

Letter to Smt. Ambika Soni , Union Minister for Tourism and Culture, India

The following letter was circulated on the occasion of the World Tourism Day 2007 by Theeradesa Mahila Vedi, the women's wing of the Kerala Independent Fishworkers Federation. (<http://keralafishworkers.org/Womensgroup.htm>)

**To,
Smt. Ambika Soni,
Union Minister for Tourism and Culture
Transport Bhavan, Parliament Street, New Delhi.**

Dear Madam,

On the occasion of the upcoming World Tourism Day, on 27th September, whose theme this year is "Tourism opens doors to women", we as women's organisations, civil society groups and trade unions express our serious concern regarding the ongoing one-sided and biased discussions and celebrations of the occasion with the support of India Tourism and other governmental and intergovernmental agencies.

While international agencies such as the UNWTO are actively promoting this year's theme, what the hype obscures is the negative impact of tourism on women, especially marginalised women through pressure on natural and other resources, curtailed access to resources, and vulnerability to sexual and other forms of harassment.

UNWTO insists that they are using their Global Code of Ethics for Tourism for gender empowerment. But from experience we know that tourism development is not only gender-insensitive but has negative effects on women's lives in destination communities. In the case of marginalised communities such as fisher folk, adivasis and dalits, it is even worse. In Kerala, where tourism is being promoted as a development option and engine for growth, in almost every destination, local populations are facing problems due to the unplanned and unsustainable development of tourism.

In Kovalam, one of the most prominent tourism destinations in Kerala, many of the women fruit sellers, most of them from fishing communities, are faced with harassment and torture by the authorities and hoteliers. Authorities and hoteliers consider them as a nuisance and level fake cases against them. Communities report that tourism development is displacing traditional communities from their lives and livelihoods.

In Kerala's backwater tourism destinations, the livelihoods of fisher folk and farmers are at stake because house boats, resorts and other boats are polluting the waters. The women from these areas say that their privacy has been intruded by the tourists taking photographs and travelling through the backwater canals.

In the context of post-tsunami tourism development in the coastal regions, strategic evictions of communities for tourism and other infrastructure developments are very visible. Government has adopted double standards in these areas. Recent policy formulations related to the coast are also protecting the interests of industry. The draft Coastal Zone Management Plan prepared by Ministry of Environment and Forests, which excludes tourism projects from coastal zone regulations, is testimony to this. The zone demarcations being proposed will further cut off fisher people's traditional access to the sea and the coasts. As further stretches of beach are bought by hotel and tourism lobbies, privatized coasts will mean no place for drying fish, mending nets, or carrying out all the ancillary activities that provide fisher women a means of survival.

The present trend in tourism is that women have employment opportunities only at the bottom end of the hierarchy (sweepers, garbage collectors, dishwashing, washing clothes etc.). Mostly, cleaning is the only work that remains for women. This development paradigm for the sake of a privileged few alienates the people whose resources are being sold to tourists. Based on these experiences, the UNWTO and various governments should understand that tourism has never been what they have claimed it is.

The promises made in the various policies and development plans that tourism development shall generate employment opportunities and upliftment of women need an in-depth analysis and debate. The impact of tourism on the social relations, gender discrimination and power relations involved in tourism is to be reviewed carefully before blindly pushing tourism as an economic mainstay. According to our experiences, tourism may open doors for a chosen few, but does not help the marginalised.

The UNWTO and industry lobbies are using this opportunity of World Tourism Day to promote tourism as a means of poverty alleviation, linking it with the Millennium Development Goals fixed by the United Nations. But the discussions taking place in relation to the theme seem to be biased and do not address concerns which have from time to time been raised by women's groups and civil society organizations. UNWTO should remember that it is a UN agency with certain responsibility to protect the people's interest, not an agency to represent the interests of a privileged few.

In this context we wish to put on record that we:

- 1) Strongly oppose the celebrations with respect to World Tourism Day planned for September 27, 2007
- 2) Call upon the Government of India and various state governments to stop acquiring further coastal land for tourism development
- 3) Strongly condemn the growth of sex tourism and demand that immediate steps be taken to end it
- 4) Demand the immediate monitoring of cultural impact of tourism development on traditional communities
- 5) Demand the immediate rehabilitation of communities displaced by tourism development, and further,
- 6) Demand that immediate steps be taken to clean up already accumulated pollution, waste and ecological damage due to tourism.

We urge you to look into these demands with due seriousness.

Yours faithfully,

Copy to: Francesco Frangialli, Secretary General of the UN World Tourism Organization

[1] Violence Against Women In the Post Tsunami Context, People's Report (Draft), Action Aid.