



Prayas



Newsletter of the Sanctuary group

Welcome to June 2006 issue of Prayas. The first article in this issue describes the work done by a young but energetic organization in Varanasi called SARC. Their work is centered on preventing and mitigating the incest-related violence. They also work towards creating an awareness of the issue. Addressing incest, its pervasiveness and persistence requires that we have a public and honest debate on nature of relationships and sexuality. The SARC effort is a small but positive step in that direction. The second article, a thought piece aimed primarily at men, introspects a little bit more on the sexual violence. Discussion surrounding various incidents focuses too much on the details and not enough on the systemic aspects of the violence. A better understanding of the process of development of attitudes especially related to gender is key to address the problem of the various forms of gender violence. The participation of men is critical in the action because they are both perpetrators and victims at the same time. The last article discusses the importance of microbicides in preventing women from becoming HIV infected. Housewives around the country are vulnerable to HIV given their lack of choices and domination by men. The article presents the features that make the microbicides timely, convenient and effective.

Social Action And Research Center

If gender inequity and the current social structure makes discussion of women's sexuality a taboo topic, violation of the same gets worse. However, in the pride that we take in the close knit nature of families, incest becomes an impossible topic of discussion in our society.

Founded in 1997, Social Action and Research Center (SARC) is a Varanasi-based women's group that is primarily focused on preventing child sexual abuse among girls. SARC is also working within the community and organizing women against violence and human rights, with volunteers on gender and youth, and also on some legal work.

Early research they conducted in Varanasi found that about 88% of the girls interviewed had a history of some degree of sexual abuse. Similar troubling statistics have been reported elsewhere in Delhi and Chennai.

SARC works in 3 ways: direct action, preventive action, and advocacy. SARC volunteers regularly visit ten schools in Varanasi to educate 8th-12th grade girls about domestic violence and about their human rights. They teach girls how to identify sexual violence, how to discuss this taboo subject in the open, and how to get help through SARC's 24-hour help line.

Volunteers of SARC approach the school principals for permission to speak to the teachers and students, and this is often the most difficult step. Some schools recognize the importance of this kind of awareness right away, while others tend to be reluctant. Their experience has been more positive with private schools.

Briefly, they begin with two orientation meetings with the staff at the school, and team up with those staff members that are inclined and willing to work with them. These members are key to their long-term interaction and continuity of contact at this school. These staff members also become future confidants for students in the future. They take them through a separate process that will help them later to better support students.

Their sessions with the students start with a discussion of child rights. In all they have 5-6 sessions per class organized in a way that is convenient to the school - an hour a day for a week or an hour a week, whichever works for them. They never have to bring up sexual abuse, the discussion drifts that way quite on its own. SARC members discuss in general terms different situations that can arise and possible courses of action they can take.

As a consequence of these meetings sometimes a student or students approaches SARC volunteers for help. They think it is vital to get the child to understand that if they have been victims of sexual abuse, no matter the circumstance, it is NOT THEIR FAULT. After that they discuss ways to prevent molestation and sexual contact, some tools being:

1. Just say 'no'.

2. Talk to other members of the family, share the problem.

Confidentiality of the entire process is essential to gain the trust of the child and to ensure her physical security. The support team at the school are also advised accordingly. Occasionally when the child has to be approached in home environment, care is taken to ensure that the child does not feel exposed or shamed.

At this moment, SARC does not get involved in litigation against the perpetrator as this requires incontrovertible proof and resources - which are difficult to sustain for a small organization like SARC.

Given the pervasiveness of the issue, there are far too few people working in the area of sexual abuse, incest and related issues. In addition to the difficulty of the task, the laws are rather ambiguous and do not take into account the vulnerabilities of the victim. There is also resistance from families because of the stigma associated with the issue. SARC is approaching the issue by strengthening the capacity of the girl to resist and cope with abuse. Only the larger society can address the origin and pervasiveness of the problem.

On Sexual Violence - Venkata Pingali

Issues such as trafficking, rape and incest are discussed at length at public fora and in the media. However the discussion is almost always framed as if the event occurs in isolation and independent of the social, economic, political and religious factors that make it possible. Often the framing is also in terms of particular law violated.

