

affirming sexuality

REPORT OF A REGIONAL
CONSULTATION ON
SEXUALITY IN SOUTH
AND SOUTHEAST ASIA
CHIANG MAI, THAILAND
19-20 JUNE 2007

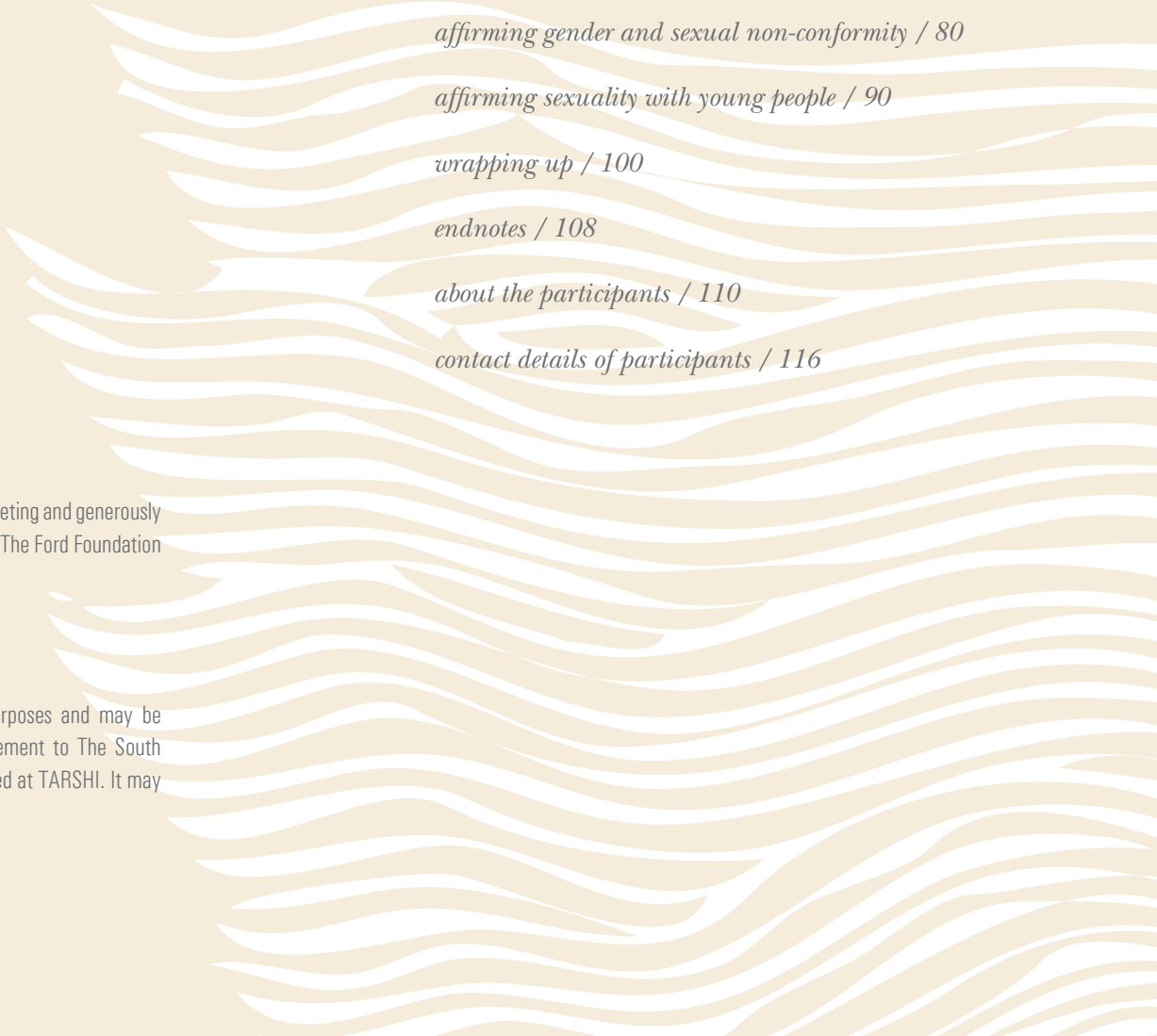
THE SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA RESOURCE
CENTRE ON SEXUALITY AT TARSHI



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*The Regional Consultation on
Affirming Sexuality brought together individuals
with a range of expertise on different sexuality
issues in the South and Southeast Asia region to
look at the ways in which sexuality is and can be
affirmed in this region and to suggest potential
action and strategies.*

introduction

WHY A REGIONAL CONSULTATION ON AFFIRMING SEXUALITY?

