

14.02.2022

***Over the last few weeks there has been a multitude of hate speech and criticism about women's bodies, dress, culture, ethnicity, and religion in the media as well as on social media. A teacher, Fathima Rameez, at the Sri Shanmugah Hindu Ladies Collage, Trincomalee sought to resume her duties as a teacher on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2022. She was allegedly threatened and assaulted over wearing an abaya to school. This is not the first time this has happened. Many such incidents affect all of us and particularly affects girls' education, their ability to think, imagine and grow.***

***We write this letter to our young sisters, to say, these kind of threats and violence does not have to be default; that you/we can live with freedom; that you/we can choose a life that you wish and be happy.***

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To our young sisters and students,

As women, sisters and friends who live in the same society as yours, we write to you with open hearts.

We are women's rights activists who live and work amongst you now, who come from a long history of such people who have struggled for the rights of women and of all human beings.

At a time when women, and young people in general, are facing long term interruption in accessing education and spaces of knowledge we are worried that this new discussion on the attire of school teachers has added to this long list of interruptions. We are saddened that this will affect your education, your growth and your access to your rights and freedom.

Your education and the sense of self it will inculcate in you is our primary concern. This should be your primary concern as well. Given then, we must consider what your essential needs are for such education to be available to you. You need consistent classes which continue without hindrance. You need teachers with knowledge, dedication and integrity that will inspire you every day. Most importantly, your parents must prioritize this process of your education and growth. It is at the cost of this important priority that such attacks over the teacher's attire are being taken forward. The main reason given for this recent disruption is "culture".

Across time and place there are so many things that are forced on women in the name of culture. Do we have to accept these without question? Are we going to allow ourselves to be brainwashed by these forced ideas of our 'cultural identity'? Are we going to attack and malign our fellow women in the name of such 'culture'? Are we going to go be pawns in the politics of violence that is perpetrated on women in the name of culture?

We must never forget that there was a time, not so long ago, when women's education, women's right to vote, and the right to walk freely was declared to be not part of our culture and women were controlled and disallowed from living fully. Let us not forget! Yet, women have overcome these oppressions and now have emerged and succeeded in so many fields. This is a matter of pride for all of us!

Right to vote, right to education, and other rights that you and I take for granted today, are a result of many struggles of those who came before us. If we are to continue enjoying these rights and gain greater freedom - we must vigilantly identify the signs of oppression in our lives, at present. We must come together and challenge any controls imposed upon us by any group in the name of culture, ethnic identity, and religion. We must recognize it, when such impositions are a hindrance to our growth and our ability to live full lives as women. In the least, we must not become party to such prejudice, hatred, and violence against any women.

Today we have been made pawns in the hatred being perpetuated using women's dress codes in the name of culture. Culture is not defined by appearance or attire. Neither is culture a static entity – it is constantly changing. The British dress code for men has been accepted by all without question as the formal attire for men in our society. For women on the other hand, our external appearance and clothing has been given more attention than our intellectual abilities. The symbols of cultural identity that we think of as ours, we must remember, were not created by us women. Neither were the clothes we wear today, as part of our 'culture', worn by our mothers or grandmothers. We are made to believe that clothes thrust upon us by powerful voices in every community and the market and its advertisements is our 'culture.' Our struggle with such powerful structures of oppression will last a very long time.

**In the here and now, we have the ability and right to decide on our own ideas of culture based on values and ethics that we hold dear. We can decide that a society's culture lays in how respectful we are to those within our own society and towards those of other cultures and societies. You can make that decision for yourself and share this with your friends.**

The history of the world and even the painful history of this island has taught us, repeatedly, that living in harmony with differences and diversity is the best way forward for the growth of humanity. For humanity to thrive, all humans, irrespective of their identities must have the right to practice their religion and cultural practices in peace and simultaneously ensure the same right to others.

What you as students, must prioritize is that which you need to ensure your education and growth. For you to receive a stellar education and for the growth of our society, what is more important – what the teacher is wearing or her intelligence and commitment?

Our dear young friends, all the voices that distract you away from your education and growth in the name of culture are voices that breed violence and diminish your growth and that of our societies. This is a well learned truth. Do consider internalizing this truth for yourself and sharing it among your friends.

**It is not the clothes that matters but the person who wears it. Open heartedness and compassion should be at the core of our cultures.**

**Let us build cultures that prioritize knowledge and integrity in women and in everyone.**

**With love,**

Your sisters and friends,

*Women's Organisations*

1. Suriya Women's Development Centre (SWDC), Batticaloa
2. Women's Coalition for Disaster Management (WCDM)- Eastern Province
3. Islamic Women's Association for Research and Empowerment (IWARE), Batticaloa
4. Women and Media Collective (WMC), Colombo
5. Women Action Network
6. Mannar Women's Development Federation
7. Affected Women's Forum (AWF), Akkaraipattu
8. Sisterhood Initiative
9. Social Welfare Mantram (SWM), Hatton
10. Sri Lanka- Diaspora women's group (Pengal Santhippu)
11. Muslim Women's Development Trust, Puttalam
12. Stuttgart Tamil Women's Organisation, Germany
13. Women Organisation for Working with Disabilities, Mannar
14. Women's Education and Research Centre, Colombo

