



Womanifesto Second Cycle 2021-2023

Concept Note

Womanifesto: Combat Authoritarianism and Advance Participatory Democracy

Deadline to Submit Applications Extended to 21 June 2021

1. Why Womanifesto

Women's participation and leadership in decision making at all levels, starting in the domestic sphere and extending to the highest levels of government, is a fundamental prerequisite for a just and equitable world and for participatory, accountable democracies. At present, not only are women under-represented in legislatures across the world, and particularly in Asia and the Pacific region, the socio-economic and cultural barriers make it difficult for women to fully exercise their democratic rights and political power.

Since the early 2000, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) has worked to build women's capacity to increase women's representation and transformative leadership in political and policy building processes. In 2018, based on the critical reflection of the state of women's political participation and leadership, APWLD decided to adopt a new strategy called 'Womanifesto'. Womanifesto--women's agenda for change--has long been used by women's movements to ensure elections are fought around policies demanding just, equitable and transformative changes that shift power relations and uphold women's human rights. In APWLD, the Womanifesto is envisioned as a critical organising tool for women to influence the electoral process, hold elected leaders accountable to their promises in advancing women's human rights, equality and Development Justice, and advance feminist participatory democracy.

2. Context

2.1 Rise of Authoritarianism and Extreme Fundamentalisms

The global turn to authoritarianism has seen the rise of hetero-patriarchal fascist leaders, deeply reliant on military force and allied with neoliberal capitalism. These leaders have been busy consolidating their power by amending the constitution and laws, criminalising dissent and manufacturing imaginary enemies out of the most marginalised and historically silenced--including religious and ethnic minorities, migrants, peasants, people living in poverty; while using the state and military power to surveil citizens, curb dissent and advance the cause of corporations. In fact, the turn to authoritarianism can be mapped



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through the strengthening of surveillance, particularly, digital surveillance in these countries that then manufacture 'seditious' criminals out of anyone speaking against the powers that be. The nexus between the authoritarian state and neoliberalism has seen the roll back of the welfare state approach and instead intensified the surveillance through militarism and control of the media.

At the same time we see the governments criminalise dissent on an unprecedented scale. From Hong Kong and Thailand to India and Bangladesh and even beyond in the USA, Lebanon, Nigeria and Belarus the protesters are constantly portrayed as 'unruly' 'mobs' 'violent' and 'disruptive'. This then, 'justifies' the use of polarising hate speech against them and the unleashing of state sponsored violence. Another common feature is gag on independent media and human rights organisations as well as using the COVID-19 pandemic to quell physical protests and arrest dissenters, academics and human rights defenders.

2.1.1 Capitalist, Authoritarian, Surveillance States

From early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became a global phenomenon, leading to the halting of life as we know it. The pandemic laid bare the shocking inequality, a result of the neoliberal capitalism; while the authoritarian governments seized this crisis as an opportunity to undermine participatory democracy than listening to the peoples' needs such as through emergency decrees, passing regressive labour laws and signing of mega Free Trade Agreements.

Of equal importance was the unleashing of newer ways of increasing surveillance, particularly digital surveillance, on citizens. At least 34 countries around the globe have been ramping up digital surveillance in the name of arresting the spread of the COVID-19 virus and 16 of these countries are located in Asia and the Pacific and many are counted among the largest democracies in the region. The collusion between authoritarian states and large corporations profiting from surveillance capitalism is the newest feature of neoliberal late capitalism. Digital authoritarianism is a deeply worrying facet of the latest cycle of democracy deficit.

2.3 Democracy and its Discontents

Women's political representation at the parliamentary level is at mere 25 percent globally, and in Asia and the Pacific region, the representation rate gets much lower to the global state. The political representation does not translate to the actual power of women making decisions. Furthermore, women politicians and human rights defenders continue to face threats and attacks as they challenge the power structure and relations.