From when we are young, we are taught that sexuality is ‘not a good thing’. Kids receive many messages that reinforce this – behave yourself, be a good girl/boy, sit with your legs together (if you are a girl), don’t act like a ‘sissy’ (if you are a boy), and so on. Teens are guided to be ‘careful’ and to not keep bad company (meaning don’t hang out with people who take drugs or have wild parties) so that they don’t taste the exotic fruit of sexuality until they are ready for it. Who and what determines when anyone is ‘ready’ for it? Even when people are at a stage of life when being sexually active is socially acceptable (for example, because of age or marital status), discussions about sexuality are restricted to certain socially prescribed ‘legitimate’ aspects of sexuality or, more commonly, its dangers.

There are dangers of course – unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmissible infections including HIV, the threat of rape and sexual exploitation. Yes, there are horrors. But, there is also so much more. Sexuality has affirmative aspects that are not discussed as much as its negative aspects. The approach to sexuality is most often from the perspective of disease, violence, discrimination and exploitation. While these are worthy approaches in themselves, they do not sufficiently address all aspects of sexuality.

Sexuality is also a site of comfort, discovery, exploration, joy, fun, tenderness, pleasure, and many other positive feelings. It has the potential to transform and liberate. Sexuality of course does not operate in isolation. It intersects with gender, class, religion, economics, the law, culture, and many other variables and is implicated in broader structures of power. Any exploration of affirming sexuality needs to be grounded and contextualised in these overarching structures.

Our vision must be large enough to include varieties of sexual desire and pleasure that may be different from our own. Pleasure finds little discussion in scholarship and intervention. Almost 25 years after Carole Vance’s groundbreaking book, *Pleasure and Danger* (1984), we have yet to treat it as a subject deserving serious consideration. The only time pleasure is talked about at all is in the context of safer sex practices for HIV prevention.

One of the exciting new developments in recent years has been the increasing discourse about sexuality in the framing and claiming of human rights. The rhetoric of human rights is both liberatory and regulatory. Claims have been made for the universal right of people to not be discriminated against based on their sexual preferences and gender identity or expression. There have also been debates on whether it is wise to make a claim for the ‘right to seek sexual pleasure’, thereby affirming sexuality, but at the same time possibly giving the State an additional entry point into ‘private’ lives. More recently, in March 2007 the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity were launched in Yogyakarta, Indonesia¹. They were framed by 29 international human rights experts based on existing human rights law, and the Principles affirm binding legal standards with which all States must comply. They offer another avenue to affirm sexuality, albeit limited to sexual orientation and gender identity narrowly read as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues.

Given these developments against the disturbing absence of a larger discussion on affirming sexuality in the South and Southeast Asia region, a regional consultative meeting was convened by The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality. The Regional Consultation on Affirming Sexuality brought together individuals with a range of expertise on different sexuality issues in the South and Southeast Asia region to look at the ways in which sexuality is and can be affirmed in this region and to suggest potential action and strategies. It was held on June 19 - 20, 2007 in Chiang Mai, Thailand. There were 30 participants from 11 different countries in the region: Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, and The Philippines.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE MEETING

Based on the mix of individuals who confirmed their participation, the following sub-themes were selected to serve as a focus for productive and substantive discussions.

Affirming Sexuality in the context of Gender
 Affirming Sexuality through Religion
 Affirming Sexuality in HIV/AIDS Interventions
 Affirming Sexuality in Sex Work
 Affirming Sexuality in Anti-Violence Interventions
 Affirming Sexuality in the Media
 Affirming Gender and Sexual Non-Conformity
 Affirming Sexuality with Young People

This choice of sub-themes was not exhaustive. It was selective and emerged from the existing expertise of those invited and participating in the meeting. There were many other themes that could potentially have been selected. For example, discussions around the axes of law, medicine, caste, class, region, age, etc. It would be useful to discuss these at some future point.

In order to draw on the expertise and interests of those present at the meeting, participants had been requested in advance of the meeting to make 'trigger' presentation (five to seven minutes) at the beginning of sessions. We hoped that these initial presentations would stimulate further discussion amongst all. Each presenter was to talk about how they conceptualise affirming sexuality, how they affirm sexuality in their work, and pose two questions that they are trying to grapple with in their work and/or understanding. The trigger presentations were meant to be just that: triggers to fuel discussion. Following the trigger presentations, the discussion was open to all.

