



Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

Transnational Solidarity Network

WLUML condemns the backlash faced by Sri Lankan Human Rights Defender, Sharmila Seyyid, and calls for her security and freedom to be guaranteed.

In November 2012, Ms. Sharmia Seyyid stated during a radio interview with the Tamil Rado Service of the BBC that the suffering of sex workers would be alleviated if prostitution was legalized.

Severe backlash from the Muslim community has since ensued; Seyyid has been accused of being a heretic, of disobeying the tenets of Islam, has received death threats, and has had her English academy attacked by arsonists. Persecutors have used social media to intimidate Seyyid, which has involved sexualized harassment, and threats of violence and death. The harassment has resulted in her fleeing the country, and it continues to this day, having also affected other family members.

Ms. Seyyid is a poet, novelist, journalist, social worker and single mother from Eravur, a largely Hindu Tamil province in eastern Sri Lanka. She is an active Woman Human Rights Defender who has been doing valuable social work related to women's issues in the Batticaloa District and has worked closely with minority women in the East. In 2009, she founded the Organization for Social Development, a community-based organization in Eravur, to help address post-war women's issues.

Sharmila Seyyid's exposure to physical and online threats is intolerable, and just another example of the particular persecution WHRDs face for daring to speak up.

Her persecution follows a climate of increasing influence of Wahhabist strands of Islam in Sri Lanka, which is yet to recover after the protracted civil war and ethnic conflict. Non state forces are pushing an overarching majoritarian ideology and hampering the initiatives of the few civil organisations trying to forge inter-ethnic cohesion and citizen rights. These growing influences have contributed to an increase in intra-religious tensions. Notably, the resulting homogenizing

trends of the ‘Muslim identity’ have also curtailed Muslim women’s freedoms in the name of ‘tradition, religion and culture.’

The backlash Ms. Seyyid is experiencing is an example of the harassment that activists face when speaking up about social realities.

WLUML strongly believes that Ms. Seyyid has every right to express her views without facing such damaging repercussions.

We heavily condemn all forms of persecution and harassment and are gravely concerned for her safety. Ms. Seyyid, like many WHRDs around the world, has been victim of the fundamentalist backlash that strongly hampers women’s entry into the public sphere, their political participation, and their freedom to express dissenting views. The defaming, hatred, and threats against a person, particularly a woman, for having a particular opinion is unacceptable.

We support Sri Lanka’s civil society leaders in urging the Sri Lankan authorities, community religious leaders, and civil society actors of the Muslim community to halt the targeting of fellow Muslims and all fellow citizens, to encourage a safer, fairer society, and to actively strive to uphold citizen rights. We urge the Sri Lankan authorities to ensure that investigations will be carried out against those who caused the misconduct and that justice will be meted.

If you would like to support this statement as an organisation or an individual, please email ifra@wluml.org.

This statement is supported by:

The Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)

Emilia Novo

Faizun Zackariya, Muslim Women’s Research and Action Front (MWRAF), Sri Lanka

Sally Armstrong, Journalist, Canada

Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights

Gita Sahgal, Centre for Secular Space, UK

Women’s Action Network Sri Lanka

Shreen Abdul Saroor, Mannar Women's Development Federation, Sri Lanka

The Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR)

PILIPINA Legal Resources Center, The Philippines

Matthew Abely, student teacher, San Jose, CA, USA

Source:

WLUML networkers