Even upto the present day, our idea about the origin of democracy is closely linked to etymology of the word that comes from ancient Greek meaning 'rule of the people'. But as scholars have pointed out, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that the Greek 'demos' was by its very definition exclusionary--women, slaves



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and other marginalised groups did not have the right to participate in the decision making process. For many countries in Asia and the Pacific, democracy is also a parting 'gift' bestowed by the departing colonial powers in the wake of hundreds of years of 'divide and rule' that run deep in the sectarian conflicts within these post-colonial nation-states to this day.

The rise of authoritarianism has seen not only the deepening of social and economic exclusion of the marginalised but also the weaponisation of the very basic right to belong to the polity. The 'right to have rights' as Hannah Arendt puts it, is premised upon citizenship and today's authoritarian regimes are rewriting laws to strip dissenters, activists and protesters of their citizenship in an effort to silence them. The discourse on citizenship has moved far beyond the narrowly civic and political to encompass *social citizenship*: a concept fundamentally linked to inclusion, equity, integration and participatory and accountable governance. Narrowly defining citizenship through ethnicity, and juxtaposing 'docile good citizens' versus 'anti-nationalist' and 'terrorists' who can be deprived of all human rights is a global pattern in post Arab spring Egypt to India. Neoliberal governance has traditionally increased precariousness of the most marginalised by denying them economic, social and cultural rights. But the latest trend in authoritarian citizenship regimes is the denial of civil and political rights by subverting the inclusive nature of citizenship at the heart of democracies.

2.3.1 COVID-19 and the State of Democracy

The Covid-19 Pandemic has brought about a sea change in every aspect of our lives, not the least in the political sphere. The immediate change has been suspension of multiple democratic principles and political rights as countries resorted to exceptional governance ostensibly to combat health emergencies. However, these constitutional and legal exceptions continue to define a chilling new political normal where under garb of combatting the pandemic dissent is stifled, media controlled, and extraordinary measures that extend far into the future are enacted such as the Philippines' new anti terrorism law or the Citizenship Amendment Act coupled with the use of colonial anti sedition laws in India. Monitoring of government measures across 162 countries in a research shows civil liberties are the worst affected across the world. According to a research by International IDEA, 61 percent of countries had implemented measures to curb Covid-19 "that were concerning from a democracy and human rights perspective" whereas 43 percent "implemented restrictions that were either illegal, disproportionate, indefinite or unnecessary".

2.3.2 People's Resistance to Reclaim Democracy

From Shaheen Bagh in India to streets of Bangkok, Thailand and Hong Kong, SAR of China, we have seen mass mobilisations persist for months in the face of state repression. These mass protests for peoples' sovereignty and participatory democracy are often led by the most marginalised and historically silenced sectors of the society. In the past decade we have seen the ubiquity of large-scale mass mobilisations across the globe. These mass mobilisations have, in fact, become 'a major feature of global politics'. These protests have captured international attention as never before. Some of the protests have successfully dislodged authoritarian rulers and some have faced the harshest of reprisals from the



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authorities. The protests are the route through which ordinary citizens 'seek to bring about social, political and economic transformation'. As governments across the region turn more authoritarian, there will be more violence against those claiming human rights, equality, accountability and a redress of injustices--the fundamental principles of democracy. The resilience and spirit of democracy, and our hopes, ride on these protests led by peoples' collective power with a feminist vision and alternatives.

It is equally important to focus on what happens after the protests. International and national media attention focuses on the spectacle of the protests but the focus shifts as quickly to other arena once protests die down. In fact, the aspirational fascist leaders take advantage of this fact of 'eventocracy'. Experiences of mass mobilisations for democracy and change of status quo from the Occupy Movement to Arab Spring, from the Korean Candlelight protests to protests against gendered sexual violence in India have revealed that protests in themselves are not enough to secure lasting, structural changes in the corridors of power. Without crafting strategic paths from protests to peoples' power, the protesting masses will find it hard to gain their inherent sovereign power and/or influence policies in long-term, meaningful ways.

There is an urgent need to reframe our conversations on democracy in this context, to centre participatory democratic approaches in which peoples participate and lead in decision making at the local and national levels, thereby translating protest demands into transformative, feminist policy and practice.