SUB-THEMES AND TRIGGER PRESENTERS:

Affirming Sexuality in the context of Gender
Pramada Menon, Ninuk Widyantoro, Shama Dossa

Affirming Sexuality through Religion
Abdul Hassan, Dede Oetomo, Julia Suryakusuma

Affirming Sexuality in HIV/AIDS Interventions
Alvin Concha, Chung To, Michael de Guzman*

Affirming Sexuality in Sex Work
Bhimavva Gollar, Shashikant Mane(as Bhimavva's interpreter), Erick Yusufanni, Khartini Slamah, Pornpit Puckmai, Liz Hilton (as Pornpit's interpreter)*

Affirming Sexuality in Anti-Violence Interventions
Geetanjali Misra, Shohini Ghosh

Affirming Sexuality in the Media
Angela Kuga Thas, Jajang Noer, Moammar Emka

Affirming Gender and Sexual Non-Conformity
Cristina Cristobal(Ging), Daniel Kian Sen Tung, Neil Garcia, Sasi Bhusan Gurung

Affirming Sexuality with Young People
Haitao Huang, Prabha Nagaraja, Sheena Hadi, Sophea Khun

*As it transpired, Bhimavva Gollar was not given a visa and could not attend the meeting, and Chung To was unable to stay beyond the first session.



*Just as we have censor boards that want to cut off
parts of films they think we should not be seeing,
there are discourses, unfortunately even within
feminism, that stifle our pleasures, placing them
along a hierarchy of what is acceptable and what
is not, regardless of consent.*

*the politics of
pleasure*

The meeting began with a fun round of introductions amongst the participants, a reminder of what the meeting was about and a session on *The Politics of Pleasure* before moving on to discuss the sub-themes.

The opening presentation by Radhika Chandiramani was designed to provoke the participants to think in new ways:

We have a very rich vocabulary to talk about issues of pain and violence, especially with regard to sexuality. In the 60's and the 70's, the feminist movement took violence out of the sphere of the domestic and personal and made it into a public issue. Around the same time, through consciousness raising groups, it became increasingly common, at least in the West, for women to begin to talk about sexuality issues like masturbation and lesbianism. At that time, the discourse became one of egalitarian sex or sex between equals. The framework of sex between equals and what came to be regarded as 'good sex' for feminists began to feel restrictive to many feminists. Unfortunately, even today, there continue to be ideas about what might be 'politically correct' ways to express one's sexuality. We will return to this point shortly.

We all know that desire, passion, craving, fulfillment and all of these elements that constitute our sexuality are themselves socially constructed. And that brings us to the questions –

What actually is my pleasure? What is my desire? How is it made? And there on, what is it that affirms me sexually? And having asked those questions, we come to another set, which is – How does our pleasure influence our politics and how do our politics influence our practice, even our sexual practice? What are the sexual dreams that we do not share with our feminist colleagues, with our friends, with the people that we think are closest to us? What are our sexual fantasies that we are scared of sharing, terrified of enacting, and, may be horrified to articulate, even to ourselves, and why are we so afraid of them? What is politically correct sex? Can sex be politically correct? Is it okay that sometimes, with a lover, I might be perfectly content to just lie around holding hands or not doing anything at all and feel erotically satisfied? Is it similarly okay that I might sometimes want them to fuck me senseless? I might want them to tie me up, I might want to tie them up and fuck their brains out. Is it okay for me to say this? Is it okay for me to not only say this but actually have the daring to want to enact my fantasies? And sometimes, I wonder, is it okay for me to even have these kinds of fantasies?

The other questions one can ask are – Is it politically correct for a lesbian to say that clitoral orgasms are fun, very pleasurable, but sometimes she wants something that goes deeper still to shake her up? Is it okay for a heterosexual woman to say she doesn't want to be penetrated?

These are some of the questions that we need to ask ourselves if we are serious about talking about pleasure. Is it acceptable for me to say that I don't want equality in sex, I want to play with shifting power, and I want to be in control of when and with whom I want to lose control? Now, what if we were to multiply this by different genders, different sexualities, sexual fantasies, acts, and practices to see what we get and what we can make more space for? Just as we have censor boards that want to cut off parts of films they think we should not be seeing, there are discourses, unfortunately

even within feminism, that stifle our pleasures, placing them along a hierarchy of what is acceptable and what is not, regardless of consent.

