolidate their power and to impose their version of religion. WAF members wanted to make clear to the public at large that those mobilising against Salman Rushdie were not representative of the range of voices within their communities. At their founding meeting WAF decided to organise a counter protest to the planned anti-Rushdie demonstration through central London on 27th May 1989. Images of that event provide strong [visual representations](#) of WAF's political location.

Sukhwant Dhaliwal: WAF started its campaigning work by responding to civil society mobilisations against Rushdie but quickly made the connections between this event and the state's response and the institutional position of Christianity, which came out very clearly during the Rushdie Affair as a discussion about the protection of Christianity through blasphemy legislation and the criminalisation of dissent. We were dealing with the contradictory impulses of the State. At the centre, Margaret

Thatcher challenged the traditionalism of the Church of England, but reinforced the Christian character of British nationalism. In London, Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council created resources for a whole new wave of secular, left, anti-racist and feminist projects that opened out political possibilities. But at the same time, Livingstone was bolstering right wing religious groups that slipped through funding streams by projecting themselves as 'cultural projects'. Right wing groups also worked through anti-racist circles, demanding equality of provision, and attached themselves to Thatcher's neo-liberal politics by, for instance, using privatisation of education to make bids for minority faith schools.

DK: How have the challenges that initially stimulated the creation of WAF evolved through time?

SD: Even before 9/11 we saw that the use of religion became more and more critical to state policies. Many of us noted that multiculturalism was mutating into [multifaithism](#). Paradoxically, when New Labour responded to the 2001 [riots](#) and 9/11 through the combined force of [Community Cohesion](#) policies, these were channelled through strengthened state relations with religious groups. Multiculturalism was being denigrated and assimilationism was revived, while class differences were also played down in a context where new layers of religious leaderships became the beneficiaries of a New Labour policy. The issues that we had raised in our critique of multiculturalism became accentuated as the number of 'religious leaders' and representatives increased exponentially. They became a critical part of New Labour's neo liberal instrumentalisation of 'community' and they were given additional spaces within which to manoeuvre.

But New Labour was also a paradoxical project. After the Thatcherite onslaught on civil society, it attempted to bring back a concern with human rights, equalities and social democracy. Many activists moved from a clear oppositional stance to joining forces with government departments to work on a social democracy agenda. The 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda suicide attacks on the Twin Towers polarized discussion within the UK between on the one hand, Bush and Blair's catastrophic war mongering and the projection of Muslims as dangerous fifth columnists and, on the other, an anti-racist defensiveness against any critique of Islam or Muslim political activism.

When the agenda of the New Labour government became clear, WAF opposed Blair's imperialist agenda dressed up as a bid for 'freedom' and 'democracy', but we also opposed the way in which the [Stop the War Coalition](#) responded to this new security state by building an alliance with factions of right wing Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami networks in Britain. At the time, there was little scrutiny of global fundamentalist networks by either anti-racist or feminist academics and activists. In WAF we were keen to distance ourselves from a neo imperial paternalism dressed up as liberation discourse, but we also wanted to highlight the limits of the anti-war response. We also insisted on the importance of challenging fundamentalism across all religions, not just Muslim fundamentalism. For instance, several WAF women were key in [critiquing](#) the Hindu Right and its [attacks](#) on Muslims and other minorities in India, but also their [relationship](#) with New Labour in the UK.

NYD: Questions around universalism versus relativism of rights also persisted but took different forms. The new discourse around community cohesion lay claim to such a thing as 'British values' and, as we see now with David Cameron, attempted to claim human rights struggles as specifically British, indeed a form of British superiority. Our [submission](#) to the Commission on Cohesion and Integration in 2007 questioned this claim, but also defended the values that had emerged from the Enlightenment tradition, particularly the universality of human rights as an important basis for challenging discrimination and inequality. But the 'war on terror' that led to the bombing of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq also tarnished the value of international law and frameworks and fanned the flames of cultural and religious relativism that milked the flaws of European

governance to justify their own authoritarian projects.

SD: In the late 90s WAF had to react to the proliferation of religious groups within civil society – whether as faith-based welfare providers or religious political organisations. WAF members interacted with these new discourses and spaces in different ways. Some became involved in trying to draw religious frameworks over to more [radical, left, feminist positions](#) while others stayed on the outside and asserted a [secular basis](#) for organising out of a concern that engaging with religious frameworks would both [undercut secularism](#) and compromise the principle of universality. Challenging multifaithism and [safeguarding secular spaces](#) became key aspects of WAF's work.

