

THE COLOMBO DECLARATION

(March 6th 2020)

We, South Asian feminists¹ across generations, who gathered together in Colombo, in solidarity with each other, and who remain deeply concerned about developments in our region that defy the basis on which we waged anti-colonial struggles; and with a desire to build independent, modern States that respect the freedom, equality and dignity of all our peoples, do hereby declare that:

Whereas we are cognizant of the developments in the field of gender studies and feminist research on sex and gender in the past two decades and the evolving nature of such debates, we, therefore, state that when we say ‘women’ we understand the term to mean all those affected by violence and discrimination on the basis of their gender, gender identity, and gender expression;

Whereas, feminism is a struggle for equality as well as a critical approach that challenges individuals, patriarchal structures and systems of power that entrench colonialism, discrimination, exploitation and violence. Feminism also recognizes the diversity among women, and that we experience life at multiple intersections including nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, disability and ability, sexual orientation, class and caste;

STRUGGLE AGAINST AUTHORITARIANISM, EXTREMISM AND MAJORITARIANISM

Whereas we are deeply disturbed by the tendency of many of our governments towards religious and ethnic intolerance and extremism, heavy-handed majoritarianism and authoritarian styles of leadership and governance, supported by the threat of thuggery and violence where dissent, pluralism and difference are not tolerated;

Whereas we are also concerned about increasing extremism among some religious and ethnic groups, with major repercussions for women, whereby women’s rights and freedoms are denied

¹ This declaration is a result of a brainstorming and an inter-generational dialogue among participants from Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, who had indicated a prior interest in drafting a common Declaration. We wish to also acknowledge past conferences and movements of the 1980s and the 1990s that brought together South Asian women from all countries to fight for equality and justice.

in a fundamental sense and their bodies, rituals and attire become compulsory and contested symbols of identity;

Whereas militarization and securitization have become an integral part of governance in our region, severely affecting every aspect of our lives and where old and newer forms of surveillance threaten the basic freedoms enshrined in our Constitutions and international instruments;

Whereas violence is sometimes seen as the preferred option in dealing with conflict and crime; where habitual and brutal violence at the personal, community, and sectarian level, including violence against women, online and on-ground, rarely draw censure, as this violence often results in impunity and has the tacit support of the authorities concerned;

WOMEN, THE LAW AND JUDICIAL PROCESS

Whereas women, who have a complicated relationship with the law as we call on it to protect our rights, but is, at the same time, used to contain and punish us, we are, nevertheless, concerned that the rule of law in our countries is heavily compromised by lack of access and unequal structures, and within those structures, by rampant impunity, and political interference. A climate of fear is created whereby the police, prosecutors and the courts are unable to function with full independence, resulting in a lack of judicial accountability;

Whereas women's claims for justice at national, regional and international levels are sometimes articulated from a pure law and order perspective, without respect for human rights principles, which we believe must be the framework that always guides our actions;

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

Whereas women, especially dalits and women of indigenous communities, remain the most marginalized when it comes to economic and social power, where women's fight for land and economic rights is a constant struggle making them targets of violence by the State, corporations, and dominant castes and communities;

Whereas the "corporatization" of the State and society has led to an unhealthy nexus between governments, the private sector and the military, resulting in public services and programmes that enhance equality being routinely sidelined, in the interests of large development and

infrastructure projects that are motivated by huge profits for corporate groups, often aided by the corruption of public officials;

Whereas neoliberal policies have led to corporate capture of the State and its institutions and where such capture has harmed women in multiple ways, from the loss of public services to multiple forms of exploitation, such as of women's labour, and of natural resources that are commonly held by people or communities;

Whereas we are concerned about the practice by our states of accumulation by dispossession of land, including the land of indigenous peoples, local farmers, and urban low-income communities, recognizing the creation of a 'precarious' class, often due to migration from rural to urban areas with little or no access to public services and social protection;

