INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

CAMPAIGN FOR THE PREVENTION OF MATERNAL MORTALITY AND MORBIDITY

Adapted from Ninth Call for Action: Eight Years of Campaigning

Five hundred thousand women die every year as a consequence of irresponsibility and neglect, this reflects the social inequality and lack of reproductive rights suffered by women. Morbidity related to pregnancy, delivery and botched abortions are further exacerbated by anaemia, malnutrition, disinformation, lack of health services or bad quality of existing ones, abusive medical practices, genital mutilation, to mention a few of the factors.

Maternal mortality is linked to poverty: 99% of these deaths occur in 'third world' countries. The rest of the deaths occur in the 'first world' especially among poor and immigrant women living there. The vast majority of the deaths are preventable.

Maternal mortality and morbidity (MMM) continue exist because of the legal injustice implied by the fact that half the total of abortions performed worldwide - 30 to 50 million-are necessarily clandestine. Forty percent of the world's population now live in countries where induced abortion is permitted on request, and 25 percent live in countries where it is allowed only if the woman's life is in danger. The remaining 35 percent live in countries where abortion is permitted on medical grounds or on social-medical grounds. In 1987 it was estimated that 10 to 22 million clandestine abortions were performed worldwide and 26 to 31 million abortions are performed legally.

May 28 has become a Day of Action, a day in which an ever growing number of women's organisations, national and regional health networks, and a variety of institutions call

attention to the situation of women, demanding our basic rights to health and reproductive self-determination.

The silence has been broken. Research has been carried out, statistics published, signatures gathered, mutual agreements among women organisations and political forces have been reached to improve the health status of women.

The Conferences of Cairo and Beijing showed the increased power of the international women and health movement. Many of our demands and proposals adopted in the final declarations and Plans of Action of both conferences. We want to see our governments implement the promises they made at the international fora.

For the current political establishment public health, disease prevention and education do not enjoy priority within the concept of social (human) development. Therefore, services of this kind are the first to be reduced when resources become scarce. The social status of women is low, with the added aggravation of an ongoing campaign by political and religious leaders who oppose any action aimed at improving the living conditions of women.

A Better Future For The Girl Child

Girls are often still not able to choose when to marry, whom to marry, whether to marry, nor when to bear children and when not. This lack of control of women and girls' over their lives is a result of legal, economic and social constraints. These constraints, in effect, bar us from attaining the fundamental human rights that, quite often, our own governments already adhere to, at least in writing. In many countries' child marriages persist which is the ultimate encroachment of full human rights for women. Girls are the object of persisting harmful practice, like genital mutilation, sexual violence and sexual exploitation. Girls the world over tend to inherit the historic burden of the age-old discrimination against women. This cuts across all cultures. It has very practical results for all girls: denial of health services, poor nutrition, less access to education, low status, low income and even fewer human rights.

Unless we do something about, what the girls of today suffer, all the women of tomorrow will, in turn suffer. The future of the girl child is thus bound with the future of all women.

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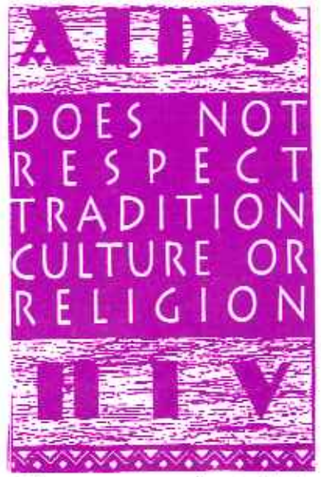
LIVING WITH HIV AND AIDS IN THE PACIFIC

Adapted from: Time to Act; The Pacific Response to HIV and AIDS, UN Agencies Report.

Harsh public attitudes and the need for secrecy make life even more difficult for those living with HIV and AIDS. People who know they are at risk can be unwilling to test, to take measures to protect their partners, or to seek medical care for HIV-related illnesses. Some people living with HIV visit private doctors in order to keep their infection status hidden, even though less expensive care is available at public hospitals. Doctors concerned about their patient's privacy may not report and HIV and AIDS diagnosis to the authorities if they are not assured the results will remain confidential.

The Pacific response to the epidemic so far reflects the fact that most Pacific countries are in the beginning stages of the epidemic. Few people are personally affected and many still react with hostility and blame against people who are known to be HIV positive. Many people living with HIV or AIDS fear ostracism, for good reason. Some of the first people with AIDS in the Pacific had returned from overseas to be cared for by their families; almost all faced discrimination and ridicule. Even today, detection of an HIV infection or and AIDS case generate sensational stories in the local press and demands for public identification of the person, their exile, or their isolation. The association of AIDS with promiscuity, homosexualtiy or drug use-behaviours that are publicly condemned in Pacific island societies but practised nevertheless-encourage people to lay blame for HIV on the individuals who contract it. In small communities, maintaining confidentiality is difficult. Through fear that little can remain anonymous or confidential, many infections remain undetected. Visiting a health centre for an HIV rest or having a health worker visit home readily generates gossip.

Even if blood samples are coded anonymously and sent abroad for HIV testing, so few people are tested that it is often simple for a technician or nurse to find out who is infected. Even publication of statistics on ethnicity, gender, and age can lead to a presumptive identification of the person involved.



There are many issues that must be resolved for people who are HIV-positive, for their families, for health staff, and for the general community. These include patient confidentiality and how to avoid lapses of professional ethics, such as when health staff will give almost anyone information except the HIV-positive person or their family; the dilemma doctors face as to how to tell people of the HIV-positive status when there are no facilities for pre- and post-test counselling; the reluctance of some medical staff to treat HIV-positive people, insensitive attention from other people, the way in which intrusive interest and rumours are fanned by the media, the concern of the community if a HIV-positive person is sexually active but unprotected.

