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பெண்கள் மற்றும் ஊடகக் கூட்டமைப்பு
Women and Media Collective

Statement on the Discourse Surrounding Bhagya Abeyratne

March 2021

Several factors surrounding the discourse of Bhagya Abeyratne and her statement on environmental destruction on national television have been a cause for concern.

We, as the Women and Media Collective, an organisation engaged in advocating for social justice and media ethics wish to highlight the following on what was problematic in the way the people, the State and media chose to respond to her.

The subject Minister was quick to discount her statement. He specified that she should verify her facts before making a statement and did not address any of the poignant issues that she had surfaced on the destruction of the Sinharaja forest. His response discounts her own very real experience and trivializes it on his claim that she did not cite facts. Wildlife officials had visited Bhagya's house to authenticate her statement. In addition to this it was reported that two male Police officers visited her home to record a statement. Bhagya was continuously harassed by the state mechanisms and she had to repeatedly defend her statement.

On an equally disturbing note the Minister called her a "young girl" and referred to her youth as a reason for the statement to be considered as irrational. This exposes the failure on the part of the State to recognize and value the intelligence, aspirations and public spiritedness of youth and women.

This patronizing and demeaning attitude has also been reinforced and perpetuated by some sections of the media. A newspaper reported the incident with a headline beginning with "little Bhagya", immediately denying her any aspect of maturity or agency as an adult concerned with nationally important issues. We also call into question the media coverage of Bhagya and her family in their home. The sensationalised camera angles of her visibly emotional state and zooming in on her mother's reaction was evidence that the media was more concerned about dramatic interest than the real issue that she had raised.

Last week the Ecocide mural at Vihara Maha Devi Park which was put up by youth wing of the Wild Life and Nature Protection Society, a 126 years old association, was taken down by officials on the orders of the President (dailymirror 19.03.2021). The President's rationale for this decision was that the mural ruined the beauty of the park and that it was not an effective way of protecting the environment. Again the freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest was controlled by the State.

We therefore call on the State to take connaissance of the issue of environmental degradation happening in the country and especially the denuding of Sinharaja, and to refrain from the use of intimidation to curb discussion and debate or a person's right to freedom of expression. We further call on the media to be particularly conscious of ethical reporting as well as for more engaged reporting on the environment.

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