We place entire categories of people outside the parameters of the acceptable. We trap pleasure in the discourse of respectability and responsibility. We leave out people who are disabled, those who buy and sell sex, those who are HIV positive and sexually active, straight men who don't like sex and straight women who love it, and, people who are considered too young or too old to have sex, to name just a few. In the field of health the focus is on safety, especially in the context of HIV and AIDS. The affirmative aspects of sexuality are disregarded almost as if it is the easiest thing for people to follow the injunctions of safer sex, forgetting that most people, including ourselves, are not terribly rational during moments of passion with a willing and eager partner. And it is at those moments that we expect people to act responsibly.

The discourse of responsibility and respectability also slides into the language of stability. For example, stable relationships are assumed to linearly progress into stable marriages. Consider what was happening in the United States of America a couple of years ago, when a lot of gay groups and gay people were saying "Look at us, we have long term stable relationships. We are as good as you and therefore we also have the right to be married." Rather than questioning the institution of marriage, and basing their arguments of civil benefits for partners on other grounds such as those of non-discrimination, many gay people were saying, "We are equally 'stable' because we have a house with two dogs and a cat and have lived together for many years." So, to be a 'good gay', one would have to conform to these parameters of respectability.

Ideas of respectability constrain the pleasures of heterosexual women as well who have to tread a very fine line between

what is too little and what is too much. In our fear of the *too much* we forget how important it is to be able to say 'yes' to sex, and if we don't have the ability to say 'yes' then how are we going to have the ability to say 'no'? Saying 'yes' or 'no' is important not only in terms of personal relationships but also in the context of much larger systemic relationships, which is where the discourse of sexual rights is a useful tool for us to use.

Radhika Chandiramani's final question for the group to think about was – Is our vision large enough to include the many aspects and varieties of what is differentially sexually affirming for different people – desires, pleasures and comforts that might be very, very different from our own?

After a long, thoughtful silence, participants began sharing their own impressions, questions and ideas about pleasure.

Pramada Menon*, an activist from CREA in India, summed up the reason for the long silence as surprise at her own surprise at some of the ideas in the presentation and was questioning her own reactions. Activists mostly talk about sexuality only in the context of health or violence. Though they have become more comfortable using the words 'penis' and 'vagina', it is still not easy to talk about 'fucking'. In personal contexts people talk about desires and fantasies, but in professional contexts even those who work on sexuality find it hard. As Pramada Menon said, "As someone working on sexuality, I am just sitting here and feeling that my mind is blown apart!"

People do many things sexually, some overtly and some covertly, but they do them all the same. However, as Julia I. Suryakusuma from Indonesia, a well known feminist and a columnist for *The Jakarta Post*, pointed out, people do not have a conceptual framework for thinking about sexuality, they just "do sex". When she was researching for her book *Sex, Power and Nation*, people were surprised to discover that

sex is connected to power and history and the State. There is also a difference between public and private. For example, it is acceptable for a woman to have multiple lovers as long as she does it discreetly.

Khartini Slamah, a transgender and sex workers' rights activist from Malaysia agreed that people place restrictions on each other. For example, in the transgender culture that she is familiar with, it is not acceptable for a male to female (M to F) transgender person to have a sexual relationship with a woman. There is a pressure to be 'heterosexual', to conform to norms of sexuality despite transgressing the norms of gender. Because many M to F transgender people in South and Southeast Asia resort to selling sex to men for lack of other work opportunities, they have come under the purview of HIV prevention programmes. Khartini expressed her indignation that trans people were being pulled under the umbrella of MSM (men who have sex with men) programmes. She pointed out that though they may be male-bodied and have sex with other men (for pleasure or money or both), they do not themselves identify as 'men', but rather as 'trans', and most often present themselves in a 'feminine' way. "Do I look like a man?" she asked. "Then, why call me MSM?"

Ging Cristobal, a lesbian activist from the Philippines asked, "Whose standards of pleasure are we defining? Some pleasures may go against my politics, but then I question, what is politically correct to me may not be politically correct to you. Even if I take lesbian feminism as the standard, it all depends on the context – it is so Westernised. We sometimes slip into using the heteronormative as the standard, valuing faithful and loyal relationships, and placing a high value on monogamous lesbian relationships. What about lesbians who want to sleep around, or sleep with men and still consider themselves lesbians, or lesbians who 'convert' to heterosexuality – whose issues of fairness are we considering?"