Around the region, people who are HIV-positive, or who care for them, say the threat of public disclosure is a major concern. Yet particularly in the small communities of the Pacific, there is considerable concern about the risks posed by HIV, concerns that need to be met with information and open discussion so that public attitudes about the disease can become more positive and greater compassion be shown to the people who are directly affected by HIV. This change is being encouraged through public information campaigns, by NGO's and by some church and traditional leaders.

'I know that a great deal of clarification is going to be needed so that the story of this epidemic can one day be told as an example of the failure of our civilisation. The politics, the ignorance, the hypocrisy, the prejudices, the vanity, the lies, the complicity with evil, the silence, the moral anaesthesia, the insensitivity. I am becoming increasingly certain that the sum of society's responses to HIV will have more serious consequences than the virus' own capacity for extermination. I am not sure yet what we will inherit from HIV. But we need to be alert to the kind of heritage we will pass on to the post-cure era. Yes, a cure for the virus will arrive. Until then, we need to listen attentively to the confused testimony of our times.'

From an HIV-positive person.

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WOMEN AND AIDS

Adapted from Women and Aids Resource Guide, Women and AIDS Project.

Making Sex Safer For Women

Feminists have been involved in AIDS education and prevention since its inception. In the early 1980s gay men were the priority for education. Hence, the development of a style of education promoting the use of condoms and the coining of the term "safer sex". As more and more women have been affected by HIV the focus of education has broadened. Still, many prevention strategies merely copied the message for gay men and applied it to other communities. Saying "no" to many things

especially in the sexual arena is problematic. "Negotiating safer sex" implies that partners are on an equal footing. AIDS education provides feminists to empower women and to encourage men to take joint responsibility in sexual relations. Persons with AIDS often speak about the positive impact that AIDS has had on their lives. It is possible that AIDS education can be a spur for changing the basis of women's and men's heterosexual encounters and relationships. Sex has never been completely safe for women. Women are seen as vectors for the transmission of HIV. Moral overtones often pervade information about transmission to babies. AIDS is a woman's issue.

AIDS is a disease unique in the 90s. The virus may be a scientific reality, but unlike other life threatening diseases it is surrounded by fear, blame, societal judgements and economic consequences the world over. One of the challenges of AIDS is recognising how substantially different it is for women and children. AIDS is like a thread that can unravel for us the ways in which women are not full partners with men on economic, political and socio-cultural planes. AIDS is different for women because women are the main care-givers in the world, and because the disease itself does not affect them the same way as men. Women alone cannot be responsible for prevention. Many women do not have societal sanctions for or the power to demand safer sex practices of their partners. Governments cannot legislate new ways for men and women to relate. Responsibility for healthy relationships must be the province of both men and women. Only by challenging and changing existing relationships and economics can women and their children be safe from transmission of HIV. People with HIV/AIDS are vocal advocates for social and economic justice. Women's secondary status throughout the world means struggling with social and political systems which undermine and weaken their ability to respond to AIDS. Women earn less income then men. They are less sustainable when infected.

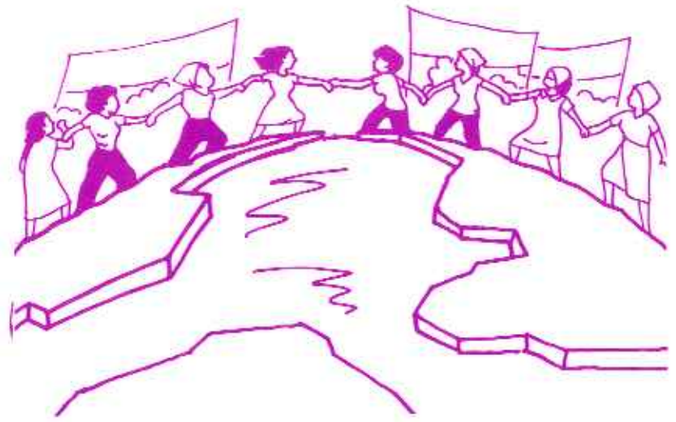
The World Health Organisation estimates that 225, 000 women have contracted AIDS worldwide and that a total of 2,500,000 have HIV infection. AIDS has become the leading cause of death for women age 20-40 years in some of the major cities of the world. Women represent only 3.5% of the total number of people with AIDS in Australia, 5.2% in Canada, 10% in the United States, 12.2% in Europe but up to 50% in Africa.

The epidemiological picture of AIDS in women varies from country to country. Heterosexual transmission is the predominant mode of infection for women although it is essential not to minimize the importance of the exchange of needles in industrialised countries of blood transfusion and the use of incorrectly sterilized medical instruments in less developed countries. HIV transmission to women will continue as long as women remain unequal partners in society.

Women, Industry and Entrepreneurship

Adapted from UNIDO Industry Series

Research and studies on women in development made in the early 1980s indicate the women represent a significant proportion of the labour force in both agriculture and industry in most countries. It is difficult to estimate the number of women engaged in industry. This is due to the fact that the number of women employed in the formal industrial sector has been underestimated in the official censuses and national industrial surveys.



Small and medium-scale enterprises (SME's) play a vital role in industrial development. They have the flexibility to respond quickly to market changes and opportunities, to develop specialised product niches, and to rapidly absorb technological innovations. They are responsible for substantial capital formation and job creation at the local level, and thus to improving local standards of living.

Women have traditionally played an important role in the SME sector, as owners, managers and workers. They dominate three important subsectors, making up over 80 per cent of the employees in textile, clothing and leather production, 75 per cent in food, beverages and tobacco production, and over 60 per cent in wood and wood processing. They also perform most agricultural work in rural areas, where they act as micro-entrepreneurs and traders of agricultural produce.

