

March 8, 2022

Press Release for International Women's Day

**Joint call by women's and feminist organisations and individuals
reiterating women's rights to education, dignity, choice, plurality and peace**

We are on the eve of celebrating March 8, International Women's Day. It is a day that signifies more than a century of resistance to patriarchy and injustice – particularly against women from the most marginalized communities and those working women whose labour continues to be devalued both within the house and outside. But it is a day that we celebrate with joy and hope since it has inspired countless struggles for women's dignity, choice, rights and autonomy from which we draw energy to rededicate ourselves to facing current and ongoing challenges.

The present moment however fills us with dread, despair and anger. For instead of moving forward building on the positive changes in the lives of women who are slowly beginning to redraw their own destinies we are regressing and degenerating in unthinkable ways. The recent events in Karnataka and indeed the country bear witness to this.

Even as we celebrate the golden jubilee of our independence, we are watching with horror the pushback against young women particularly from the Muslim communities in our own State whose basic right to education is being denied even while there is a direct assault on their right to choice of dress and to a life of dignity. The guarantee of qualitative education for all continues to be mirage for most marginalized communities be it minorities or Dalits. And in this context to suddenly proscribe an accepted customary practice of young women using the hijab or head scarf along with the prescribed uniform is condemnable. A small issue that could have been resolved at the local level has been escalated into a violent crisis consuming the entire state and putting at risk the personal security and academic future of young Muslim women. The deliberately misreading of the Interim order of the High Court leading to the stripping women off their Hijabs in Karnataka under the voyeuristic gaze of the media tells us about the depths to which the fourth estate of democracy has fallen.

On the other hand we are also witnessing the misuse and abuse of modern technology where articulate and vocal Muslim women were shamelessly auctioned by unknown armies of cybertroopers through online sites such as "Sullibai" and "Bullibai deals". We have also seen the attempt to smother expression of women journalists with the disgusting use of sophisticated and expensive technological weapons such as TekFog. The feudal patriarchal system that upholds and thrives on misogyny is clearly visible in the way in which women's bodies continue to be the battle ground on which not only is patriarchal power exercised but on which larger political battles are being fought.

These misogynistic and communal acts are not only unconstitutional and illegal but also unconscionable.

The Constitution of India has guaranteed equality to all genders, castes, religions and ethnicities. In blatant violation of this right we see manufactured hatred and violence in the name of religion. Instead of fostering mutual respect for each other and promoting values of harmony and coexistence in educational institutions we are witnessing seeds of communal poison being sown in our younger generation who falling victims to this politics of hate. The events unfolding

in the different districts of our state are the proof of such acts. Irrespective from where the action and reaction stems, what is being impacted is the education and future of the students. COVID19 has already had a differential impact in education on girls and other marginalised communities. And in this context to deny young Muslim women to even sit for their exams because of the dress they choose to wear is an absolute travesty of justice.

We condemn these attempts to target and vilify young Muslim women and the relentless attacks on minorities and Dalits that we see as a part of the project to destroy the pluralistic culture of this land and create instead the homogenized and hegemonic culture of Hindutva. A culture that goes against spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam that this country and land has prided itself on. And Kuvempu's sarvajangadaya shanthiya thotha – the peaceful garden of all diverse communities- that Karnataka has been.

As women we are proud of the history and legacy left behind by stalwarts like Savitri Bai Phule and Fatima Sheikh who fought for the right to education of particular dalit and Muslim girls and women. This legacy is today in danger of being totally destroyed. Inspired by them we the women of today are reclaiming the feminist voice in this fight against growing right-wing extremism in all religions within our homes, our communities or political spaces. We the women, regardless of the communities we come from state that we will not be deprived of our agency and autonomy or our right to choose, self-expression, education and dignity within the constitutional framework of a secular, plural and democratic nation.

Towards this we declare and demand the following:

1. Education is our Right, Dress is our Choice
2. These constitutionally granted rights should be available to all irrespective of their gender, religion or caste
3. We condemn the controversy that has been stoked at the end of the crucial educational term
4. Every possible action and attempt has to be made to see that no girl is denied the right to sit for examination for reasons of the dress controversy and therefore with all respect to the order of the High Court, the girls who have been at the centre of the controversy should be allowed to write their exams.
5. End all discrimination based on gender, religion, and caste and uphold the values enshrined in our Constitution and in the plural and diverse culture of this land.
6. It is the responsibility of the government to restore a conducive learning environment in schools and colleges that is devoid of manufactured hatred and divisiveness and instead fosters diversity, harmony and gender rights while prioritizing education for all.