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Against All Odds: Essays on Women, Religion and Development from India and Pakistan

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The impact of religion, as ideology and as culture, on development in general, and on women in particular, has assumed critical importance in view of the religious revivalism evident today in all the countries of South Asia. Religion has been used both by the State and by nationalist movements as an instrument of control and as an assertion of identity, in ways that have proved extrememly retrogressive for women. Battles over identity politics have, moreover, made for polarization and violent confrontation between communities, in which the issue of gender has come into sharp focus. This collection of essays attempts to understand the relationship between women, religion and development by looking at the project of Islamization in Pakistan, and at the sustained resistance to it by the women's movement, through a variety of strategies, both at the grass roots and through lobbying. The strategies include: presenting interviews with women of the right and left, in both countries, who have grappled with the question of faith and with the forces of fundamentalism in their politics; examining the institution of personal law; addressing the problems of religion for feminists whose activism brings them face-to-face with women who have experienced its liberating potential; reviewing the radicalizing role of religion in many movements for equality and progressive social change in the region; and looking at resistance offered by women themselves to its most obvious oppressions.

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