Although it can be dynamic, the SME sector is all too often marked by outdated and inefficient practices and technologies. As a result, small enterprises tend to operate far below their productive capacity. Improving their efficiency and introducing new techniques can therefore yield large returns to women in terms of income and job creation.

However, women are often unaware of the opportunities, and they typically face several obstacles to taking action. Three in particular stand out:

- Skills. Women often lack the skills required for entrepreneur ventures. Whereas many programmes operate on the grassroots level, women entrepreneurs require upgrading of their managerial, technical and marketing skills in their particular subsector if they are to be able to increase their competitiveness.

-Technology. Small scale businesses often use inefficient low-cost technologies which yield products of poor quality and pose hazards to health and the environment.

-Financial Support. Women entrepreneurs often lack access to credit required to invest in new technologies.

Throughout the world , women make a vital contribution to industrial output. Over 200 million women are employed across all industry sectors, with half of this number in developing countries. Their work not only sustains their families, but also makes a major contribution to socio-economic progress. Most women are employed in low skilled, poorly paid positions, where they are often exposed to health hazards. On the other hand, we are seeing the advance of an increasing number of highly educated women into senior decision-making positions. The creativity and talents of all women are an invaluable resource, which can and should be developed both for their own self-realisation and for the benefit of society as a whole. The key to enhancing women's opportunities, and hence their position in industry and the economy, is to provide them with access to know-how, technologies and credit. Training to upgrade women's technological capabilities and to enhance their entrepreneurial and business skills, whether in simple artisanal production or in high-technology industries.

Making Abortion Safe and Legal: The Ethics and Dynamics of Change

Marge Berer

THE safety and legality of abortion are matters of life and death for women. Thus, this issue of *Reproductive Health Matters* takes up the subject of abortion, from the point of view of those who have had an abortion, those who have to treat the complications of unsafe and illegal abortion, and those who are working for safe, legal abortion around the world. The papers contain a powerful message:

- Millions of women and tens of thousands of midwives, nurses and doctors who are qualified to do abortions are being forced to feel and act like criminals.
- There are a myriad of convoluted, out-of-date abortion laws that appear to have been made only to be broken.
- Sub-standard and appallingly bad abortion services for those who cannot afford better are widely tolerated.
- Women's lives are being wasted and lost unnecessarily. Humane treatment for the complications of unsafe, illegal abortions may be better than nothing, but it is too little, too late.

The authors remind us that with or without the support of their partners, families, doctors, governments and societies, women are having abortions. That women who have abortions and those who provide good quality abortion services have the right to their own dignity and the respect of the people around them. That women have the right to life. But when?

A WOMEN-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

Safe, legal abortion is one of the keys to women's reproductive health. The International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 looks set to express overwhelming support for women's reproductive health, yet abortion will be among the most contentious subjects it addresses.

Apart from the views of the anti-abortion lobby, the most problematic view the conference needs to confront is that abortion is not a method of family planning. What is family planning, then, from women's point of view? How can the right to prevent an unwanted pregnancy exclude the right to prevent an unwanted birth? As if family planning is only possible as long as the plans do not fail. As if contraception never failed either. The women's voices coming through these pages make it clear that controlling fertility is all one, whatever sub-categories it may fall into. They show that contraception, no matter how widely it is used, can reduce but not eliminate the need for abortion.

A hundred years ago, contraception was condemned and looked down upon by many of the guardians of morality. In this context, campaigners for family planning have often left abortion out of their platforms, fearing that it was too radical to include. Today, the use of contraception has become not only socially acceptable, but the socially responsible thing to do. Because abortion was left behind – separate, different – campaigns for legal abortion have been initiated much later, if at all, in most countries. The claim that abortion is not a method of family planning may make sense from the point of view of this history, but not from the point of view of women. Something is clearly wrong if planned parenthood, family planning, fertility control and birth control mean different things to different people.

The interviews by Margoth Mora and Jorge Villarreal with women seeking treatment for abortion complications in Bogotá shed light on the difficulties women experience with contraception, difficulties that are a familiar story. They show that many women and/or their partners may fail to use contraception consistently or at all, or use a less effective method than is theoretically available to them.

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There is an enormous gap between women's lived experiences and what most women want sexual practice and relationships to be. This is perhaps the central issue of sexuality for women. HIV did not invent it. HIV has been able to thrive on the actuality of women's sexual experience.

SAFER SEX EDUCATION

The Meaning of 'safe'

Adapted from Women and HIV/AIDS, Marge Berger with Sundanda Ray

What is the meaning of 'safe' in the context of sexual relationships? The very concept implies women having control over their lives and wellbeing. How can women who are in safe relationships teach and learn from those who are not, and help each other?

All of these questions and issues have implications for practising safer sex. There are many, many myths to shatter and painful experiences to overcome as women sit together and talk about sexuality, relationships and HIV. There is much laughter, enjoyment and pleasure to share as well.

Every society has ways of teaching the young about sexuality, whether it is done by parents, aunts and uncles, or through sex education in schools. Some societies leave the young in ignorance, to find out about sexuality through trial and error on their own, from friends, or from films, magazines, books and the consumerist messages of the advertising media.

If you think sex education is dangerous

Try ignorance!

Sex education in schools often consists only of a few basic lessons in anatomy and reproduction, and more recently, basic information about HIV transmission and prevention.

It is very difficult to implement a national programme of sex education for young people when parents, religious leaders, policymakers, teachers, feminists, and young people themselves have conflicting views and values regarding sexuality and therefore, about what should be taught.

Most people have barely begun to think about how to achieve safer relationships, both individually and at a social level. Different women are going to want very different things and at different points in their lives. Building self-confidence and achieving fundamental changes take time.

