

**FIGHT AGAINST SYSTEMIC, STRUCTURAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDERED  
VIOLENCE!**  
**19.11.17**

**Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS)** stands firmly with the survivors who have faced sexual harassment at the hands of the perpetrators on and off the list and, most importantly, extends solidarity in this moment of unravelling narratives, disjointed arguments and personal struggles of individuals voicing their experiences. The last few weeks have seen lists of sexual harassers in academia and civil society published and circulated on social media, statements issued by groups of persons and individuals reflecting on the lists, and questions raised on the ways of dealing with such lists, perpetrators of harassment, and the mechanisms in place to address it. Alongside the lists and statements, there has been a marked silence from some of the avenues that normally engage with sexual violence and harassment, both within and outside academia. While social media was abuzz with discussions and debates, now, once again, there is silence. As a collective standing against sexual violence and state repression, we recognise that institutional spaces can be fraught with sexual violence of varying kinds and, sometimes, despite systems and processes in place, the journey of seeking justice for each individual can be a long and lonely one.

As a collective standing against sexual violence and state repression, whose members have taken a variety of positions on this issue so far, we felt the need to reflect on our positions and come together to forge a collective common understanding. We have been doing that internally through a series of meetings for a year now focusing particularly on sexual harassment in groups and circles considered politically progressive. In the last few weeks there have been further discussions in the wake of the lists, and different responses to the list, including by WSS members themselves. Thus, despite the inordinate delay in issuing this statement, it is a product of an ongoing conversation amongst ourselves, a conversation we wish to broaden and take forward and this statement has been collectively produced in that spirit of feminist solidarity at a time when these revelations are slowly unfolding. It is important to acknowledge the institutionalised nature of sexual violence and harassment that women have experienced in academic spaces among others. Sexism and blatant misogyny is visible not merely in academic arenas but also in activist circles, amongst writers, artists, journalists, lawyers, and several other professions. The more narratives we hear the more familiar it sounds and today we hear voices from marginalised castes and sexualities adding to the whispered narratives of harassment. This makes it essential for us to build trust and unity among those marginalised by such violence. It is up to us, those facing various kinds of oppression, across caste, class, gender, religion, community, disability and sexuality to come together against all forms of oppression and exploitation. Our complicity by silence will only add to the impunity such perpetrators enjoy. This silence has been both passive, in the sense of remaining out of the debate as well as active wherein certain people wishing to speak out are being deliberately silenced. How far these silences are determined by the social, economic, political and cultural position is a matter that should concern all of us.

Meanwhile, some have raised the alarm bell of 'fascism' as a challenge more urgent and immediate than such 'witch-hunting' and 'hit-lists'. It is true this is a moment of increasing repression. But that should not divert us from the internal critique and introspection required when asking why sexual harassment exists, persists and invisibilised in educational centres that some believe to be crucial for critical thinking and engagement. There has been a long history of struggle that has paved the way for some structures that exist today. The women's movement, the queer movement, the movement for the annihilation of caste, for land rights, right to livelihood and several such struggles have taught us ways of resisting, raising our voice, and registering our dissent. It is important to note the contributions of all these movements in giving us a language of resistance. But, it is also important to note that while these struggles have helped build structures, both legal and community based, due process and existing institutional mechanisms have worked for some while they have failed many. In some cases, these legal or voluntary bodies have worked against the complainants themselves. The very fact that we have lists being circulated on social media points towards the frustrated efforts of thousands to speak out against those in positions of power who found every other door closed to them. This also shows our collective failure to build spaces of support and conversation. This, more than anything else, makes it amply clear that we need new ways of recognising harassment, new ways of fighting it, and new ways of healing.

The Saksham taskforce appointed in 2013 by the UGC to look into matters of gender sensitisation in higher education recommended in no uncertain terms that employers could not nominate appointees to ICCs. The report stated that that "ICCs... must not be directly nominated by the employer; rather, transparency and a principled basis for membership on the ICC should be arrived at after involving all sections of the HEI (Higher Education Institution) community." Meanwhile, other central and state universities simply do not have any body that addresses such concerns. The data made available for 6 years 2011-16 through the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) under the aegis of the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) is indicative of the skewed distribution of male-female ratio in the different fields of education. On the one hand, the gender gap in enrolment in higher education is decreasing with 40% women in 2000 to 46.2% in 2015-16. At another end, at the graduate levels, male enrolment remains higher. At the diploma level, this enrolment jumps from a marginal difference to 70%+ male enrolment. Meanwhile, certain courses like nursing see predominantly female students. In teacher training courses, 63% enrolled are women. A brief look at the ratio varying across different degrees reveals certain professional choices that are gendered. For instance, in B. Ed courses, 65.8% of those enrolled are women, 60% women are enrolled in MA/MSc, and 53% of women are enrolled in BA courses, while only 21.1% of women are enrolled in B. Tech with similar statistics for courses in law and management. Meanwhile, 41% of all PhD students enrolled are women.