However, if we step back and observe events spread out over time and place in private and public life, we begin to notice patterns of violence. We hear about infanticide. We learn about an incident in the family. We notice that a colleague is being subjected to sexual harassment. We see a woman being groped in the bus or on the street.

The reports in the media are only those that are more egregious and those for which a law exists. For many others the law does not even recognize the violation of her privacy.

To address the pervasive problem of violence against women, we must first acknowledge that it exists and that it is a problem. A culture that claims to be deeply religious and respectful of women does not easily accept that the respect is restricted to only powerful goddesses and not to a sister, mother, neighbor or stranger. The evidence is very much there - even the fraction that is reported in the news or could be easily found out with a single visit to the local government hospital in the night shift.

In all the events, at the very least, there is a victim, perpetrator and the society. By and large, the perpetrator is an average man. So if we leave aside the pathological cases, we have to understand what is preparing the victim and the perpetrator, what is equipping the perpetrator and what is the system that is creating the opportunities for violence. What is it that this violence is a visible manifestation of?

Lets consider the case of groping. Why does a man feel that he has the freedom to violate the personal boundaries of a woman? For one thing, men are stronger than women. If she complains or point out what has happened, the rest of the public does not come to the rescue, leave alone that people see this happen and do nothing of their own volition. Why?

When men notice that they can get away with it, they grow bolder - it is the natural behavior of a predator. They try more intrusive groping and/or more often. Perhaps not surprisingly, women and girls talk of being followed by boys/men and groped several times in the course of a single evening.

In a public life that is male dominated, there is little interest in safeguarding the rights of a woman because at some level, they would like to safeguard their own freedom to violate in some form, if not in this specific way. It is this subtle unspoken consensus that leaves no real redressal mechanisms.

Underlying this behavior is also a notion of shame. It is considered a shame to be groped and not a shame to grope. This has to be connected to the premium placed on virginity and in general on the body of a woman. This is the same condition of the child facing incest or the victim of trafficking. Talking about the traumatic incidents invites negative attention and comments - even though it is not the doing of the individual herself. A victim's tragedy does not end with the specific incident but continues in the days to come through constant reminders in social context.

While there may be variety of theories for the origin of this premium, the fact is that it is sustained by the socio-political eco-religious system and utilized for domination of women within and outside homes. Defining modesty as is done and placing the ability to defend this modesty with those very people who are likely to violate it is a no-win condition for women.

Framing the issue as us vs them (men vs women and/or this set of men vs that set of men) misses the point. We all are part of the problem through omission and commission, and can be part of the solution .A psychologist I met on a flight once told me that a certain vulnerable type of personality brings out the aggressive behavior in otherwise average persons. But such vulnerability is nurtured in women and is considered a necessary component of their attractiveness. Thus, cultural learning starting from the birth prepares a woman for a second-class, dependent and vulnerable life. The message from female infanticide is clearly that society considers a girl child a burden. During early years, the girl child sees her options and resources relative to a male sibling. She hears continuous feedback about her role as being limited to child bearing and household management. Few girls reach college. Many of them are encouraged only because higher education makes her more suitable in the marriage market. In many cases when they earn, the control over spending is with the man (husband, brother or father).

The system also encourages men to feel superior and able to dominate the women at home and outside. This happens through a combination of ideas and actions. The perks and privileges of being a boy can be observed from early enough time. Enforcement of abstinence and distance from other sex means that men develop incorrect notions about the other sex. In particular, the commoditization of sex in the form of films and porn also encourages men to objectify women in general. The sense of superiority is combined with lack of gender education and relationship management leaves men force as the only known way to resolve domestic issues. Sensitivity is discouraged by the system through active negative feedback from the rest of the community.

Interventions that seek to address issues such as incest and trafficking have to address the process whose end result is the specific case they are dealing with. This is not within the means of any single organization. Neither is it a one-time intervention. It is open-ended activity that seeks to gender sensitize every aspect of the life.

HIV/AIDS: Microbicides Add a Ray of Hope - Bobby Ramakant

An excerpt; read the entire article at this link:

<http://www.independent-bangladesh.com/news/jun/24/24062005pa.htm#A3>

Predictably HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a woman's epidemic.