Whatever the views, people of all ages need safer sex education. Creating spaces where both women and men can talk about sexuality and relationships without fear, separately or together - individually, as partners or in groups - is crucial. One session is not enough. People need time to open up, to talk to their partners and their children, and to be able to come back to discuss what happened and get feedback and support.

Many studies of sexuality and HIV risk only crudely describe risk-related sexual practices and condom usage. Sometimes they have as little to do with sexual relationships as the curriculum of many sex education courses. Although the data prove risk exists, only an insight into the complexity and multi-level character of sexuality in relationships can explain why. Attempts to substitute 'safe' for 'unsafe' practices depend on the meanings those practices have for people and the degree to which new practices provide emotional satisfaction and find social support.

The director of Family Life for the Roman Catholic Archidiocese of New York City has said: 'We don't say "Smoke Carefully." We say, " Don't Smoke." A huge campaign could work to stop kids from having sex. We don't water down principles. AIDS was caused by promiscuity and casual sex. It is not traditional values that brought us where we are'. While the director of a service centre for young gays and lesbians in New York responds: 'If you deny young people information based on morality, you are sentencing them to death. Nothing is more immoral than that'.

Debates about sexuality and morality go beyond what is right for the young.

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MUCH MORE THAN INFORMATION

Adapted from AIDS action - Asia Pacific edition.

All to often, HIV prevention prgrammes focus on providing information, and encouraging individuals to change their behaviour. But just knowing the facts is not enough. Like all human behaviour, what people do sexually (and why, where, and with whom) is influenced by a large number of factors.:

- what people know or don't(knowledge)
- what they think, or feel, and what they feel able to do (beliefs, attitudes and self-esteem)
- what they know how to do (skills)
- how other people in the community behave, think and feel (peer pressure and social influences)
- the wider environment (culture, religion, economic opportunities, health policies, legislation, and service provision).

People's age and sex also affect what they do. for example, men and women are expected to act in very different ways. Both sexes are influenced by very strong and widely held beliefs about appropriate male and female behaviour.

All these factors influence how people behave and their health. This means that programmes working with people to help make their sexual lives safer (and reduce their risk of HIV/STDs) need to explore how these issues affect what people do, and consider how to address them.

At the **individual level**, people need topportunities to build on their personal knowledge, skills and confidence, and to re-consider their attitudes and beliefs about, for example, male and female sexual responsibilities and pleasure.

These opportunities enable individuals to understand why and how they are at risk of HIV, and to feel motivated to try and reduce the risk to themselves and their partners. But even if they want to, most people do not feel able to change what they do sexually (or what others do to them).

So, in the **wider community,** programmes need to work with local organisations, decision makers and the media to encourage changes in social attitudes and in people's economic and cultural situations.

Making Environments Supportive

Individuals can reduce their risk of HIV infection only if safer behaviour is easy and widely accepted as part of everyday life. Changes in two key areas can help to make people's environments more 'supportive', not only safer sexual behaviour, but also for people who know they are livingt with the virus. These are:

-shifts in social and cultural influences or pressures; and

-overcoming barriers in wider society (such as restrictive policies and legislation, poor health services and education, lack of human rights, poor economic opportunities).

Social and Cultural Influences

Often both women and men feel they have no choice about what they do, and that they have to behave in ttraditionally expected ways. Women in particular, mayu have few options because of emotional or financial pressure, or may be forced to have sex against their will.

Programmes are working with people to developm new sexual norms, and to make traditional practices safer.

Economic Opportunities

Poverty, especially for women, is a major factor in the epie\demic spread. Again, while long term strategies are needed, local efforts can help greatly. For example, in Ghana, elders are supporting young women's education and loan schemes to help them start up their own businesses, rather then leaving home to become sex workers.

Open Environment

Barriers to providing relevant information about HIV/STDs need to be overcome, especially for young people. Reducing discrimination against people with HIV, and marginalised groups such as sex workers or drug users, means that more individuals can live openly and with dignity, and be able to protect themselves and others.

Q: What is the difference between early and present day feminists?

A: The main difference between the two is that earlier, the struggle was for the democratic rights of women. These rights include the right to education and employment, the right to own property, the right to vote, the right to enter parliament, the right to birth control, the right to divorce, etc. In other words, earlier feminists fought for legal reform for a legally equal position in society.

Today, feminists have gone beyond mere legal reforms to end discrimination. They are working towards the emancipation of women. Feminism, therefore, now includes struggle against women's subordination to the male within the home; against their exploitation by the family; against their continuing low status at work, in society and in religion and culture of the country; against their double burden in production and reproduction .

In addition, feminism challenges the very notions of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive, biologically determined categories. In its essence, present day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home.

But it must also be made clear that it is not enough to simply ask for women to be equal to men in the community. What good will it do for a peasant women to become equal to a peasant man who is himself brutalized, exploited and oppressed by society. Feminists, therefor, are not only asking and fighting for the "equality" of women but for a just and equitable society - for both women and men.

Q: But is this struggle relevant today? After all women now have many democratic rights - education, employment, franchise and more. Recent policies have resulted in the liberation of women out of the home and into the workforce and have made them economically independent. What then is the problem, and do we still need feminism?

A:. While some women have indeed benefited from these changes, their number is small and needs to be increased. Feminism is for more women coming out of the home and into the workforce, if they want and need to work.

But at the same time we are against policies which allow and perpetuate the exploitation of women's labor : the payment of low wages, the prevalence of unhealthy working conditions, overwork, arbitrary hiring and firing, denial of freedom of association, sexual exploitation,etc.

But it needs to be added here that economic independence, although very important for women's emancipation is not enough. Even economically independent women are subordinate to their men and families and face discrimination at home. The fight for economic independence is, thus just one aspect of the women's struggle.

Moreover, the figures with regards to women's participation in government and policy making are, in fact, appalling. Only a handful of countries after independence have had women in parliament. Nevertheless, presence of a few women in important public positions in no way proves that the overall status of women is satisfactory.