Pleasure, and the ways we come by it, lies at the intersection of the politics of the public and the private, but it also is about the politics of visibility and invisibility. And, as Angela Kuga Thas, an activist from Malaysia, eloquently put it, "We are all beings who are navigating boxes of desires. With shifting boundaries we probably would reveal ourselves very differently and in a way we are coming out at different levels. It's not just about sexual orientation for sexual minorities, but it's also about ourselves, and how do we accommodate that? How do we deal with the obstacles that prevent us from linking with other movements, for example, the obstacles that stop transgenders from understanding lesbians? How do we cut across that?"

Though increasing visibility has brought attention to certain groups of people who have been marginalised on account of their non-conformity to sexual and gender norms, it has also led to barriers between these groups. We have limited our conception of sexual choice to sexual object choice and think only in terms of the gender of our erotic object, ending up with categories like homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual. But there are many different ways of conceptualising sexuality. As J. Neil C. Garcia, a queer academic from the Philippines elaborated, "Sexuality can be conceptualised in many different ways. For instance, in terms of erogenous zones: are you a nipple person, or a butt person, or a foot person? Number of partners... do you like dyadic sex, one on one, multiple partners? Skin, colour, race, ethnic preferences. Age of partners. No partner at all, as in autoeroticism. Frequency of sex – do you like it once a week, twice a week, four times a week, four times a day? The time of day you prefer to have it (in Manila, a quickie during the afternoon lunch break is called a 'nooner'). Whether you use toys or not. Do you prefer the conventional or the forbidden? And so on." Neil Garcia went on to caution the group that, "By talking about these things we reify and define them. When we talk about power and about culture we may have to insist on making conscious

certain things because they are a source of oppression for some people, but we also have to decide when to actually just enjoy the ride, enjoy the body, enjoy sexuality and not problematise and categorise everything.”

However, others felt that it was important to talk about sexuality issues and the way they are framed. For instance, in Cambodia, according to Sophea Khun who works with CARE, if they talk about masturbation it is not from the viewpoint of self-pleasure but prevention of HIV; similarly, there is no talk of pleasure while promoting condom use, only a focus on HIV prevention. “How do we extend and enlarge our vision? What do we want to see ten years from now?” she asked. Similarly in China, Haitao Huang, Coordinator of the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-sen University, felt that it is important to talk about sexuality because while people are “doing it” there are many who call toll free hotlines to say how sexually depressed they are and thinking of committing suicide. There is also internalised discrimination between marginalised groups – “Gay men are discriminating against lesbians and transgender people, and even among themselves”. Haitao Huang pointed out that we were a bunch of like-minded people in the room and share more or less similar values, but it is the world ‘out there’ that needs to be changed. Huang stated that one of the ways to do that is to start young: “I think it is important that we start talking about it early to young people because when they get older they have a lot of judgments.”

The discussion veered back to the important point that sexuality encompasses everyone, not only marginalised groups like LGBT people or sex workers, and what might be a common thread to tie all groups together is the notion of human rights. Geetanjali Misra, an activist from CREA in India, reminded the group that in discussing the politics of pleasure, we are talking about power, “We need to remember that consent as a standard of sexual legitimacy is a relatively new notion. We need to interrogate what consent is. Does

it have the same meaning for everyone? Is it given freely under the same conditions? Does consent make every kind of sexual act acceptable? Even in this room, we probably each place different sexual acts differently on a hierarchy of acceptability and of pleasure”.

Affirming sexuality is not limited to affirming sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is a good way to start a discussion because everyone understands what it is and it stimulates many ideas, as the discussion above showed. Sexuality has different aspects, with pleasure being one of them. To affirm sexuality, its links with other issues need to be considered as well as was done in the sessions that followed.

*One transwoman came in figure-hugging and
body-revealing women's clothes, whereas the
(biological) women in the same group felt that
they could not reveal parts of their body simply
because they were women.*

Affirming Sexuality in the Context of Gender

The first subtheme discussed during the Regional Consultation was on Affirming Sexuality in the Context of Gender. As Shama Dossa from the Aga Khan University in Pakistan, Ninuk Widyantoro from The Women's Health Foundation in Indonesia, and Pramada Menon from CREA in India made their trigger presentations, several ideas and questions surfaced.

Shama Dossa, a faculty member at the Department of Community Health Sciences (CHS), Aga Khan University, Pakistan, made a trigger presentation provocatively titled, 'Oops! Where did all the Notes on Sex go?'. According to her, women in the community are comfortable talking about sex in discussions at field sites, but activists and researchers who work on gender do not document these discussions and consequently sexuality gets set aside.

