

# To build feminist futures, suspend judgment!

[opendemocracy.net/5050/srilatha-batliwala-geetanjali-misra-nafisa-ferdous/to-build-feminist-futures-suspend-judgment](https://opendemocracy.net/5050/srilatha-batliwala-geetanjali-misra-nafisa-ferdous/to-build-feminist-futures-suspend-judgment)

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As feminist thinkers and activists, we must tackle not only the systemic discrimination embedded in the world outside, but the often unconscious or invisible biases that we ourselves have internalized. Part 1. [Part 2](#).



**The booth from which CREA's Suspend Judgment was launched at the 13th Annual AWID Forum in Bahia, Brazil. September 8 - 11, 2016**

The recently concluded [13th AWID International Forum](#), on the theme “Feminist Futures: Building Collective Power for Rights and Justice”, was framed around the sweeping idea that realizing “feminist futures” is only possible if we build our collective power to advance rights and justice. The great challenge for building such power, however, is that we ourselves, as feminist thinkers and activists, must tackle not only the systemic discrimination embedded in the world outside, but the often unconscious or invisible biases that we ourselves have internalized.

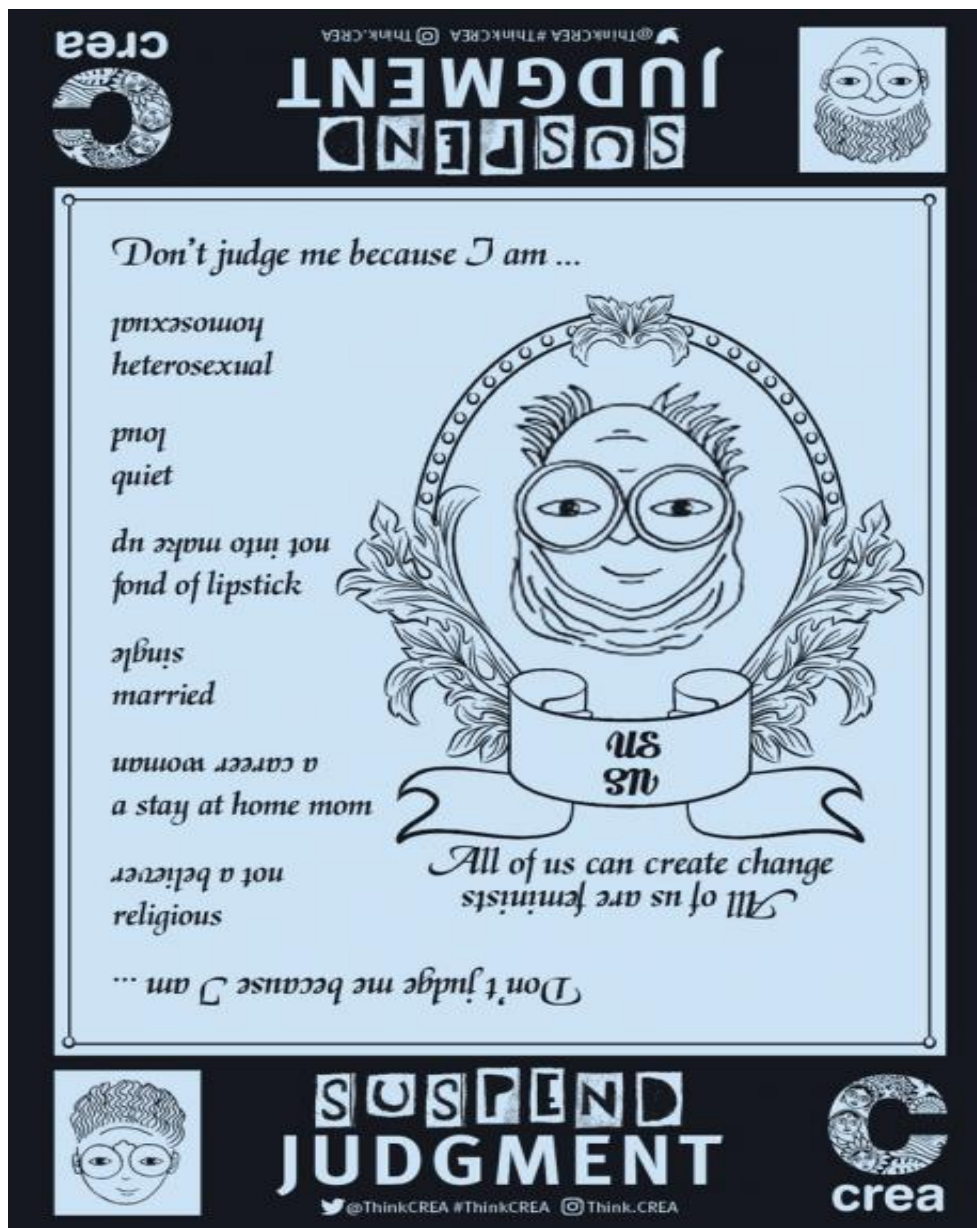
The twin concepts of rights and justice have embedded within them a rarely recognized and deeply normalized *practice* – viz., the practice of *judgment*. We are constantly *judging* each other as people, as social groups, as identities – whether on the basis of gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, location, nationality, religion, the work we do (“unclean” and “immoral” occupations such as those that stigmatize Dalits or sex workers). We are taught from our earliest years, and usually with good intentions, to make judgments – about

what is normal, abnormal, right, wrong, good, bad, clean and unclean. But these judgments are often reflections of social norms and values that feminists and social justice advocates have not only rejected, but transgressed in our own lives.