Graphics courtesy from
' Kali For Women '
(India)

Who's Afraid of Feminism?

Adapted from Women in Action

Feminism is a very misunderstood word. Many people-men and women alike-are scared of it. The confusion and misunderstanding comes partly from the male-dominated media, which has widely misrepresented feminists as 'bra-burning,' 'manhating or bed hopping,' 'family-destroying' women. These images are reinforced by other forces and groups that see the emancipation and liberation of women as a threat. As a result, feminists are often attacked and dismissed as 'middle class,' 'westernized,' and 'rootless.' As a result, many, who have not even given feminism any thought at all or who have imbibed the false propaganda against feminism, are too quick to say that they are not, or that somebody isn't a feminist. Or that someone who is should be feared and avoided, or simply shunned and ignored or, at the very least, humoured and patronized.

"My God! They know! What'll we do now?"

Q: Are Feminists manhaters?

A: Feminists do not hate men but are against patriarchy, male domination and the maleness in men-and in those women who might imbibe similar behaviour patterns-which is expressed as domination, aggression, violence, etc. We are against men who do not accept women as their equals, who treat women as their property or otherwise view them only as commodities. Moreover, any move by women to help them recognise this, they consider antagonistic.

Q: What really is feminism?

A: Unlike many other 'isms' feminism does not derive its theoretical or conceptual base from any single theoretical formulation. There is therefore no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times. The definition thus can and does change because feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels of consciousness, perception and actions.

This means that feminism meant one thing in the 17th century (when the word was first used) and that it means something quite different in the 1980s.

It can also be articulated differently in different parts of the world and, within the country, differently by different women depending on their class, background, level of education, consciousness, and others. Even among similar kinds of women there are different currents and debates in feminist thinking, particularly with regard to the reasons, that is, the historical roots, for us today.

In a South Asia workshop, women from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka accepted this definition of feminism: "An awareness of the oppression and exploitation of women in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change (these conditions)."

In this definition anyone who recognises the existence of sexism (discrimination on the basis of gender), male domination and patriarchy and who takes some action against it is a feminist. Note however, that the mere recognition of sexism is not enough. That recognition has to be accompanied by action, by a challenge to male domination.

But this action can take any form. For instance a woman's decision no to be humiliated ot to educate herself and pursue a career or her decision not to have taken in the most recognised struggle. In other words, you do not have to belong to a group to be a feminist although in order to do anything effectively, it is much better to be part of one.

Young Hopefuls

I am young. I am young. I am brown. I am a mother. I am rural. I am a worker. Iam an immigrant. I am old. I am of the North. I am a professional. I am happy. I am poor. I have access to resources. I am disabled. I am white. I am of the South. I am urban. I am a woman. I am an individual.

We have come to talk abouth this thing called "women". We have come to talk about "her" and the issues "she" is facing. Oh, the inequality. Oh, the oppression. Sisters of the world unite. Fight the common enemy.

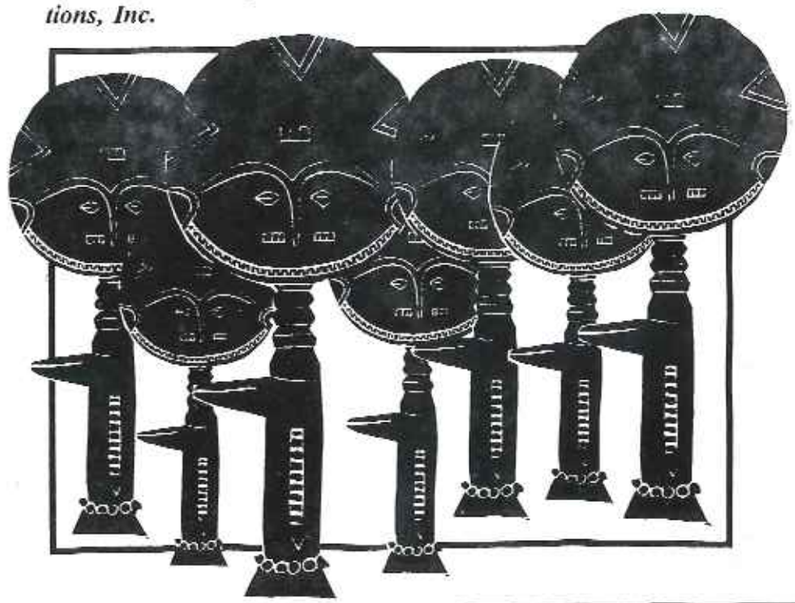
But our enemies are not common. Our struggles are not equal. We do not come here as one the almighty female monolith. We come here as many. We come here as individual voices bound together in various coalitions by common politics, nationality, colour, sexuality, age, or occupation. Our stories are not the same. Our power is not equal. We, too withhold the capacity to oppress each other.

I embrace the spirit and purpose of this conference. I embrace the opportunity to gather, connect, and celebrate the ground that has been broken and the progress that has been made. I embrace the opportunity to gather, discuss, and strategise about the work that remains to be done. For there is so much to be done...

But as we gather and connect and talk and discuss and lobby and laugh and shout, let us remember that there is no single challenge or issue paramount to us all. Our links will be limited, our common ground may be narrow. In the final analysis, there may be as many answers and solutions as there are women here today.

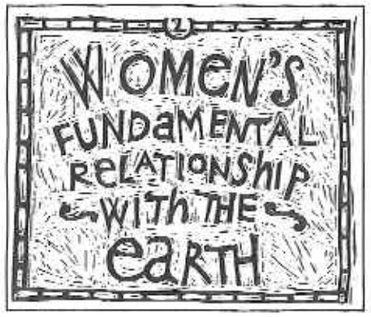
Let us forge ahead in this awareness of our diversity...