To lay out the context, she talked about how the State in Pakistan has used the construction of gender to maintain its role and control through patriarchy. In the pre- as well as post-partition era, women were considered to be the protectorate of the State. This reinforced patriarchal power over women. The Hudood Ordinance of 1979 is a case in point. Some of the laws were amended in 2006 with the passing of the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Bill, 2006, also informally called the Women's

Protection Bill². Shama Dossa pointed out that *fatwas* (religious edicts) are often passed to keep women in their place, as a pressure to conform to being the ideal gendered subject. She cited an example of a *fatwa* being passed in May 2007 against the Tourism Minister, a woman, for 'an act of obscenity' – hugging her male skydiving instructor after she had successfully completed a tandem jump to raise money for child victims of the earthquake that struck Pakistan in October 2005. The Minister was forced to resign.

Shama Dossa discussed two cases from Pakistan that raise the question 'Gender before sexuality or sexuality before gender?' The first case was that of Shahzina and Shumail, who were cousins and married to each other. Both of them faced a three-year term for perjury when Shumail was found to be biologically born a woman who was married to Shahzina, another woman³. The second case was the gang rape of Mukhtaran (also called Mukhtar) Mai and the acquittal of the accused in the case⁴. These cases bring up the issues of violence against women and same-sex marriage. Shama Dossa berated the fact that only the women's movement addressed these matters while other social movements were silent.

The focus of the women's movement has been on issues of gender and gender equality, but the issues of challenging gender stereotypes and the social construction of gender were not considered to be important. Against the socio-political backdrop in Pakistan, gender is being used as a benign way of addressing women's rights. It is also used in the context of working on HIV and AIDS. Sexuality is not fully integrated into work on gender.

The next presenter, Ninuk Widyantoro from The Women's Health Foundation in Indonesia claimed that since 2000, many activists and advocates in her country have shifted from working on reproductive health to sexuality, as they now believe that both are related to each other.

Article 19 of the Population and Family Planning Law⁵ in the country states that “the husband and wife have equal rights and responsibilities as well as equal status in determining the method of birth control”. Also, Islam is affirming of sexuality and there are verses in the Quran that reflect this. “There are *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence or case law) and *hadis* clearly stating that married women and men have the right to have and to enjoy sexual relations, including foreplay, as well as the right to refuse sexual relations” (Masruchah & Keenan, B., 2005)⁶. In spite of having law and religion on their side, women still lack basic information and awareness on sexuality. Also, a woman has limited power to negotiate matters of sexuality. Religious and/or cultural norms repress women in Indonesia where society has standardised notions of good or bad and right or wrong about sexuality.

Ninuk Widyantoro also touched upon the rights of LGBT people and reiterated the need to work further on this issue. A possible strategy to do this maybe through working with young people. She added that LGBT rights are also not protected through any laws. She emphasised the fact that there was a need to affirm rights at a wider level, in the community.

The third presenter, Pramada Menon from CREA, an NGO in India, based her trigger presentation on three recent experiences. Having just returned from a workshop in Khartoum, Sudan, she shared her delight at finding that there are myriad ways in which women are taught to be sensuous in Sudan. For example, as young women they learn how to burn incense and let it waft over their body, including the vulva. However, unpacking these practices revealed that even though women were experiencing pleasure in the process, the ultimate recipients of pleasure were men.

She then narrated an experience of being mistaken for being a transgender person because of her unconventional appearance. In one particular instance, she was specifically

questioned by a group of sex workers at a sex workers’ rally on the occasion of International Women’s Day. She said, “The first question a group of transgender sex workers asked is whether I was in the stage of moving from male to female. And I said, no, I am a woman. At which point they said, okay so are you a brothel owner? And I said no, and then they said, so are you a sex worker? By this point I had no identity left because I did not fit into their categories. I said I don’t take money but I have sex. Then they had no interest left in me and they just walked away.”

The third incident occurred at a get-together with a group of transgender people at a public place. One transwoman came in figure-hugging and body-revealing women’s clothes, whereas the (biological) women in the same group felt that they could not reveal parts of their body simply *because* they were women. As gender is performative, Pramada Menon questioned why women are required to perform gender by appearing to be traditional and submissive, whereas *kothis* who are emulating women, perform gender in a hyper-feminine way and dress up in sarees, jewellery and make up “as if they are going to a wedding instead of participating in a meeting/conference”. Another example of how gender (and here also sexuality) is performed differently, is that at a party it is acceptable for sari-clad *kothis* to dance with their sari either falling off their shoulders or being raised up high to reveal their legs, while if Pramada Menon were to do that she would not be considered ‘woman enough’. What is it that women can do versus what other female-identifying people can do in performing gender and sexuality?

