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November 10, 1994.

Women's Training,
Documentation and
Communication Centre



Dear friends,

We are writing this letter to seek responses from various women's groups on a controversial issue.

Recently, The Pioneer carried a news item stating that the Vice-President of NFIW, Ms. Vimala Farooqui, had appealed to the Prime Minister to cancel permission for an international conference of Gay Men to be held in Bombay at the end of this year.

The news item did not really come across as a surprise to many of us; however, it did cause turmoil. Ms. Farooqui and NFIW are not alone in such intolerance. There has been a strong voice against the rights of lesbian women and gay men in this country, even from progressive quarters. By and large, the women's movement and other progressive movements have either maintained silence over the issue or condemned it outright in moralistic overtones. Therefore, we have reasons to assume that a majority of political parties (from Communist to the Hindu fundamentalist BJP) will applaud NFIW's initiative, and that a large section of the women's movement will give silent assent to the intolerance expressed by Ms. Farooqui.

The assumptions and myths which are the basis of NFIW's argument, are widely shared, and intensify the discrimination faced by lesbians and gay men. We feel it is important that the women's movement counter these myths and question this prejudice.

First, the dismissal of homosexuality as "western". Anything that society sees as threatening to the dominant ideology and power relations is dismissed as "western" and deviant. For a long time, feminism (unlike democracy, socialism and communism, which have all come from the West) was seen as a product of western culture and inappropriate within the context of India.

Homosexuality, far from being "western" and a product of the "signing of the GATT agreement" (as Ms. Farooqui states), is as old as history and as universal as heterosexuality. Indian history is replete with examples of the existence of lesbians and gay men. The report, Less Than Gay: A Citizen's Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India, published by the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan of New Delhi in 1991, documented both historical and contemporary experiences of lesbians and gay men in India. A recent conference, on "Gender Constructions and the History of Alternative Sexualities" was held in Delhi in December 1993. It documented the hidden heritage of lesbian, homosexual and bisexual existence in the civilisation of the sub-continent throughout the pre-Aryan, vedic, shaktic, puranic, islamic, bhakti, sufi and colonial contexts.

While research into this ancient history is ongoing, we need to jog our memory regarding more recent events. In February 1988, two women in Bhopal got married and were subsequently terminated from their services for having caused embarrassment to a powerful institution of the State - the police. In January 1992, a group of Kerala schoolgirls were thrown out of their school because they were lesbians. In April 1993, two women were prevented from getting married in Chandrapur, Maharashtra. These are just a few examples of people in remote villages and small district towns who have to lead extremely suffocating lives because they have chosen to live their sexuality differently from the heterosexual norm. Coming from oppressed classes and caste backgrounds, they, especially women, face enormous oppression and ostracism by family as well as the state and are a very vulnerable section of society. Women have attempted/committed suicide rather than succumb to the societal pressures of compulsory heterosexuality and enforced marriage.

At the fourth national conference which took place in Tirupati in January this year, many women from different class and caste backgrounds risked ostracism and spoke about their sexual orientation. A resolution was passed at the conference stating that all women had the right to sexual choice.

Lesbians and gay men the world over are struggling to make their lives more visible. In India, an appeal to repeal the sodomy law (Section 377) is pending in the High Court of Delhi.

As part of the women's movement, we cannot forget these events and dismiss the day to day reality of lesbians and gay men as unimportant, and delegitimize their struggle for a rightful place in society.

It is important to understand where this voice of repression within the women's movement is coming from. We need to examine our own intolerance towards all those people who we think are not like us - people of other religions, castes, colours, marital status and sexual orientation. Those who live their lives differently and courageously, although often silently, undermine our own moralistic agendas and are therefore threatening. Statements such as that made by NFIW are a reflection of deep seated prejudice. They are contrary to the notions of justice and equality of human beings. They pave the way for fascist tendencies to take root within our movement.

State-run institutions can deny a group of "mentally retarded" women the right of integrity of their bodies and remove their uteri en masse. Kiran Bedi can deny prisoners in Tihar Jail the right to protect their bodies and their health by not providing condoms, and can launch a campaign to coercively "reform" them. These are fascist tendencies of the State. Can we allow such tendencies within our movement?

Our pain and anger is aggravated by the sheer knowledge of NFIW's and Ms. Farooqui's past. She, as a member of NFIW, has been in the forefront of the women's movement and has

contributed immensely to the struggle of working class people. Therefore her public statement against homosexuality becomes all the more disturbing. The ideologues of left political formations need to acknowledge that class is not the only discriminatory factor in people's lives.