This essay, written by Susan Dowse, 24, Vancouver, is one of the two winning entries to a Canadian sponsored competition jointly administered by Status of Women, Canada and Telemedia Communications, Inc.



WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Adapted from Women and the Environment A Statement prepared by the Office of the Status of Women, Australia



We all, women and men, depend on the resources of the Earth for our fundamental needs. Whether we grow our won food or buy it at a supermarket it has to be produced and nourished by the earth's resources. Whether we live in a house made of bamboo and palm thatch or in a high-rise block of units made of reinforced concrete, the materials used derived from the Earth. We depend on the Earth for our clothing, the energy or fuel that we use, the means we use to communicate with others or move from place to place, the water we drink and the air we breathe.

In most cultures and societies, women and men have particular roles, although these are neither universal nor immutable. In many, if not most cultures, women play a major role in the provision of the family's basic needs and thus, those of the community. In many communities this is a direct role. Women are responsible for growing food, livestock care, water and fuel-wood collection, making clothes, providing health care and house construction. But even in more industrialised communities we find that women still have a major role in making parallel provisions for their families and communities. They take major responsibility within the home for food, both its acquisition and preparation, and for other domestic arrangements such as house cleaning maintenance, as well as in other roles such as health care.

The domestic sector is defined in the UN System of National Accounts as being any work that is done without pay in the home or related areas. This can be arbitary division. In some countries where women grow most of the food their work is not formally counted because it is defined as unpaid work in the domestic sector. In other countries the same tasks are paid, described as 'agriculture' and counted as part of GDP.

This is not to suggest that women can only relate to the environment and development through their work in the domestic sector. Women's activities in paid employment also have significant effects on development and thus the environment, but the reason for an emphasis on the domestic sector is its importance. There is an inherent importance in the work done in this sector in providing for fundamental daily needs and the sector is economically significant.

'Poor women in rural areas are particularly dependent upon the productivity of the land and other natural resources. Their welfare is directly affected by development activities, especially impinge upon the source base. Where these natural resources the basic resource able land is food needs and for satisfying the centre of subsistence production in many Common-wealth countries.' These women in the rural areas are the main producers, growing food for subsistence and sale; women grow more than half of the world's food. Yet their ability to invest time and resources in long-term conservation practices is constrained by their lack of land ownership or secure tenure: these problems continue to be largely ignored in agricultural development programmes.

There are some self-sufficient communities, in lower income countries and especially among indigenous populations, which depend directly on the resources around them. In these situations the close relationship to Earth is clear; there are immediate interreactions between the people and the environment when there is bad management in the use of the earth's resources, and an immediate impact on the people from natural hazards and disasters. The growth of the 'global village', of which most of the world's population in now, in some way or another, a part, has led to more complex relationships between cultures, societies and economies, and to more complex arrangements for sustaining our basic needs. This complexity appears to have removed awareness of how we all depend on the Earth for our sustenance.

"Women should stay home"

Women and young persons should not be allowed to work at night, says Ro Sainimili Takiveikata.

She said women should stay at home and look after their family at night.

"Members of the public are now expressing their concern on the increasing crime and violence against women. To legalise their work at night will be an additional source of further crime because young children will not be looked after at night.

"They will turn to mischief and later on in their lives take to crime and violence."

Apart from social implications, Senator Ro Seinimili was also concerned about the safety of women.

"To allow them to work at night is to ask them to travel on public transport alone at night.

"This will mean they will expose themselves to violence and crime to and from work."

She called on government to ensure security for female workers on their travel to and from work.

She said to do this would ve hard and expensive for the employer and government, therefore the existing working conditions of all workers should continue.

From the Fiji Times, Letters to the Editor

The Fiji Women's Rights Movement writes in reference to the article titled "Women should stay at Home" (F/T 11/6). We are disappointed to see the continued discrimination rendered towards women in relation the unpaid work they do in the home. Women do not "stay at home"; they WORK in the home, they cook, clean, wash, rear children and the list goes on.. Unfortunately most of our society still sees all this WORK as just staying at home. The reasons for this is clear, if we work, we are paid and thus since housework and subsistence agriculture are unpaid, it could not be work.

The article goes on to say that by legalising night work for women, we will be encouraging crime as children will turn to crime since mum will not be home. How realistic is this notion? Crime is rampant in Fiji and women were not working in the night. If crime will increase with women working in the night than what is the excuse for today's criminals? The nightwork ban was lifted yesterday and not twenty years ago. The argument that by not having mothers around to discipline children and educate them will lead to increasing crime is quite discriminatory to those of our men who are fathers.

Are we saying that fathers are incompetent with teaching children about social and moral values? We were aware that only women could give birth to children, but thought that child rearing was a joint affair.

We appreciate that women are more likely to be subject to physical and sexual violence but this is where the need for proper legislative and policy safeguards arises. Keeping women locked in the house will not eradicate violence against women. Government needs to ensure the safety of all its citizen's by effecting legal and policy changes to ensure that women and men workers who work in the night are not exploited. Issues such as remuneration, transport and meal allowances etc. need to be decided. If it is "too hard and expensive for government to ensure security for workers" than maybe we need to question government priorities as one would have thought that the security of its citizens would be a paramount concern of any government.

In regards to employer practices, proper policies and procedures need to be set to ensure that the interest of the worker is not marginalised in the pursuit of profits. We all speak of productivity and the most effective way of increasing worker productivity is by ensuring proper working conditions and wages. We need to move away from protectionist arguments to ensuring that women who wish to work at night are allowed to do so with proper working conditions and wages and that those women (or men) who do not wish to participate in nightwork are not victimised.