The discussion that followed was wide-ranging, moving across issues of the ethics of representation of gender, the limitation of categorisations, and the relevance of academia to lived reality. Now, with medical advances, like sex reassignment procedures, participants agreed that the old notion that gender is constructed while sex is biological no longer held true.


Issues of the ethics of representation of gender in the popular media and ‘whose voice is heard?’ were highlighted by Geetanjali Misra, a women’s rights activist from India, and Shama Dossa. They pointed out that Mukhtar Mai became well-known, and even famous in the West, largely owing to Nicholas Kristof’s articles about her in *The New York Times*. More recently a book was published about her called *In the Name of Honor: A Memoir*. It is based on Mukhtar Mai telling her story to Marie-Therese Cuny and has a foreword by Nicholas Kristof. Purportedly, the story is being told by Mukhtar Mai herself; in actuality, one does not know whose voice one is really hearing. Is it Mukhtar’s real voice, or the interpretation by the French raconteur, or the creation by Kristof? The word “feminist” is used in the book to describe her, but it is unlikely that Mukhtar Mai identifies as feminist and also raises the question of what it means to be feminist in Pakistan. Without decrying this courageous woman’s persistence, what is interesting is that though Mukhtar Mai has set up schools in her village and plans to use the money that is pouring in through donations, development agency and other support, to buy an ambulance, create a women’s shelter and so on, she has no strong links with the women’s movement in Pakistan.

The discussion moved on to the concept of identities. One of the participants, who identifies as gay, reflected that he identifies more with his straight friends than his gay ones because he shares more of his straight friends’ values. “I maintain that I am more straight than gay in certain senses, and some of my straight friends are more gay than straight. One way to find a point of convergence is to look for how the conventional sexuality, which is heterosexuality, actually has margins and how the marginal sexuality has conventions too, and at what points they overlap”, he said. Noting that identities could be very limiting in that they tend to freeze people into a category, Neil Garcia suggested that identities be viewed as a fiction that should be generative and productive, and used strategically to champion for rights.

Julia Suryakusuma drew a parallel with the stereotypes around “being a feminist”, stereotypes that are imprisoning while feminism itself is liberating.

Discussing the limitations of categorisations, Shohini Ghosh, a queer academic and film maker from India, noted that there was a need to extricate notions of masculinity from male bodies and femininity from female bodies. Categories are largely created within academia, and they do not matter to people who go about their lives expressing their sexuality. For example, a transsexual person in Malaysia is not necessarily someone who has undergone a sex reassignment surgery. Or, as Dede Oetomo, a queer activist and academic from Indonesia, pointed out, people talk about their sexual experiences and feelings with friends using their own language and not in academic jargon. The use of English may distance people from their own lived realities, whereas the use of local languages may allow more space for articulation of diversity. Conversely, because the local languages may not have many words for expressing diverse sexuality, many new words are also being created in the process.

In wrapping up the session as a moderator, Angela Kuga Thas, a researcher and activist from Malaysia, left the group with some interesting questions to reflect upon: “It was interesting to see the potency of the term gender. We need to think about the fluidity of gender, not just of sexuality. We immediately began talking about categorisation and boxes and labels, and had to remind ourselves that we are looking for points of convergence. Can we move away from labels? How does it affect our sense of community and of empowerment if we don’t use labels?”



*People have strong religious beliefs. Using concepts
of spirituality or religion like those of tolerance
or being nonjudgmental might lead them to
reconsider their beliefs.*

Affirming Sexuality through Religion

The issue of Affirming Sexuality through Religion was discussed by Julia Suryakusuma, a feminist columnist and author from Indonesia, Abdul Hassan from the Muslim AIDS Action Committee in Singapore, and Dede Oetomo, an academic and queer rights activist from GAYa Nusantara in Indonesia.