3. Grassroot Women's Agenda for Change: Participatory Democracy for Accountability to Peoples

Research has repeatedly shown that local movements led by women and girls in all their diversity are a key driver for policy change. Yet only a very little proportion of funding reaches the grassroot level directly to women's rights organisations or aims at building holistic feminist movements. With the rise of authoritarianism and its complicity with surveillance capitalism and corporate power, it is now more important than ever to build the political capacity of feminist movements that centre the voices of the most marginalised women to shape and lead political processes and decision makings. In order to address the democracy crisis in the region, it is crucial to create spaces where grassroots to regional feminist movements can come together to build solidarity and collective feminist political power and effect changes in governance and policies.

3.1 Our response: Womanifesto

The Womanifesto has been a tool to bring marginalised women's voices front and centre in the policy spaces. It is envisioned as a strategy to translate protests into pathways of participatory democratic power that will challenge authoritarianism from the bottom-up and build feminist solidarity across Asia and the Pacific.



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The first collaborative journey of Womanifesto with eight women-led diverse grassroots organisations was powerful - women defined their own political agenda and asserted their democratic demands collectively with their Womanifestos. [The journey](#) not only resulted in unforeseen level of changes - from personal level, to changes in practices in the community to policy changes - but also forged resilient, intersectional feminist solidarity and movements to advance participatory democracy.

In 2021, APWLD will continue our journey for feminist participatory democracy. We will support and work with 8-10 organisations with a small sub-grant between USD12,000-USD 14,000. The sub-grant support may be utilised to work with a dedicated young woman (community) organiser to carry out community/constituency consultations, shape womanifesto and advocate with the electorate to advance the political demands of their women constituencies.

APWLD will provide capacity building workshops, feminist knowledge tools, advocacy and/or networking opportunities. We envision this process as feminist and participatory. Feminist, because it is rooted in an understanding of the structural oppressions that have excluded women from shaping the political processes and how to change these power structures. It is also participatory because we want the marginalised and excluded voices to come together, organise and make themselves be heard in the corridors of power.

3.1.1 Overall Objective

To advance women's democratic rights and civic engagement in Asia and the Pacific by increasing women's political capacity to author and realise Womanifestos.

3.1.2 Specific Objectives

- Develop the capacity of women, their organisations and communities to elaborate women's political agenda (or womanifesto) and thereby, engage in broader political processes and policy debates at local and national levels;
- Foster knowledge and resources on women's human rights, particularly democracy methods and community organising tools;
- Establish electoral advocacy plans to share and support women's political manifestos;
- Strengthen institutional development of partner organisations through leadership development and solidarity movement building.

3.1.3 Participants

Womanifesto will accommodate 8-10 partners of national and grassroots organisations led by women in all their diversities from marginalised communities, including women with disability, LGBTIQ+, ethnic and



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religious minorities, indigenous communities. Each partner shall identify one grassroots woman organiser and one woman mentor. At least one of them should come from the community/constituent and be committed to community organising and feminist movement building.

3.1.4 Womanifesto Timeline

Timeline	Activities	Description
May 2021	Call for Application and Selection of Participants	Only selected participants will be intimated by June
August 2021	1st Regional Training on Women's Human Rights and Democracy Methods	The first training will orient participants towards a better understanding of gender and politics through a human rights based approach. The training will also refine the participants' skills in organising and bringing together women from their community using Feminist Participatory Action Research methodology
January 2022	2nd Regional Training on Drafting Womanifestos and Introducing Advocacy Skills	The second training will prepare participants to go back and start drafting the Womanifestos through participatory approach with the community. It will also help them formulate advocacy plans of how to engage with the political leadership and elected representatives of the government with the Womanifestos



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July 2022	3rd Regional Training on Advocating with the Womanifesto and the Way Forward	We will take cognizance of the Womanifesto journey so far. Then we will move on to expand our advocacy skills further and plan for an advocacy phase
November 2022 - May 2023	Advocacy Phase	The partner organisations going ahead with further advocacy will enter into contracts and execute the advocacy phase for six months.
July 2023	4th Regional Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Meeting	All the trainers and participants come together and reflect on the journey so far and the learnings from the successes and failures and evaluate the Womanifesto cycle