Praveen Sharma
FWRM

from Pg 1

We should be allowed to decide for ourselves whether we wish to work at night or not. For those of us who wish to work at night, we need to have issues such as wages, transport, meal allowances addressed to prevent exploitation and those of us who choose not work in the night should not be victimised for our choice.

While we continue to be bogged down with protectionist arguments, we continue to fail to address the double burden women face in the form of paid work and unpaid work. (On this note we can say that women have and continue to work at night...in the unpaid workforce where the workplace is the home). We need to educate our men that rearing children is a dual parent responsibility and not the 'women's job' only. We need to recognise house work as family work rather than as women's work. Unfortunately while we are still engrossed in arguments which are based on a women's place being in the home, issues such as these will continue to be ignored.

We recognise the fact that women are more likely to suffer violence (sexual and physical) than men, but is this violence limited to the workplace? Can we realistically state that keeping women inside the home will reduce the violence against women? If one casts their mind to the more recent reports in the media on violence against women, it is apparent that you do not need to leave home to be subject to sexual and physical assault.

The arguments made by those supporting the night work ban have been primarily about protecting women and children from the dangers of the 'outside world'. Women should be protected as working at night will increase their chances of being sexually/ physically assaulted. Given the statistics on sexual assaults, how valid is this statement? Did the advocates of the night work ban do research on the possibility of women getting assaulted outside the home as opposed to within the home? Another reason put forward for supporting the ban was that night work for women will lad to the breakdown of the family. Children would turn to crime as their mothers will not be around to provide them with moral education. Personally I believe that this is discriminatory against those men who are fathers. Are we saying that fathers cannot instill moral and social values in their children? It is interesting as during most gender training sessions on work issues we usually arrive at the conclusion that childbirth is the only "work" that is gender specific, every thing else including child rearing is a dual parent responsibility.

The night work has been lifted. Let us now work to ensure that proper legislative guidelines are in place to address our concerns regarding wages, transport and other working conditions for night workers. Protective legislation which takes the choice from women is not designed to protect women but those sections of society who still believe that a women's place is in the home and not the workforce.

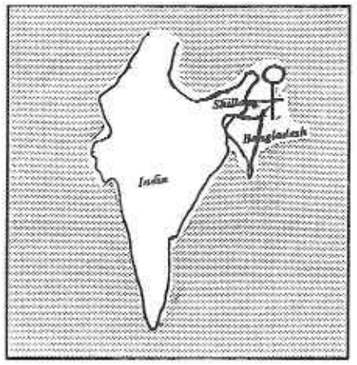
Our aim should now be to ensure that the choice remains with the women...on **the right to work** at night and the **right not to** work at night. Let us choose for ourselves.

Where Women Rule

AND MEN USED AS BREEDING BULLS

By Thomas Laird and Paul Andrews

In a small province in the midst of macho India, women hold the power. Owning land and livestock, they dominate the men who are little more than "servants". But now, in the name of progress, this traditional way of life is under attack from the men, who complain they are nothing more than breeding bulls.



In a remote part of north-east India, the largest surviving matrilinear society in the world is indeed a woman's world. One million people in the province of **Meghalaya** live according to an ancient system, by which power, property and family names are passed down through the female line. The region is an island of sexual equality in the midst of a macho continent. But this society is under attack as " progress" threatens its unique culture.

In the hills of Meghalaya, the boys and men work the fields and tend the goats and the women own all the property. Unusual? That's not all. When the boy's mother dies, it's the sister who will receive her home and possessions. And the land worked so hard by a boy will never be inherited by him - but by his sister. Like his father before him, the boy will ensure his own future by marrying a woman from another clan, with her own property.

Anywhere else in India, such a notion would be met with incredulity, even hostility. Few of the tens of millions of rural women in this vast sub-continent own anything beyond a few meagre personal possessions. Certainly not homes, land or livestock. But Meghalaya is a place apart both physically and culturally. Centered on the small but bustling city of Shillong, one million Khasi, Jaintia and Gharo tribespeople inhabit a remote backwater of Assam - itself connected to the rest of India only by a narrow corridor of land between Nepal and Bangladesh. The survival of Meghalaya's unusual social structure has been largely due to its isolation. The clans live in the heavily forested culde-sac valleys that rise to the south of Shillong towards the northern border of Bangladesh, accessible only by steep, winding mountain roads.

Meghalaya is a world where women are held in a degree of respect that's unheard of anywhere else on the continent. Nowhere else in Asia do women have so much independence, own so much, or have so much economic freedom.

And nowhere else in India could a man feel so insecure. Where else would a man complain, 'I am just a servant - breeding bull'? The words of 18 year-old Anthony Musnong-bri highlight a growing backlash among many Khasi against a custom which they see as out of touch with the rest of society.

Not that Khasi men have no rights or powers. Khasi traditionalists are quick to point out that being a matrilinear society does not imply that it is also matriarchal. In many ways, day-to-day gender roles follow a traditional Asian pattern. Politics are most entirely a male preserve. *Durbars* - village meetings - are strictly men only affairs, although those men invariably consult with their womenfolk before voting. The Meghalaya state assembly boasts only a single woman member.

'Of course, outsiders say that in our society men are deprived of everything, and that the women dominate completely,' explains Judy Schullai, a professor at the University of Shillong. 'That is not true, We are partners.

'The family name, maternal home and estate, yes, these pass down through women. But our men have a great deal of power - in their mother's house, though not in their wife's. Political power is, and always has been, in the hands of the men. There are never any village headwomen, only headmen. Nor did we ever have reigning queens, only kings. Priests, too, are always men.

'But all these positions pass down through the women. For example, not from a king to his son, but to the son of his youngest sister - who was fathered by a man from another clan. This gives women a degree of status they do not have elsewhere in Asia.'

That status is clearly defined in Khasi attitude to some of the great taboos of other Asian societies: rape, abortion and divorce.

