

Subject: Letter to AIDWA and NFIW

Date: Mon, 19 Feb 2001 07:02:03

From: "campaign for lesbian rights" <caleri@hotmail.com>

**To: asukthan@law.harvard.edu, deofilo@hotmail.com, janakia@vsnl.com,
l_murthy@yahoo.com, saran@post.harvard.edu, anigam@nde.vsnl.net.in,
pramadam@hotmail.com, saleemk@vsnl.com, sl3399@hotmail.com,
chakfam@mantraonline.com, surovani@hotmail.com**

Copy of letter sent to AIDWA and NFIW with many thanks to everyone for edit comments and adding to the list of names...please overlook any mistake/ommission made. Lesley, could you please forward it to Sangini, Nirantar, Human Rights Law Network, and Sakshi? Thanks.

Date : 17-02-2001

Dear Friends at AIDWA and NFIW,

This is to register our protest at the way in which you categorically and formally refused to include CALERI and Sangini in the joint programme being organised for 8 March. Both these groups are involved in the struggle for lesbian visibility and basic democratic rights and have every right to be part of the International Women's Day both as women and as organisations.

While preparing for 8 March last year, you had expressed the need for greater debate before taking on board the issue of lesbianism. We had seen this as a positive sign and therefore participated in the march looking forward to more open debates and the inclusion of Caleri and Sangini in the following year. Three meetings were organised by us in the course of last year in April and May (AIDWA office) and in August (NFIW office) as a sincere effort to build deeper alliances with women's organisations of the left on the issue of lesbianism. Many who attended these meetings found it both constructive and useful in our joint efforts to understand the range of oppressions faced by all women.

This process of open discussion and working together has received a setback by your blanket insistence on keeping Caleri and Sangini out of the joint programme. Such struggles need our unbiased support rather than closed doors.

The focus on industrial closures in Delhi and the destitution of lakhs of working class families as the theme for 8 March this year is a major concern for all of us and some of us have been working on this since 1996. Therefore, we are unable to understand your objections to getting the broadest possible support for this issue including that of lesbian groups. Such expedient issue-based alliances that sacrifice lesbians in order to attract short-term allies are unacceptable to us. According to those present at the 9 February meeting in the AIDWA office, your representatives neither responded to any ideological issues raised nor opine on these three meetings held in the recent past. The onus of the decision not to have these two groups in the 8 March programme was constantly placed on organisation workers and others not present in the room. This clearly communicated your silence and refusal to enter any debate on the question of lesbianism in particular and women's sexuality in general. We oppose this oppressive silence in no uncertain terms.

It is distressing that you refuse to even concede to the presence of two lesbian groups on a day symbolising the struggle for women's liberation all over the world. This attitude of untouchability indicates that you do not consider the oppression of lesbian women as a crucial dimension of the

oppression of all women in a dominantly patriarchal and heterosexist society.

However, we still hope that you reconsider your decision as well as continue the debate to arrive at a broader and deeper understanding of women's sexuality as a tool of patriarchal control and exploitation. You cannot disagree with us that sexuality is mediated by both class and patriarchy. It is only through honest and open discussions, debates and joint action that we can hope to move toward a society of our own making.

Looking forward to a response,

In solidarity,

Jaya Shrivastava (Ankur), Dimple, Maya, Ranjana, Uma Chakravathy, Nivedita Menon (CALERI), Janaki Abraham (Gender Studies Group), Cath, Betu, Lesley (Sangini), Vani Subrahmaniam, Sadhna Arya, Laxmi Murthy (Saheli), Deepika Tandon (Secy: PUDR), Pramada Menon (CREA), Diamond Oberoi (St. Bede's College, Shimla), Honey (Dept. of Psychology, D.U.), Priya Narula, Samta, Aparna (Human Rights Law Network), Sakshi, Jaya Sharma (Nirantar), Ashwini Sukthankar, Sandhya Luther, Fahima, Manjima, Vineet, Arunesh Maiyar, Saleem Kidwai, Ashley Tellis, Nishit Saran,

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Tel: 3274749; 3287196;
3254734; 3277948

Delhi State Committee
National Federation of Indian Women

4/7, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002

February 20, 2001

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your letter of 17.02.2001 addressed to AIDWA and NFIW. On behalf of the Delhi State Committee of National Federation of Indian Women we would like to communicate to you our distress over your decision to opt out of the joint platform of women's organizations for observing International Women's Day, 2001. As you are aware, for the past more than one decade several organizations which are committed to the struggle for women's rights have been jointly observing International Women's Day in Delhi every year. This, we would like to underline, is a tradition which we cherish, and which, it is regretted, might come to an end due to the refusal of some of our friends to appreciate our problems with regard to formally accommodating, on our joint platform, groups which are specifically (though, perhaps, not exclusively) concerned with the issue of lesbian rights.

When the question of making these groups a part of the existing joint platform was raised on the eve of International Women's Day last year (2000), we had pointed out that it might not be possible for us--at least for the time being--to include the issue of lesbian rights among those issues which were to be highlighted on International Women's Day. Surely you would concede to us the right to focus on those issues which, in our assessment, should be urgently taken up by the women's movement. The collective opinion of our organization was, and still is,

that the issue of lesbian rights is not such an issue. We would like to place on record that under no circumstances should this be interpreted to mean that we support the denial of normal citizen's rights to lesbians. We are opposed to any intervention by the state in the matter of adult lesbian relationships and are against the use of its repressive machinery to regulate anyone's sexuality. Similarly we stand against any form of social oppression in the name of disapproval of lesbianism. However, this is a problem which can be placed within the broader ambit of the struggle for civil liberties and democratic rights.

