

## **PRESS RELEASE: STATEMENT BY PINJRA TOD IN RESPONSE TO NOTICES ISSUED BY DCW**

**Dated: 9.05.16**

Pinjra Tod welcomes the notices that have been issued by the Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) on 7th May' 16, to ALL 23 registered universities in Delhi instituting an enquiry based on the report that Pinjra Tod had submitted as a complaint to the Commission in November last year. Separate notices have also been sent to all undergraduate colleges under Delhi University which have women's hostels. The report submitted by Pinjra Tod is 45 page exhaustive document that emerged from a long process of collecting and documenting testimonials and experiences from women students across colleges and universities in Delhi. For Pinjra Tod which has emerged as an autonomous movement of women students from across universities in the country since August last year, the institution of this enquiry by DCW is a very important and powerful achievement.

To finally have a state body recognise the widespread and insidious forms of discrimination and humiliation that has marked the lives of thousands of women students in higher education for decades now, denying them equal opportunities, access and rights, shall instil confidence in many women students. The notices also mark out the commission's mandate to implement safeguards provided to women under the constitution. The enquiry instituted by the DCW therefore also raises the very important question of the constitutionality of the current rules in effect in universities across the country and the result of the enquiry would have implications across the country.

Our movement has emerged from a long history of struggle by women students challenging the university authorities and the state on their sexist and patriarchal biases and practices. The notices by DCW mark an important step ahead in that history and add to the strength of women students. From here on, it is to be seen and ensured that university administrations take the implications of this action seriously and participate sincerely in the enquiry. We plan to open direct dialogue with college and university administrations with regard to our demands in the coming semester seeking to make them answerable both to their women students and the DCW. The need for this is clear in that while JMI promised to review its hostel rules in the wake of a similar notice last year, nothing concrete has changed in the daily lives of women residents of Jamia hostel as yet. Similarly, little progress has been made by the Hindu College administration in revising the fees and discriminatory rules in their upcoming women's hostel despite being served notices by both the NCW and the DCW. Such disregard of DCW proceedings reflect a disregard towards the concerns of women and gender-parity and is very unfortunate to say the least.

We have already been in conversation with the Delhi University administration on our demands, submitted to them on International Working Women's Day where they have agreed to meet some important demands such as greater publicity of information on redressal of sexual harassment, introduction of anti-sexual harassment undertakings during admission along with the anti-ragging undertaking, and a standardization of rules across women's hostels in the university. They yet remain silent on many of the other demands and questions. We hope that

these notices will add pressure on the administration to show greater commitment to the resolution of these issues.

Despite the powerful movement going on in Hindu College, DU, the administration has been repeatedly defending its regressive rules saying that most colleges have similar rules. It is therefore clear that these issues cannot be resolved at the college or even university level but needs to change across the country.

### **POINTS RAISED IN THE NOTICE MARKED OUT IN THE PINJRA TOD REPORT**

Since establishment of the first school for girls by Savitri Bai Phule and Jyotirao Phule in 1848, it has been a long struggle for women to enter institutions of higher education to where we stand today, where women are present in almost equal numbers as their male counterparts, in our universities. However, what Pinjra Tod has been arguing as a movement is that the terms of women's participation in the university is marked by discrimination where women students are still accorded a secondary status, which is what the questions raised in the DCW notice highlight. One of the starkest examples of this unequal position accorded to women students is the wide range of sexist rules and regulations that exist in women's hostels and PGs. These include deadlines/curfews that start as early as 5.30pm; tedious processes for acquiring late nights/night-outs that need permissions from parents/LGs/hostel authorities; regulations on movement inside the hostel premises/lawns; constrains on having female visitors/guests in your own room, restrictions on accessing common room or internet lab/TV/canteen facilities inside the hostel; dress-codes for maintaining 'decorum' and 'decency, everyday moral policing by wardens and hostel authorities', requirement of warden's permission for availing coaching classes or taking up a job/internship, severe disciplinary action for 'flouting' curfew rules, eviction from hostel during vacations etc. A women student's life in the university is thus, characterised by tiring mechanisms of applications, permissions, registers, slips and signatures for availing the most basic of rights: an ordeal which is completely absent for a male student.

