



Banglar

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Statement on International Women's Day & systematic impunity in India

8 March 2021

International Women Day is a celebration of all women, across the barriers of nationality, ethnicity, race, caste, religion or sexuality. It is a day to remember revolutions, challenge patriarchal institutions and to acknowledge the courage and struggles of women across the globe. It is because of the resilience of women that our resolve to fight for equal rights, participation and justice gets stronger with each passing year. We, at MASUM express our solidarity with women across the globe and seek to draw the world's attention to the extraordinary women who reside near the Indo-Bangladesh border.

Living near the Indo-Bangladesh border has myriad challenges due to the concerns emerging from national security, territorial sovereignty, immigration and cross-border smuggling. Due to these concerns, the rights of citizens who reside close to the border are often overlooked. It is one of the poorest regions of the country with problems such as unemployment, forced migration, lack of access to clean water, sanitation and other basic amenities. Moreover, the civil and political liberties of citizens are often violated by BSF personnel, who monitor essential freedoms of association, movement and livelihood. Violence is often perpetrated against women by the agents of the state with little to no accountability. These are some of the many challenges faced by women at the Indo-Bangladesh border.

Torture

Cooch Behar, 10.04.16: Renubala Barman, a 35 year old woman belonging to the Scheduled Caste community, is an agricultural labourer by profession. In 2016, she was arbitrarily tortured by personnel of the BSF and was severely injured. The police took no cognizance of the complaint filed by her. We sent a complaint on her behalf to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which recommended monetary compensation of 50,000 INR (683 USD) for her. However, she has still not received this compensation and neither have the perpetrators been brought to justice.

North 24 Parganas, 20.08.13: Taslima Begum, a 47 year old Muslim woman is a resident of North 24 Parganas District in West Bengal. In 2013, she was brutally tortured and sexually assaulted by BSF personnel who forcibly entered her residence in the middle of the night. Other members of her family were also harassed, beaten and intimidated. The police refused to lodge a complaint against the perpetrators while the NHRC recommended monetary compensation of 25,000 INR (341 USD), which has since been paid. No enquiry against the perpetrators has been initiated.

Extrajudicial Killings

Murshidabad, 05.05.15: Ashia Bibi, a Muslim woman aged 29, was shot to death by BSF personnel in 2015. She merely happened to be at an alleged scene of cross-border smuggling. Criminal proceedings were initiated against the alleged smugglers but not against the personnel who shot her. The NHRC closed the case without granting any relief, citing the matter to be sub-judice.

Cooch Behar, 11.10.14: Umran Bewa, a 45 year old widow was however, shot dead by BSF personnel at her residence in 2014. She was a poor woman and the sole earner in her family. The NHRC recommended a monetary compensation of 500,000 INR (6832 USD) for her next of kin, which has not yet been granted.

Sexual Assault/Molestation

Cooch Behar, 08.11.19: In 2019, 20-25 BSF personnel raided the homes of **Fatima Bibi and Hamida Bibi**, on the pretext of looking for smuggled items. They vandalized their property, threatened their family members and sexually assaulted them, leaving them extremely traumatized. The NHRC has since transferred the case to the District Magistrate of Cooch Behar with directions.

Murshidabad, 29.03.17: Jhuma Singh (name changed) alleged in 2017 that a man had raped her. She approached the police of Murshidabad on multiple occasions to file a complaint against the accused. She was met with threats, harassment and humiliation by the police personnel. A case was filed against her by the accused for allegedly lodging a false complaint against him. The NHRC closed this case stating that the matter is sub-judice.

Human Trafficking

Murshidabad, 20.01.15: Javeda Khatun (name changed), a 24 year old woman, has been missing from her home in Murshidabad since 2015. Her family has alleged that she has been abducted and trafficked but the police refused to conduct an investigation in the case. The NHRC disposed the case to the Ministry of Home Affairs with directions.

Bangladesh, 14.04.18: Hamida Akhtar, a 13 year old Bangladesh National was trafficked to India in 2018. Police personnel in Bangladesh refused to act on the complaint made by her parents till the Women and Child Abuse Tribunal, Netrokona took cognizance of the case. Since then, investigation has revealed that the girl has been sexually exploited and forced to terminate a pregnancy. She is still stuck in a shelter home in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh even though the authorities have been able to trace her.

The Indian State has ratified the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It has also been a party to the Beijing Declaration on women's rights. The Constitution of India and domestic laws have also been amended over time to ensure equality and eliminate violence against women. In spite of this, the laws are seldom implemented on the ground.

These instances are to showcase that violence against women is either perpetrated or aided by agents of the State. There is little room for accountability and proper reparations for the victims and their families. We recall these particular cases among many others, to highlight the conditions of impunity at the Indo-Bangladesh border. Even though State authorities are quick to dismiss these incidents, we shall never forget the injustices faced by women. On the occasion of International Women's Day, we honour the struggles of women living close to the Indo-Bangladesh border and take a solemn oath to participate in their fight for justice and equality.