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Open Letter to the Chief Minister of Karnataka

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Shri Basavaraju Bommai
Chief Minister of Karnataka
Bangalore

We write to you on behalf of all those women's groups and individuals in Karnataka who have been working with issues related to gender violence and feminist visions of justice, peace and social transformation.

It is with shock and horror that we are watching a relatively small issue related to the attire of women students from the Muslim community in one government college in Udupi being escalated into a violent crisis consuming the entire state and putting at risk the personal security and academic future of young Muslim women. A gendered institutionalized apartheid is being systematically being put in place in colleges like in Chikmagalur, Mandya and Shimoga where the administrations are actively involved in preventing Muslim women students in Hijab from entering the premises and even sitting for examinations. Flames of hatred are being fanned between students from Hindu and Muslim communities who earlier studied together as friends. And all this as part of a plan to deliberately cultivate a culture of Islamophobia to target, demonise and marginalise the Muslim community in the name of creating a Hindu nation that totally goes against the spirit of Vasudaiva Kutumbakam that this country and land has prided itself on.

Enough is enough Mr Chief Minister.

May we remind you Sir that you are a constitutional head who has to govern a state with diverse populations of multiple faiths in a country that continues to be a secular democratic republic. And therefore you have the responsibility and obligation to protect the rights of all and especially the most marginalized and vulnerable. And this instance it is that of young Muslim women who are being denied their fundamental right to education only because they happen to be exercising their choice to wear the hijab and that too as part of the prescribed uniform. Our question is why and how is this practice that till now was not a source of offence to anybody suddenly become one which is apparently threatening "equality, integrity and public law and order" In fact what is disturbing "equality, integrity and public law and order" is the offensive sight of mobs of young men dressed in saffron scarves being mobilized and brought into the colleges to literally chase and intimidate the young Muslim women students and spread the poison of a divisive communal politics within our educational institutions where there was none. It should disturb all concerned citizens that those vested interests are playing with the lives of the youth – both from the Muslim and Hindu communities - to who we owe an education that will enable and empower them to make their own futures while

becoming complete human beings. And not insecure adults, goons and thugs as we see them becoming on the streets of Karnataka today.

There are many arguments being made for and against the Hijab. But that is of little or no consequence in this context. In an enlightened Democracy, like the food we choose to eat or don't, clothes we choose to wear or don't, gods we choose to worship or don't – **Hijab too is a matter of personal and individual choice.** Education on the other hand is a fundamental right that the government has a direct responsibility to ensure and not deny on any ground - be it gender, caste or religion. **It is unfortunate and unacceptable that while the government should be enabling both the personal choices of the women and ensuring their fundamental rights, it is doing neither. Instead like a self appointed patriarch it is trying to interfere in the personal choices of the women on the one hand and deprive them of their fundamental rights on the other.**

Working with gender violence across communities we are aware that often cultural symbols like burkha, hijab, ghunghat or any other attire could be reflective of traditional practices that try to confine and define a woman, working against her interest and freedoms. However, we have also seen how over the decades women are exercising their own free will and choice to adopt and adapt many cultural practices in ways that are not dictated by patriarchal values but their personal choice. In this context to single out the Hijab as an issue when so many markers of diverse cultures for both women and men like bindi, tilak, turbans etc exist in public spaces including educational institutions is nothing but a way to mark and malign the Muslim women in the context of the increasing majoritarian onslaught on the entire Muslim community. And finally in this instance to deprive the Muslim women of their right to education.

As concerned citizens and women's rights activists we cannot not allow this to happen. Government colleges that are accessed by those poor and marginalized communities who cannot afford private education have to remain spaces that are open and inclusive of all genders, religions, castes and communities. Towards protecting the rights of those young women who are protesting peacefully to be allowed entry into the colleges to continue their education, stopping further communal polarization and restoration of peace and harmony within these institutions we would demand the following:

1. Invoking the Karnataka Education Act of 1983, Section 133 (2) of which states that students will have to wear a uniform dress chosen by the college authorities a recent circular has been issued adding the clause that – “clothes which disturb equality, integrity and public law and order should not be worn.” This circular is totally unwarranted and ill motivated since it goes directly against the interest of the women students from the Muslim community. It should therefore be immediately withdrawn and the students should be allowed to sit for their exams and continue with their education.
2. Setting up of peace committees in the affected colleges along with student representatives and their parents, local women's rights activists and respected local leaders to come to a consensus on how to comply by institutional norms related to

uniforms that accommodate diverse cultural practices without dictating any dress codes specific to women in general and targeting Muslim women in particular.

3. Re-establishing healthy democratic learning spaces within which young women from all communities can continue to have healthy debates on diverse cultural practices such that they become a matter of individual choice and not institutional imposition.
4. Stay within the constitutional framework to ensure the basic rights of the women to education regardless of the attire they choose to wear.

We want to reiterate in no uncertain terms that this issue is not that of Hijab vs. saffron scarves that the media and majoritarian forces are trying to reduce it to. It is clearly an issue of Muslim women's right to education and their security on which there can be no compromise whatsoever.

We look to you to do the needful.

Jagrutha Mahila Okkuta, We The Women, Mangalore, Magadi Citizens Forum,
Uttara Karnataka Jogappa Sangha, Karnataka Rajya Mahila Dourjanya Virodhi Okkuta,
Karnatak Prajwal Seva Sansthe, ONDEDE, Dwani Women Federation, Mysuru,
Karnataka Sex Workers Union, Citizens Forum for Mangalore Development,
Uttar Karnataka Mahila Ookutta, Amma Foundation, Bebaak Collective
Chiguru Bala Vikasa Samste, Ramanagara Dist, Gamana Mahila Samuha
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Diocesan Council of Catholic Women, Mangalore, All India Janavadi Mahila Sanghatane
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