Such regressive rules and regulations close off numerous possibilities and experiences that a woman student can explore on campus and in the city: whether it is about attending an evening seminar or working in the library/lab at night or sitting in a park or walking the streets or going for a film or working a part-time night-job for financial independence/survival, or exploring love – the list is endless. Through the garb of 'safety' and the justification of 'parents wanting such rules' the university essentially acts like a Khap Panchayat and reproduces the patriarchal and Brahminical structures that exist in society, instead of upholding fundamental constitutional rights of freedom and mobility for its women students. We want the university to stop infantilising us as 'girls' and 'daughters' in need of 'protection', but demand that they treat us as adult women who can make their own independent decisions. The rule-books of the women's hostel reflect the deep fear that this society has about an autonomous assertion by women of their voice, independence and sexuality: women's freedom is too dangerous and destabilising for our patriarchy and caste re-inforcing universities.

The second issue tackled in these notices is that of education being more expensive for a woman student. Pinjra Tod conducted a study of different women's and men's hostels under

University of Delhi (which is included in the report) and found that women students pay much more than their male counterparts on an average. This has come up in a particularly strong manner in the context of the newly constructed women's hostel in Hindu College, where the fees is thrice that of the men's hostel. The exorbitant fees of women's hostels (besides the fact that there are often lesser hostel seats for women) closes off the opportunity for education for a vast section of women who come from Dalit, Bahujan and working class families. This leads us to the third crucial implication of these notices: which is the demand for data from the universities that is disaggregated not just by gender, but by reservation status as well. Pinjra Tod insisted for this disaggregated information to be sought, as we believe that this will provide us crucial insights into understanding and fighting the extent of discrimination and exclusion faced by Dalit, Bahujan, differently-abled women and transgender students in universities. Fourthly, these notices also highlight the lack of adequate accommodation for women students which forces them to take up private accommodation, where there is absolutely no accountability or mechanism for redressal of grievances. Women students living in PG accommodation face tremendous difficulties and harassment, and also have to pay unregulated exorbitant rents. Details about plans and efforts for construction of new hostels will reveal how committed universities are to resolving the acute accommodation crisis for students. In our report, Pinjra Tod had also compiled cases of 'witch-hunting' women students who have been unduly denied their hostel seats in upcoming academic sessions for raising their voice against the administration about issues as basic as 'water'. Such action is often justified through unaccountable and dubious re-admission rules. Question 7 about availing and retention of hostel facilities arises from these cases.

The Pinjra Tod report also raised concerns about the non-existence/ non-functioning of internal sexual harassment complaints committee cells (ICCs) including democratically elected student, teacher and staff representatives in colleges and universities, as we believe that such mechanisms provide us an empowering and enabling way for addressing questions of women's safety instead of regressive measures such as locking up women. This issue does not feature in the notices issued by DCW on 7th May, as the Commission assured us that this is on their priority and they have already started an independent process for making the ICCs functional, as reflected in the notices issued to universities last year, seeking information on number of complaints filed. Another point raised by Pinjra Tod was that of lack of democratic bodies such as unions in many women's colleges and hostels, which has not been taken up in the notices issued, as the Commission felt that it was beyond their purview.

## **CONCLUSION**

The fact that our campaign, which initially took shape in the context of universities in Delhi, has received an overwhelming response from women students across the country, from Patiala to Chennai and Bhopal joining in the struggle only underlines the great necessities for these changes to be brought about. Women today are participating in almost every field of activity and experience, exploring new terrains, gaining greater confidence and aspiring to do even more with their lives. That the social disadvantages we face in a patriarchal world is furthered

by institutions disseminating "education", is being challenged by women students across campuses big and small. We feel that a change in these institutionalised mechanisms of gender discrimination is now only a matter of time. Women across the country are pushing ahead for these times to unfold, we hope that our university administrations will know better than to try and push back the gains of history!

- Pinjra Tod