While there are 78% colleges running in private sector, they cater to only 67% of the total enrolment. Overall, women constitute 46% of all enrolments in higher education. But a closer look at the social backgrounds reveals a skewed picture. Scheduled Castes are 13.9%, Scheduled Tribes are 4%, Other Backward Castes are 33.7% and, finally, the greatest disparity in terms of population percentage and enrolment is visible among Muslim women who are 4.6%

of total enrolled. These percentages are all below the national average. There is no doubt that besides gendered discrimination, the caste and community backgrounds of women add to the burden of discrimination that women carry when they enter the university.

In sheer numbers, the non-teaching staff appears to be 2/3rds male and in some states, the women in non-teaching staff are 1/5th of the total employed. This disparity is visible even in the post-wise number of women employed as teachers, especially when compared with men, despite gradually increasing enrolment of women in higher education in the last five years. Women constitute 33% of the teachers and professors at the college and university level. The social background of those employed as teachers does not match the existing composition of social groups in society. This is clear as 65% of those employed are upper caste, 25.4% are Other Backward Castes, 7.5% are Scheduled Castes, 2.1% are Scheduled Tribes, and, finally, 3.3% are Muslims. This disparity visibly appears to grow with more men being offered promotions to the position of Professor, Reader and Associate Professors while women remain Lecturers, Assistant Professors or Tutors. This disparity across public and private institutions only appears to increase when taking caste and religion into account and cuts across science, management, engineering and humanities programmes. Thus, discrimination cuts across students, non-teaching staff and faculty. This government appraisal of the situation of higher education in the country based on quantified data reveals the power equations that function in a patriarchal society. These numbers speak of an institutional crisis where merit may be the basis revealed to us on paper but the numbers speak of discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, religion and even region.

Institutional spaces like universities are built hierarchies of power in the name of age, experience, professional standing, and, most visibly, social capital. Persons in such positions of power have abused their positions to harass not just their colleagues, students and researchers, but also non-teaching staff, and persons outside of such institutional frameworks. The language utilised is often couched in polite requests, gentle nudges, explicit demands, and defended with the language of sexual freedom. Anyone who objects is often described as conservative and shamed for not being open and accepting. We see this most clearly as a consequence of the publication of the lists. 'Naming and shaming', 'witch-hunting' or targeting the perpetrators has only found them support from amongst their kith and kin. None of those named or found guilty have faced the consequences of their actions. The shield that protects them remains intact while questions about the veracity of claims, the complainant's intentions, and the backgrounds of those who have published lists have been scrutinised vigorously.

When we talk about sexual harassment, it is important to recognise that it stems from the space permitted to it by a deeply casteist, classist, communal, regressive, hetero-normative patriarchal society. It can appear in the form of gendered discrimination that is subtle and extend to blatant violence. The wide range of gendered harassment that the lists show tells us that there are forms of oppression as varied as the background of the oppressors. But this complexity should not stop us from exploring these intersections, exposing their internal power dynamics and find ways to transform spaces – personal and professional in our fight against patriarchy. We need to look at central and state universities, schools and organisations as well as private universities, schools and organisations. Careful attention also needs to be paid to different forms of sexual harassment in fields of education and research ranging from

management, to science, and medicine as well, besides other professions, institutions and organisations.

The systemic nature of sexual harassment has deep-rooted effects on the life of those harassed. Meanwhile, it builds a sense of impunity for the perpetrators. We cannot allow these forms of oppression to be normalised as part of everyday sexism. Our complicity by silence will only add to the impunity such perpetrators enjoy. Sexual predation is a means of asserting power that is visible and palpable. We need to call it out for what it is in a society that repeatedly tries to invisibilise it. Women alone cannot be held responsible for their safety. In a society such as ours, women and marginalised communities find their access to even available due process inhibited by social scrutiny and prejudice. We will not stand by while women are accused of overreacting while the mental conditions of the perpetrators, named and unnamed, are being avidly discussed. Those who have suffered sexual harassment or violence need much more than mere acknowledgment. Though, this may just be a start, mental, legal care along with building safe spaces are crucial steps that require long-term engagement and commitment towards community care. This, if done with the spirit of camaraderie, can be the basis for further strength for women to fight violence. We need new ways of talking about sexual harassment, new ways of defining it, calling it out, exposing it, bringing the perpetrators to book and new ways of recovering from the violence it entails.

Today, let us recognise these fractures and needs of the time. Let us move towards a collective conversation instead of expressing our rage individually in personal spaces. Let us open up those personal spaces into spaces of safety, solidarity, unity and struggle. Let this moment not go without consequences in our larger struggle for gender justice. And let those consequences pave the way for building structures, networks, systems that bear in mind the pain and humiliation as well as the resilience of those fighting back by speaking out.

WSS reiterates its commitment to stand strongly by those who have dared to speak out and find ways of addressing these questions in the long run with the care and consideration it deserves. In the coming months, we hope to initiate and invite conversations across university and other spaces, understand forms of violence that have not yet come out in the open, and, finally, work towards a policy on how to deal with sexual harassment that incorporates structures of care that each of us need today.

**Let us break the silence!**  
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