
Women NGOs Statement on Culture and Religion

This oral statement on Culture and Religion was delivered on the 8th of June 1994 to the Second ESCAP Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference that met to discuss the Draft Plan of Action for the region for the World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995.

The statement was made by womens groups including Isis International Manila to express their 'deep concern that the ESCAP Draft Plan of Action failed to address the issue of culture and religion.'

We reaffirm the statement in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of June 1993 which stresses the importance of working towards the elimination of all forms of sexual harassment, exploitation and trafficking in women, the elimination of gender bias in the administration of justice and the eradication of any conflicts which may arise between the rights of women and the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism.

We reiterate human rights and freedoms particularly of women, which are guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women and other international human rights instruments.

We wish to emphasise that universal rights standards are rooted in many cultures and religions of our people. However, we wish to draw a distinction between institutionalised religion, perpetuated by the state, religious institutions and religion in people's movements.

Religious movements to be empowering must adhere to principles of non-violation of human rights. While we advocate multiculturalism, all cultural and religious practices, which deviate from universally accepted human rights including women's rights must not be tolerated.

Culture and religion have been used systematically to violate women's fundamental human rights and their access to power and equality. Women's rights are increasingly threatened and violated by militant assertions of religious and ethnic identity, in normal and in crisis situations.

We are concerned by the use of religion by governments in the region and by political forces wanting to gain political and cultural control that had pitted state against people and communities against each other and is played out intensely against women.

We hold our governments responsible for the failure to accord protection to women and children in crisis situations.

We call on our governments:

- 1** To ensure that the cultural, religious and ideological diversity of all communities is given expression in media and education in ways that do not include or violate the rights of women and minority communities.
- 2** To ensure that the army, police bureaucrats and other state apparatus provide effective safeguards to minorities.
- 3** To ensure the 'Asian values or culture, religion and traditions' do not violate the rights of women and other repressed communities. While cultural and religious specificities may impact on universal standards, they cannot be used as a pretext to justify violations of rights of women, or be used as an excuse for non-ratification or making of reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.'

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