We feel that in the context of building a mass movement for women's rights there are several more pressing problems which are of the utmost concern to a very large section of Indian women and it is over these problems that we, as an organization, have been mobilizing support over the past several years. Our attempt has been to build a consensus on such issues. There could, of course, be some issues which we regard as important but which, in the interests of such a consensus, we might not insist upon in a joint forum precisely because they are likely to be of a contentious nature.

A joint platform can only be built around a consensus, around a minimum programme that is acceptable to all those who are part of it. We do not visualize the joint platform for observing International Women's Day as a platform on which there is unanimity among all constituents on all issues. It is a matter of deep regret for us that you are not prepared to allow divergent views on an issue on which there was no prior consensus, and have chosen to disassociate from the joint platform. Yet, as you yourself have mentioned in your letter, on our part we have tried to engage in a constructive dialogue on the question of lesbian rights. In these matters there can be no firm deadlines and it might take much longer for you to convince us and even longer for us to convince our grassroots activists of the necessity of accommodating the demands of lesbian/gay rights groups. Unfortunately there seems to be a lack of that kind of patience on your part. One year is too short a time in the history of any...

movement. Moreover, every organization has the right to have its own agenda and we are rather disconcerted at your attempt to lay down a timeframe within which we should accept an agenda to which you accord priority.

We find the reference to our alleged 'refusal to enter any debate on the question of lesbianism in particular and women's sexuality in general', rather surprising because within any movement the debate over the relevance or otherwise of a particular issue is an ongoing process. While you appear to be thinking in terms of a here-and-now outcome we have had in mind a wider debate at various levels both within our organization as well as with other organizations which are part of the women's movement. It would not be appropriate to regard the meetings which we have had so far, and which you have referred to in your letter, as being of the nature of academic seminars or symposia. The main purpose of these meetings was to sort out the question of whether or not the issue of lesbian rights is to be included in the forthcoming joint programme on International Women's Day.

Our representatives at these meetings were not expected to respond to so-called 'ideological issues' as in a debating competition but were required to place and clarify the collective understanding of our organization, for whatever it is worth, before other organizations and carry back the outcome of the interaction for further discussion, if necessary, within our organization. It is strange that you should question the manner in which we arrive at decisions within our organization and even go to the extent of suggesting that our representatives perhaps misrepresented the opinion of our organization, i.e. of 'workers and others not present in the room'. We seek to offer no clarification on this point because this is a matter on which our representatives are answerable to our organization alone. Just as we respect the internal organizational structures of the organizations which are part of the joint forum, we expect them to have some respect for our manner of functioning.

As for formally including CALERI and Sangini in the joint programme being organized for 8 March 2001 we would like to

reiterate that according to our understanding whatever other concerns these organizations might have, their main focus is on the issue of lesbian rights and it is with this single issue that they are most closely identified. In view of the lack of consensus on placing lesbian rights on the joint minimum agenda for this year's International Women's Day we are not convinced that they should formally be a part of the joint programme.

We once again appeal to you to reconsider your decision to withdraw from the joint programme on this issue. At a time when the rightwing offensive within the country as well as internationally seeks to intensify the exploitation of women through instruments of class and patriarchal oppression we need to, more than ever, close rather than break ranks. However, should you still not feel inclined to join, we wish you all the best in your struggle and send you warm greetings on the occasion of International Women's Day.

Sehba

Sehba Farooqui
on behalf of State Council
of Delhi State Committee, National Federation of Indian Women

Akhil Bhartiya
Janwadi Mahila Samiti

Delhi State Committee (A I D W A)

23, V. P. House, Rafi Marg, New Delhi-110001 Tel. : 3710476

Ref. No.

Date :

To
Ankur, CALERI, Sangini, Gender Studies Group, Saheli, Sakshi, HRLN, Nirantar and
other signatories
C/O Jaya Srivastava, Ankur

Dear friends,

This is in response to your letter addressed jointly to the AIDWA and the NFIW. We find it extremely unfortunate that you have completely misrepresented our position in your letter to which we will return later.

Your letter does damage to the process of unity, which has been built up in Delhi through our joint efforts and experiences. The unity in action among different women's organizations and groups does not preclude differences in ideology, methods of organization and mobilization. Our approach to joint action has been respect for each others' positions on different issues while seeking to find common ground for action on issues which affect women. Your view that issue-based struggles are "expedient", "short-term" and "non-ideological" completely belies the last two decades of the history of the women's movement in Delhi. It undermines our many struggles through which varied forms and arenas of women's oppression were made visible.

In this struggle there are numerous issues, even as each organisation has its own priorities. AIDWA certainly has priorities in its work among women which are decided collectively by our organization at different levels through a democratic process. We understand a group having a priority to get social recognition for sexual rights and preferences. This is not a priority for us at present and we do not intend to have any public campaigns on this issue in the near future.

We had thought that we had made our position quite clear in the meetings you refer to which were held last year. We had also mentioned that as and when there were any specific cases of discrimination against lesbians which the lesbian rights groups were aware of, we could certainly discuss our participation in any joint action at different levels. As many of you know, in the past AIDWA has extended individual and organizational support on issues of sexuality and sexual preference.