To be Cont-d

Media images of bodies and sexuality - setting the social agenda

- By Dr Mridula Selwath

Media images imprint, affect and mould the thinking and attitudes of people in all societies. Media images create a sexual agenda. Media imagery is in fact a very powerful language. It is clearly heavily edited to protect men's sexual and hence social confidence and self-esteem, while undermining that of women.

One can easily document this culture of 'gender inequity' within the confines of one's own home - one does not have to go to a sex shop or adult movie to see this. There is an enforced double standard for men's and women's nakedness. So rare is sexual explicitness in the context of love and intimacy that society treats sexuality as if it were deviant, while embracing violent sex as healthy.

There is an urgent need to break the underlying assumption embodied in the media that sexuality is confined to the genitals. It is not. Sexuality suffuses all of life, flowing over the whole body, it is personal and tactile, it is something to explore, communicate and celebrate.

Sexuality follows fashion which follows politics. The graphic ideal of perfection against which a woman measures herself hobbles her. Female sexual pleasure is represented in the media as being directly related to the ideal perfect body. This means that those inhabiting less than perfect bodies are denied the possibility of sexual pleasure.

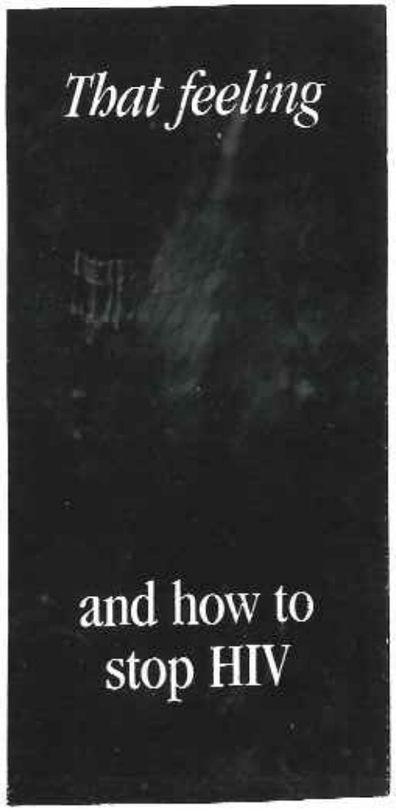
AIDS further intensifies an atmosphere that suggests to women that only an ethereal beauty would lead a man to risk his life for sex.

Then there is the case of sexual licence versus oral licence. On any day, 25% of women are on diets with 50% finishing, breaking or starting one. Female models weigh less than an average female. The state of her fat, like the state of her hymen in the past, is a community concern. 'Let us pray for our daily bread' has become 'we will encourage you to lose it'. 90% of members of weight watcher's programs are women, yet an equal percentage of men and women are overweight.

Furthermore, our eyes are trained to see signs of aging as a flaw on women's faces, but a mark of character on a man's. Men die once and women die twice, women as beauties before their bodies die.

Let a child pick up a comic, an adolescent a teen magazine, an adult tune into a rap song or a family flick on the television to their favourite soap opera, the senses will be bombarded in all cases with obvious and subtle inequities in relation to the types of sexed bodies the media propagates. All the processes to fight for justice and equality come to nought, unless the knob is turned off on this rising tide.

Adapted from ' Women's Sexuality & Culture ' (Women's Studies Center - Uni. of Sydney)



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Balance

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MAY - JUNE 1996 ISSUE

editorial

by Praveen Sharma

Lifting of the Night Work Ban

These past few months have been extremely exciting at the FWRM office particularly in relation to our stand on Night Work. We have been branded and I quote 'some women's organisations who apparently do not enjoy the same level of labour knowledge as Trade Unions do' (Daily Post-letter to the editor, June 20). Although the letter writer did not name the women's organisations, it is not very hard to guess as the Fiji Women's Rights Movement and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre were the two women's organisations which supported the lifting of the Night Work ban on women. Our readers may ask why are we supporting night work for women given the escalating criminal activity and the general state of lawlessness? Why are we saying that women should be allowed to work in the night and thus opening them to further exploitation by employers (as some may argue)?

While advocating the 'right to work' argument we are mindful of the "RIGHT TO CHOOSE' and the 'Right to Refuse'. Our critics are arguing that women need to be protected hence the choice should be taken away from them. We question this train of thought.

There are many reasons for arguing for a night work ban, but if night work is so unsafe and so open to exploitation than why are we protecting women only? Why are not men accorded this protection? If night work will lead to a breakdown of the 'family' than could one not argue that the absence of the father could also lead to that?

When we chose to support the lifting of the ban, we wished to move away from the protectionist arguments. The danger in protective legislation such as the ban on night work is the rationale behind it. Today, women working in the night will lead to the breakdown of the family, tomorrow this argument can be extended to not allowing women to work at all. Absurd as it is, there is a real danger of this occurring. People can argue that women working in paid work outside the home will lead to increasing crime, violence and exploitation of these women. Thus it is crucial that when we advocate protectionist policies and legislation for our women we need to be clear of our reasons as they can (and will be) used against us at a later date. In times where we are faced with an economic crisis, women are the first to bear the costs of such a recession. The same reasons used for the ban on night work (to protect women) can be used to justify our exclusion from paid employment.

Women need to be allowed to make their own decisions; we need to make our own choices without fear of retribution. This is what Trade Unions and women's organisations should work towards. We should be allowed to decide decide for ourselves whether we wish to work at night

Inside this Issue

- *Lifting the Nightwork Ban*
- *Feminism*
- *International Day of Action for Women's Health*
- *4 pages of AIDS info.*
- *Smoking and Women - trying to quit?*
- *Young Hopefuls - young women's perspective*
- *A story with a twist: Where Women Rule and men used as breeding bulls..*

plus more..