The proposed conference is an assertion of the right of a discriminated group to come together and visibilise their oppression. All progressive people need to respect and actively uphold this right, whatever their personal opinions about the issue of homosexuality. The right to form associations and the right to choose one's sexual and emotional partners are inalienable fundamental rights, irrespective of class, caste, religion, sex, etc. We cannot ally ourselves with the social and political discrimination of any group of people. We consider it the responsibility of all progressive movements to uphold the rights of people who already face discrimination in this society.

In the end, we would like to clarify that we are aware of the class and gender bias of the organisers of the conference. But we support their right to hold the proposed conference. It is a fundamental constitutional right.

We are aware of the difficulties surrounding this issue but that should not stop us from informing ourselves of the conditions and struggles of people who have been silenced by the arrogance of certain views. It is important that diverse voices are heard and a mature dialogue takes place on the issue.

We hope that you will respond soon. We will take the responsibility of circulating your responses to all of you who would like to be kept informed on the issue.

With warm wishes,

Preeti, Yashvi, Sargi माया, शिवांगी, Aika, Abha

14-11-17

JAGORI GROUP

CPI assails gays conference

The Times of India News Service
NEW DELHI, November 8: What is the connection between homosexuality and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs? Well, according to the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), a women's organisation affiliated to the CPI, the spread of homosexuality could well be the fallout of India signing the GATT treaty.

In a statement, it has expressed its outrage at a proposed international conference of homosexuals to be held in Bombay next month. Describing the conference as "an invasion of India by decadent western culture and a direct fallout of our signing the GATT agreement," it has urged Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao "not to follow Bill Clinton's immoral approach to sexual perversion in the US" and immediately cancel permission to hold this conference in India.

The conference, scheduled for December 30, is to be preceded by a homosexual film festival in Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi on December 27. The delegates to the conference will, thereafter tour Varanasi, Bhubaneswar, Calcutta, Agra, Puri and Delhi, "spreading the message of homosexuality", according to the statement. The NFIW also says that "no country was prepared to host this conference but India readily agreed to host it."

Sponsored by the California-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, the conference's purpose, according to the NFIW, "is to promote and legitimise homosexuality," which will "surely start a wave of sexual permissiveness among urban youth, who have become vulnerable to the vulgarity of western culture brought to them through the media."

Hamsafar to go ahead with gay meet

By S. Balakrishnan

The Times of India News Service

BOMBAY, November 8.

Despite criticism from the women's wing of the Communist Party of India and a warning issued by Shiv Sena legislator Pramod Navalkar, the Hamsafar Trust has continued preparations for the first-ever south Asia conference of gay men to be held here next month.

Trust chairman Ashok Row Kavi said at least 75 gay men would attend the three-day conference which opens on December 27. The conference would be held at a secret venue. Delegates were expected from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka apart from some NRIs from England, Australia and Indonesia.

The theme would be "emerging gay identities in south Asia" and the deliberations would be closed to the press. Interestingly, some representatives of feminist groups have been invited to attend some workshops.

The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), the women's wing of the CPI, has urged the Centre to ban the conference which, it alleged, sought to spread "decadent" western values in India.

It alleged the conference was a

direct outcome of the policies of globalisation and liberalisation being pursued by the Narasimha Rao government. However, Federation's representative in Bombay Tara Reddy said she was neither opposed to the conference nor supported it.

Mr Navalkar said he had no objection "so long as the homosexuals' conference was confined to a closed door discussion." However, he warned that efforts to propagate "perverted sexual values," would not be tolerated.

Meanwhile, Mr Kavi has denied the charge that the conference sought to propagate homosexuality. He said there were already a significant number of homosexuals in India, but they were not given proper guidance on the danger of AIDS and other diseases.

The conference would deal with the implications of their behaviour vis-a-vis their sexual health. According to a brochure brought out by the Trust: "Today the debate concerning sexuality, sexual behaviour and AIDS and the development of effective prevention programmes has become an issue of deep urgency for south Asia."

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1994

PM asked to stop gays' meet

Staff Reporter

New Delhi

THE NATIONAL Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), an organisation backed by CPI, has expressed grave concern at the proposed international conference of homosexuals to be held in Bombay in December and urged Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao to cancel permission to hold the meet.

In a statement on Monday, NFIW's vice-president Vimla Farooqui said the proposed conference amounted to invasion by decadent western culture and was a "direct fall-out" of India's signing the GATT Agreement.

As the purpose of the conference, to be preceded by a film festival, was to promote and legitimise homosexuality, this would start a wave of sexual permissiveness among urban youth, Ms Farooqui said.

She also expressed surprise over the Government's permission to hold the conference, being sponsored by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, as no other country was prepared to host the meet.