Women are twice as likely as men to contract HIV from unprotected intercourse. Vaginal membranes are exposed to infectious fluids for hours after sex. Younger women are at greater risk because the immature cervix is more vulnerable to damage and infection. STDs often go undetected, and, therefore, untreated in women. They in turn increase a women's vulnerability to HIV. In addition, untreated STI can lead to infertility, entopic pregnancy, infant mortality and cervical cancer.

Millions of women lack the social and economic power to insist on HIV prevention measures such as condoms, abstinence or mutual monogamy. Male and female condom use requires the tacit cooperation, if not outright participation, of a woman's male partner. HIV risk escalates among adolescent girls because of their physical vulnerability and susceptibility to rape, forced marriage, trafficking, economic dependence and coercion.

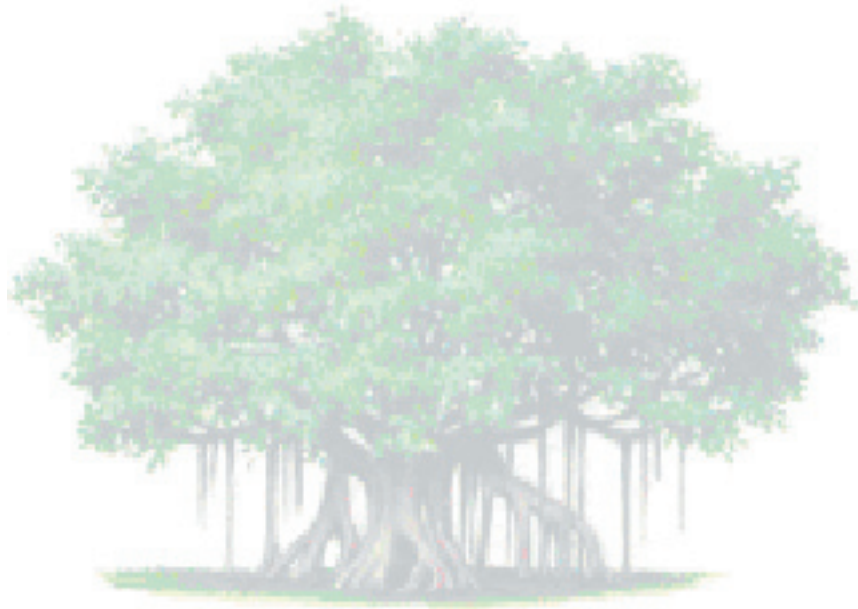
Some dedicated scientists and (other support groups) are working to develop microbicides a woman could use to reduce her risk of getting HIV through sex. Microbicides are still being researched, and will require significant political will, public investment and popular demand before they become available. Epidemiological models suggest that a microbicide with 60 per cent efficacy could avert 2.54 million HIV infections world-wide over 3 years.

Microbicides could be produced in a variety of forms: gel, cream, film, suppository, sponge or vaginal ring. While condom promotion has encouraged men to use condoms with sex workers and casual partners, most men still refuse to use condoms with the wife or regular partner. Predictably, HIV cases are increasing rapidly among married, monogamous women in countries like India. Microbicides will certainly help these women to protect themselves from STI/HIV.

Since condoms are contraceptive, women now have to choose between childbearing and HIV prevention. Microbicides offer a ray of hope here too, being developed into two variants: contraceptive and non-contraceptive, which will make it possible for women to conceive without exposing herself to the risk of HIV transmission.

There are about 60 possible microbicides in the (research) pipeline. Six potential products are likely to enter Phase 3 large scale multi-centric clinical trials soon to assess effectiveness in prevention of vaginal transmission of HIV. These products include the surfactant (Savvy), the acidifying agent (buffer gel), and the adsorption inhibitors (PRO 2000, dextrin sulphate, carageenan and cellulose sulphate).

There are some barriers to widespread support for microbicides. Morally conservative and patriarchal social norms make it difficult to confront the reality of a sexually transmitted epidemic. A culture of silence around women's sexuality enhances the stigma associated with seeking information or interventions about self-protection. Badly needed is a significant increase in investment from both the public and private sectors. Another challenge is to involve men and try to address the unequal power equation between a man and a woman. HIV prevention has to address women's needs and vulnerabilities. Women need HIV and STI prevention tools they can control. Women need microbicides.



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or visit <http://www.ashanet.org/focusgroups/sanctuary/>