*Women's Activists*

1. Kamala Vasuki (Vasuki Jeyasankar), Batticaloa
2. Sarala Emmanuel, Batticaloa
3. Karthika Suvendranathan (A Friend), Batticaloa
4. Sitralega Maunaguru
5. Radhika Coomaraswamy
6. Prof. Maithree Wickramasinghe, University of Kelaniya
7. Prof. Sumathy Sivamohan, University of Peradeniya
8. Shreen Saroor
9. Ambika Satkunanathan
10. Ermiza Tegal – Attorney at Law
11. Jayanthi Kuru Utumpala, Colombo
12. Anuratha Rajaretnam, Batticaloa

13. Aneesa Firthous, Batticaloa
14. Bhavani Fonseka, Attorney at Law
15. Rajaletsumi Kanthaiyah, Batticaloa
16. Vani Saimon, Akkaraipattu
17. S.Sritharuni, Batticaloa
18. Jesuthas Rajitha, Batticaloa
19. Mahaluxmy Kurushanthan, Mannar
20. Jensila Mohideen, Mullaitheevu
21. Bisiliya Bhutto, Puttalam
22. Juwairiya Mohideen, Puttalam
23. Sarjana Tharmalingam, University Student (Asian University for Women in Bangladesh)
24. Menusha Raveendran, University Student (Asian University for Women in Bangladesh)
25. Aishwariya Pragash, University Student (Asian University for Women in Bangladesh)
26. Siva Malathi
27. Thailini Jothilingam
28. Rajini Thibaharan
29. K. Thushanthini
30. Fahmiya Shareef, Batticaloa
31. Viruththika Aloysius, Batticaloa
32. Rinosa Yusaf
33. Saitha Abdul Hameeth
34. Dino ChachchithanantharasaLady Doak college in Madurai
35. Ranjuthamalar Nanthakumar, Jaffna
36. Ahilini Nanthakumar, Jaffna
37. Sara Arumugam, Attorney at Law
38. S. Sutha
39. Sharmila Sayeed
40. Ramshiya Hanifa, Attorney at Law, Batticaloa
41. Soumiya Seharuban, University Student (Asian University for Women in Bangladesh)
42. Mathumitha Parameshwaran, University Student (Asian University for Women in Bangladesh)
43. Shalomy Daniel, Attorney at Law
44. Niroshinthevi. M, Batticaloa
45. S. Roshani
46. Oodaru Ranji, Switzerland
47. Uma Shanika, Germany
48. Majitha Hanifa
49. Lasintha Ganesamoorthy, University Student (Asian University for Women in Bangladesh)
50. Sameera Muhamad Azees
51. M. Ushanthini, Student(National College of Education)
52. Viveka Vijayakumar, Student for social change
53. Zainab Ibrahim, Colombo
54. Muqaddasa Wahid Freelance journalist
55. Kumudini Samuel, Colombo
56. Hyshyama Hamin – Activist

57. Sirany Thevakumar – Rights Based Activist
58. Amara
59. Anar
60. Kalyani Sunthalingam, Batticaloa
61. Roshmila, University Student (Asian University for Women - Bangladesh)
62. Kishanthini, University Student (Asian University for Women - Bangladesh)
63. Dilakshana, University Student (Asian University for Women - Bangladesh)
64. Annaletsumi, AWF-Akkaraipattu
65. S. Ariyamalar, Batticaloa
66. Sharon David, Batticaloa
67. Kayathry Thangarajah, Batticaloa
68. Elangeswary Arunasalam, Batticaloa
69. Romila Sengamalan, Batticaloa
70. Vijayaletsumi Segaruban, Batticaloa
71. Sriranjani Thiyagarasa, Batticaloa
72. Anberiya Hanifa, Colombo
73. K. Ranitha Ganarajah, Colombo
74. Sabiya Hamdu
75. Haqparla Aseez
76. Mangayatkarasi, Germany
77. Mery Vijayakumar, Germany
78. Theva, Germany
79. Vijitha, Trincomalee
80. Nageswary, Trincomalee
81. Jeyanthi Thalayasingam, France
82. R. Sulaxshana
83. Jeyanthi, Batticaloa
84. Jinandani Parameshwaran
85. Naguleswary
86. Ranishla
87. Tamizhini
88. Pavithra Thavarasa University Student (Asian University for Women - Bangladesh)
89. M. Noorullsmiya, Trincomalee
90. Nirojini Balachandran, Student for social change
91. Sathasivam Jinojini
92. N. Sumanthi, Akkaraipattu
93. Vijayakumary Parameswaran, Batticaloa
94. S. Sasiyanthini, Batticaloa
95. Vettrichchelvi, Mannar
96. M. F. Fathima Sufiyani, Human Rights Activist, Puttalam
97. J. Kumuthini, Batticaloa
98. Setheeswary Yogathas, Batticaloa
99. M. N. Lipshiyah, Kilinochchi

100. T. Mirukanchini, Batticaloa
101. T. Premananthu, Batticaloa
102. Jeyananthini Emmanuel
103. Sumithra. S, Batticaloa
104. Aruni Abeysinghe, Colombo
105. Kalavathi Kalaimagal, Batticaloa
106. Vijayakumary. M, Canada
107. Mohanadharshny, Penn Viduthalai Sinthanai Amaippu, Malayagam
108. Aazhyaal, Australia
109. Safna Iqbal
110. Vije Nallaiya, France
111. Sangeetha, Batticaloa
112. Shabna Iqbal
113. Vije Nallaiyah, France
114. Mujeeb Janusha, Mullaithivu
115. Mano, Mullaithivu
116. Rajabdeen Rajeeba, Mullaithivu