Why then do we not recognize the ways in which we still continue to judge others, and justify those judgments? How can we find common ground and build our collective power for rights and justice if we continue to be divided by our own internalized biases? As Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said in a recent powerful [speech](#), “Nobody is ever just a single thing. And yet, in the public discourse today, we often speak of people as a single a thing.” She goes on to say, “So I would like to suggest ... that this is a time for a new narrative, a narrative in which we truly see those about whom we speak.” Or whom we judge.

This is why CREA chose to launch our [SUSPEND JUDGMENT campaign](#) at the AWID Forum, where thousands of feminist social justice activists from every corner of the world were gathered.

The Idea for the campaign arose from a practice encouraged at CREA's Sexuality, Gender and Rights Institutes (SGRIs), an internationally lauded programme whose participants are exposed to entirely new concepts, perspectives and discourses that radically shift their perceptions and practice, often in deeply disturbing ways. When participants arrive, CREA faculty ask them to be *in a heightened state of suspending judgment*, in order to gain the most out of the course. The more participants allow themselves to question their long-held ideas, beliefs and biases, the more they are able to learn. They are not only able to better understand the human rights of others, but can more effectively *influence* others - especially those in social movements that are often antithetical to these ideas (such as accepting the fluidity of gender identities and sexual behavior). By leaving their preconceived notions and assumptions at the door, participants are able to recognize that many of the biases and beliefs they have internalized – whether around gender identities, sex work, our bodies, or even pornography - arise from social norms and practices that are in turn embedded in patriarchal, racial, classist or hetero-normative ideologies that uphold deeply unjust power structures.



Suspend Judgment leaflets on display at the AWID Forum. Designed by Sherna Dastur. CREA.

The most formal space where the practice of judgment is integral is of course the law – which tends to reflect dominant social norms and values, especially with regard to gender. But the legal domain is also where we have pushed boundaries, and gained rights for people who were not only marginalized and excluded in their societies, but considered unworthy of rights. The constitution of India, for example, gave equal rights to women and Dalits in 1950, a time when even Western countries like Switzerland denied women the vote, and untouchability continued to be practiced in countries like Japan (Burakumin) and Rwanda (Hutu, Twa). Nepal's new constitution awarded equal rights to third gender peoples when countries like the United States continue to criminalize them in many states, and the Delhi High Court struck down the legality of British-made laws criminalizing homosexuality.

Women's and LGBTQI movements around the world, but especially in the South, have been quite successful in using the law to gain rights and justice for women by challenging the biases or gaps within existing legal frameworks. But despite these advances, the judgments in cases involving sexuality and gender tend to flout these

progressive changes due to the internalized biases of power holders in the judicial system. In judicial contexts of Iran, Brunei, Nigeria and other countries, homosexuality can legally be punishable by death (though follow-through of these judgments often vary).

CREA's mission is to change the way people think so that we can change the way they act. This takes time - it is an iterative process. It is unfortunate that few NGOs, donors, or governments are investing in these kinds of processes – everyone seems to be focused on superficial change that leaves exclusionary constructs largely intact. We accept that judgment is sometimes necessary – those who violate the rights of others, who commit violence, who oppress others simply because of who they are, how they live, what they believe - must certainly be held to account. But we believe that these violations themselves could be more effectively contained by helping people move from judgment to understanding.



CREA at the AWID Forum, Bahia, Brazil. September 2016

Our campaign - Suspend Judgment - is one step in this direction. We launched the campaign from our installation at the AWID Forum, where we exhibited posters and distributed leaflets that disturbed and interrogated people's unquestioned beliefs and biases, and pushed them to understand the systems of meaning embedded in their attitudes. The leaflets were simple – some had mainly images and little text. They were designed to get people to rethink their positions on different issues and identities. For example, our leaflet on abortion had five images of women, each giving her reason for having an abortion, but the sixth and final woman simply asks “Why do I have to give a reason?”



Suspend Judgment leaflets on display at the AWID Forum. Designed by Sherna Dastur. CREA.

Shifting discourse does not happen overnight, but it must begin with those who believe in feminist social transformation. As movement activists, we have to challenge ourselves to constantly suspend judgment and remain critical even within feminist organizing. How can we dismantle and decolonize our own beliefs and attitudes in order to stop perpetuating conflicts, assumptions and norms rooted in patriarchy, narrow nationalism or the

essentialization of bodies? How can we deepen our solidarities and our collective work as feminists so that unexamined or yet-to-be-examined opportunities to work together can arise?

We believe that suspending judgment is feminist practice. We launched the “Suspend Judgment” campaign at the AWID Forum to challenge global feminists to think and act differently. In part two of this article, we will share the exciting and thought-provoking reactions, comments and insights that emerged at the Forum in response to the campaign’s messages. We hope that in the months to come, more women’s rights and social justice activists and advocates, and anyone committed to a more just world, will support CREA’s [Suspend Judgment campaign](#).

*The authors would like to acknowledge the immense contribution of many members of the CREA team and our Institute participants to the conceptualization of the Suspend Judgment Campaign and to the ideas in this two-part article*

Part two of this article will be published on openDemocracy the week of October 10th.

**Read more articles from the AWID Forum written by speakers, participants and [openDemocracy 50.50](#) writers [Ché Ramsden](#) and [Rahila Gupta](#) - [HERE](#)**



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