Whereas we are deeply disturbed by the proactive engagement of the large, powerful segments of the private sector in supporting authoritarianism in our societies, and where increasing dependence on private-public partnerships enable the State's abdication of its responsibilities towards the provision of services and the safeguarding of rights;

Whereas the international discourses on 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment' are increasingly co-opted and used by our governments and corporations to strategically digress from serious issues of rights violations for which they should be held responsible;

Whereas programmes for microfinance have been relatively successful in some countries, in others they have resulted in crippling debt, increasing poverty and violence, and, in extreme situations, driving women to suicide;

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Whereas climate change and environmental degradation remain a central concern of feminists, requiring immediate action by the State, including effective legislation, policies and programmes informed by research and analysis, and State responsibility in holding itself, corporations and other non-state actors accountable for violations;

Whereas introducing environmental laws and development programmes should be undertaken through consultations with local communities and indigenous peoples to ensure that women's lives and livelihoods are not negatively impacted;

DIGITAL AGE, INTERNET AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA

Whereas the digital age has produced new technologies of communication that have given us opportunities for connecting and mobilizing, they also allow for the collection of data that infringe on our privacy and expose us to increased surveillance and harassment by the State, corporations and non-state actors;

Whereas we are disturbed by the fact that our region has the highest rate and longest duration of internet shutdowns, used as a tool of control by the securitized State, resulting in the loss of information, and isolating and crippling whole communities;

Whereas hate-speech is rampant across the media, including social media, in South Asia, becoming a major instrument for violence and the destruction of the social fabric. Large platform-providers must be held accountable for their platforms becoming sites of hate, while ensuring that the principle of freedom of expression is protected;

Whereas internet regulation in the name of protecting women has been weaponised to target journalists, human rights defenders, women survivors of violence, and has resulted in the curtailing of freedom of expression, dissent, the right to privacy and pleasure, and the freedom of movement and assembly;

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Whereas global and regional developments have placed South Asia at the epicentre of the struggles for dominance and hegemony, and where the fight against “violent extremism” has led to international security practices that seriously violate human rights and where these practices are shared and copied by nation-states;

Whereas the porous borders that have defined South Asian history have now become sites of imprisonment due to brutal violence and/or immigration policies; where exclusionary practices sanctioned at the highest levels aim at denying people citizenship, and where statelessness that denies individuals basic rights and services provided by the modern nation-state has become an important concern;

Whereas a rules-based system of international law and relations is no longer a goal or an ambition of the more powerful states, therefore international networks of solidarity among progressive individuals and groups are essential to counterbalance the deal-making and real politicking of our governments;

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND OF ARTISTS

Whereas freedom of expression is being severely curtailed by persecution or self-censorship, but journalists and artists in all spheres are struggling bravely against many odds to express themselves in extraordinarily creative ways, to represent and transcend the reality that we are all faced with;

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Whereas some nation-states in South Asia have attempted to recognize sexual and gender diversity, and plurality, others continue to criminalize, ostracize and discriminate against those of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, often resulting in violence, stigma and discrimination;

Whereas our sexual and reproductive rights are constantly challenged, and where bodily integrity and autonomy continue to be denied and are under attack at the global, national and community levels;

MISOGYNY AND RESURGENT PATRIARCHY

Whereas cultures of misogyny and a resurgent patriarchy, spurred on by extreme right-wing politics, entrench the inequality of women and welcome and valorize that inequality, threatening to push back the gains achieved by successive generations of women's activism and movements;

Whereas women are affected by all these developments in a specific and distinct way and where their struggles for political representation, violence against women, equity in personal laws and equality in all spheres, must be understood in the context of national, regional and global realities challenge the basic values on which feminist movements were founded;

Whereas on the occasion of our coming together, recognizing the realities that face us, we, feminists of South Asia, gathered in Colombo on March 5 and 6, 2020, hereby pledge to:

1. Unite across all religions, genders, ethnicities, classes, castes and all forms of identity, while recognizing our differences, to fight for the equality and freedom of all people in South Asia to live a life of dignity and respect, free from discrimination;
2. Respect and celebrate the diversity of our peoples, recognizing that many intra-community struggles need to be waged to ensure the equality of women, but where political, legal and administrative systems must enable and strengthen a recognition and acceptance of this diversity;
3. Create regional and international networks of women in solidarity to contest and challenge the growing tide of majoritarianism, religious extremism, authoritarianism and a climate of fear in our region;
4. Condemn in the strongest terms wanton and brutal communal, caste and sectarian violence against women, minorities, indigenous peoples, and vulnerable communities as well as the weaponisation of the “riot” as a means of control.
5. Hold states accountable for the torture, disappearance and extrajudicial killing of individuals and prisoners, and for the impunity that is granted and sometimes attaches to all those who commit such acts.
6. Resist the militarization and securitization of our states, and expose the disproportionate use of force (in accordance with international humanitarian law) by the military, as well as the military take-over of civilian administration and economic enterprises;
7. Support local and regional struggles to strengthen legal and judicial processes by protecting and amending Constitutions as necessary, pushing for progressive legislation and ensuring that the judiciary and independent commissions are given full protection. We also urge that all the countries of South Asia have functional independent commissions on women as a step towards securing women’s rights;
8. Work with women lawyers, human rights defenders and their networks to fight impunity, to ensure that rule of law processes truly result in justice, to highlight the need for judicial accountability, to especially support victims of injustice and discrimination and to supplement such legal action with political and social campaigns. Protecting human rights defenders, insisting on gender-just laws and, where necessary, gender-neutral laws must also be an essential part of this work;
9. Recognize the importance of waging feminist struggles not purely from a law and order perspective but from a human rights framework and to recognize intersectionality, including intersections of nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, disability and ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, class and caste;

10. Strengthen communities affected by global and national policies resulting in gross inequalities by insisting on a more egalitarian economic and social order, the provision of basic services, and by challenging systems and practices of discrimination and exploitation;
11. Recognize the damage that has already been done to the natural environment and to work with national and global climate justice activists, indigenous peoples and all affected communities to adopt laws, policies, programmes and systems of accountability to ensure the survival of the planet and the promise owed to succeeding generations;
12. Encourage women activists and technology communities to use their digital platforms for progressive causes, and to support their work on digital rights, fight for the protection of our data and against hate-speech and hate communities;
13. Prioritize community concerns and support women – with their informed consent – to be a part of decision-making that affects their lives;
14. Reclaim the “international community” as global networks fighting for the rights of individuals and peoples, leading to the transformation of existing international institutions and practices to make them more inclusive and participatory;
15. Work towards recreating value for a rules-based international system, with the expectation that feminist movements everywhere will take a lead in making this happen;
16. Ensure that the fight against “violent extremism” does not result in draconian measures, arbitrary security-force activities, and mass incarceration. Platforms on counter-terrorism and bilateral and multilateral support for military establishments must be founded on the principles of human rights.
17. Ensure that the concerns of the women of the Global South, our call for justice, the need for forward-looking plans for economic independence and recovery, as well as women’s participation in the decision-making processes in prevention, protection, peacemaking and peace-building, are represented in international relations and global security agendas;
18. Enable and support women artists and writers in their creative work to reclaim memory, represent women’s histories, and transcend boundaries, and ensure that education in structural spaces such as schools, museums and galleries, be expanded to include informal extracurricular activities in the form of plays, storytelling, video-making, and varied art activities;

19. Celebrate the many past and continuing achievements of women's movements, and invest in the multi-generational harnessing of collective power on platforms where activists across levels of experience can connect, organize and transform, building upon existing knowledge and momentum;
20. Reiterate and struggle at all levels for the foundational values of feminist movements, movements which have for over two centuries challenged systems of hierarchy and fought for freedom, equality, respect for all, and the dignity of persons.