NYD: Some members felt that while focusing on the state's multifaithist policies we neglected the forensic analysis of fundamentalist organisations and actors themselves. The balance between anti-fundamentalist and anti-racist feminism was always precarious but this became much more complex to maintain due to two shifts in public policy. Firstly, the scope and scale of the securitarian agenda complicated the task of challenging Muslim fundamentalism without colluding with stereotypical racist 'common sense'. Secondly, fundamentalist movements, including Christian Right, the Jamaat-e-Islami, Salfist factions and Khalistani fronts in the UK, had become far more sophisticated in their operations, [articulating](#) their concerns in human rights and civil liberties idioms and becoming more careful with their public language. Using the multifaithist agenda and funding policies, fundamentalist organisations became [embedded](#) in various facets of mainstream state and civil society – in education, the law, health, and as general consultants on the development of public policy. So it became much more difficult to challenge them without sounding racist to those with a shallow knowledge of the organizations and their policies and principles.

DK: If WAF occupies a distinctive place in the landscape of feminist activism in the UK how would you define that place?

NYD: Feminism, like all significant social movements and ideologies, is more a cluster of positions than one homogeneous body of principles, perspectives and practices. The feminist slogan 'sisterhood is global' has been [challenged](#) by particular groupings of women – working class, Black, lesbian, disabled to [reflect multiple identities](#). WAF's sense of feminism was slightly different – the ethnic, national or religious origins of the women involved were diverse but were not the focus of their activism. Rather WAF activism was defined by [shared political values and an intersectional analysis](#), we sought to challenge multiple axes of power and oppression (race, class, gender, ethnicity) simultaneously. We viewed these multiple axes not as additive (i.e. 'racism plus sexism plus disability equals double or triple oppression') but as constitutive of each other. WAF was also [critical of identity politics](#) and the ways in which these [essentialised](#) political positions were more concerned with closing and policing the borders of their groups. We focused, instead, on [building solidarities](#) across differences.

SD: WAF was determined to show that fundamentalism is a concern for anti-racist feminists and endeavoured to locate a feminist response to fundamentalism within a left political and civil liberties frame. It was unique in its ability to make the connections between seemingly different types of struggle without concealing their nuances and contradictions. It is difficult to find organisations nowadays offering analyses of fundamentalism that bring together an understanding of gender, class, racism, Christian privilege in the UK, and critiques of imperialism as well as the facilitating role that both state and civil society have [played](#) in fundamentalist mobilisations. Together with a demand for secularism, a robust welfare state, and Disestablishment these characterize WAF's politics - an orientation that is sorely missing from the current political landscape.

DK: How do you see continuing challenges for the future?

SD: The challenges are immense! At a normative level there has been a huge swing to the right both in terms of entrenched neo-liberalism and the growth of authoritarian religious movements. We now have an overtly neo-liberal state with no regard for social democratic principles – slashing funding and decimating the welfare state, closing borders and returning to 1970s jingoism about immigrants, assimilationist in its assertion of British superiority and the resurgence of a [narrative](#) about Britain as a Christian country despite declining Church attendance. Faith based provision in the UK has become so [embedded](#) in areas of social policy that the idea of removing all state funding of faith schools, for instance, carries little resonance as a pragmatic response to the problem of religion within the education system. Globally, we are seeing the exponential growth and power of right wing religious movements, from the electoral victory of Narendra Modi in India placing the Hindu Right at the centre of a growing world economic power, to the unencumbered Zionist [assault](#) on Palestine, and the heinous [actions](#) of the Islamic State (ISIS). Forms of oppression based on gender and sexuality continue as critical features of all these movements.

NYD: One can group key challenges into three types. First, the need to adjust and expand our political-ideological analyses to encompass both global and UK-based developments since WAF first became active. The bi-annual CMRB-SOAS [seminars](#) are an attempt to encourage such a discussion. The second challenge is organisational. WAF disbanded in June 2012 because its members were active in groups and campaigns against domestic violence, against immigration policies, on the environment, and campaigning for secularism. Having resisted NGO-isation, WAF could not sustain itself on an entirely voluntary basis. The question remains as to whether it is possible or desirable to resurrect WAF. How do we reproduce WAF messages and activities for and with new generations and constituencies? We feel that WAF's agenda should be at the forefront of feminist and anti-racist activism and interwoven with critiques of neo-liberalism and militarism. However, there has been an entrenchment of religious identity politics – something we spent decades contesting.

Asserting that rights need not be justified by religious texts or frameworks, but must simply be available to everyone, requires new struggles. Individually and collectively, we need to find a way of keeping a politics of hope alive while avoiding the all too easy sense of paralysis and despair induced by the vast local and global challenges facing anti-fundamentalist anti-racist feminism.

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