

## **The weight of religion on women's status and the importance of feminist alliances**

The past three decades have witnessed the rising political prominence of religious actors and movements. While religious attachments and practices may have weakened in some countries (most notably, Western Europe), on a worldwide basis they seem to have persisted if not intensified. Moreover, religious arguments continue to be actively invoked in politics across a wide range of countries, both developed and developing. This alleged 'de-privatisation' of religion has raised fundamental questions about the predictions of sweeping secularisation as the inevitable companion to modernisation and development.

In the post-Cold War era, the greater emphasis on democracy and rights has given particular prominence to women's rights as well as human rights more broadly. In much of the world, however, the positive developments in political and legal rights have not been matched by improvements in social justice, as income inequalities have increased and poverty remained stubbornly in place. Some argue that the failed promises of the modern, secular state to produce both democracy and development have in many regions prompted the search for alternative discourses of power and authenticity to challenge the dominant Western agenda. Apart from the dynamics emanating from national and local/grassroots level, the role of transnational networks of finance and the proliferation of diaspora communities over the past three decades have also contributed to the rise and influence of religious actors and movements in many contexts. Feminists wonder where this leaves gender equality.

In this presentation, echoing the debate between Anne Phillips and Jose Casanova about the dynamics of secularism and religiosity, I will mainly base myself on a four years research, coordinated by the UNRISD, that tried to catch how the intertwine of politics and religion do weight on this very question. The project, based on case studies, was waged in eleven countries, spinning diverse regional contexts and encompassing both developed and developing countries, with populations belonging to diverse religious traditions (including Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim). But before doing that, I will refer to a recent cross-national study that I made last year on the question of reproductive rights, to show that on the topic of abortion and contraception, women are far from seeing a real recognition of their rights. I will end in discussing some of the dilemmas facing feminist action and alliance-building in a context where conservative religious forces are assertive and where the struggle for gender equality coincides with other justice claims.