The session began with Julia Suryakusuma distributing copies of one of her columns that was published in *The Jakarta Post*. In September 2006, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, the alleged spiritual leader of *Jamaah Islamiyah* and the head of *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* (MMI), a hard-line Islamic organisations, made a statement that Indonesian TV shows featuring scantily dressed women are more dangerous than the Bali bombs because they undermine public morality (*The Jakarta Post*, September 20, 2006). Reacting to this, Julia made a strong feminist protest in writing in her column including a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that naked female flight attendants would help prevent terrorism because they would frighten away Muslim hardliners⁷. Here's what she wrote "Inadvertently, he gave me a brilliant idea about how to deal with Muslim terrorist hijackers. Rather than bother about complicated and frustrating security measures, airlines should simply eliminate all male attendants on flights and have only nude female space waiters. Since a nude woman is apparently something that completely offends potential

Muslim terrorists, they will naturally avoid flying! In fact, maybe we should all run around nude and there would finally be peace in the world!"

Taking off from this point she went on to show how there are different kinds of Islams – ranging from the hardline view to one that is accepting and compassionate. Without praying, fasting, or wearing a headscarf, one can still be a Muslim because "it is more to do with my heart, and it is to do with my intention of helping others, and it does not negate my own or anyone else's sexuality". Islam is in fact affirming of sexuality, and there are injunctions in the *Qu'ran* that state that pleasuring one's partner is a marital obligation. This applies equally to women and men. However, restrictive patriarchal interpretations of Islam have prevented this from being better known. There are also no injunctions that specifically forbid homosexual practice.

Since the so-called post-Suharto reformist era in 1998, Indonesia has seen the rise of conservative and hardline Islam, partly as a reaction to globalisation and the onslaught of western culture and values through mass media and the Internet, but also as part of an ongoing struggle of political Islam since independence in 1945. This is manifested in regional ordinances like the *purdah* (the veil) and the anti-pornography bill, which would oblige everyone to keep their body completely covered, leading to an unfortunate homogenisation of all the ethnic and religious diversity that exists in Indonesia. In the New Order Era (1968-1998) in Indonesia, the State was all powerful and repressive, so Julia used sexuality to debunk the power of the State in her book *Sex, Power and Nation* (2004). Now that political Islam is trying to get a foothold and impose itself on the rest of society, she refers to it as 'pseudoislamisation' and again uses sexuality to expose this in her forthcoming book *Julia's Jihad*, a collection of her newspaper columns. "I want to take back the true meaning of *jihad*. It is not a war or a weapon, it is not physical or violent. *Jihad* is struggle – it is a struggle

of the intellect and there is actually an injunction in Islam to seek knowledge, so it is obligatory”, she concluded.

Abdul Hamid Hassan, the coordinator for Action for AIDS, Muslim AIDS Action Committee in Singapore, quoted from several sources in his trigger presentation which he titled ‘Problem of/or Pride? The Homosexual Muslim Seeking Reconciliation with Islam’. Pointing out several inconsistencies and contradictions, he quoted Kecia Ali a feminist expert on the *Qur’an*, “Those who view sexual orientation as inborn but suggest that same-sex desires can never be fulfilled lawfully confront the problem of divine injustice, particularly where they also argue for the importance of sexual satisfaction as a human need.”⁸ Further, Aysha Hidayatullah, another feminist scholar, says that “...the notion that Islam tolerates homosexual tendencies but not behaviours points to an inconsistency in Islamic allowances for the satiation of ‘natural’ sexual desire”⁹. However, according to Abdal-Hakim Murad, a British convert to Islam and Imam of the Cambridge mosque, “...just as God has given people differing physical and intellectual gifts, He tests some of us by implanting moral tendencies which we must struggle to overcome as part of our self-reform and discipline. A mental patient with an obsessive desire to set fire to houses has been given a particular hurdle to overcome. A man or woman with strong homosexual urges faces the same challenge.”¹⁰

So there are different interpretations made by Islamic scholars themselves, with some advocating for the reformation of the perception of homosexuals and homosexuality and the possible recourse and theological accommodation of homosexuality within Islam, and others who recommend the preservation of and adherence to the traditional and classical condemnation of homosexuality that opines same-sex acts and homosexuality as abominations with no possible recourse within Islam. These are two different points of view, and the challenge lies in reconciling them.

According to Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, the *Qur’an* has no abstract analytical terms like homosexuality or homosexual, nor does it contain a word that means ‘heterosexuality’, though it does have words for certain sexual acts. The closest the *Qur’an* comes to directly addressing homosexual people is the phrase “men who are not in need of women (or have no sexual guile before women)” in the Surah al-Nur, 24:31. He recommends ‘sexuality-sensitive’ readings of the *Qur’an* – through semantic analysis and thematic analysis. Semantic analysis would mean gathering words together and then trying to describe the semantic category of the word in terms of the conditions of its use. For a thematic analysis one would gather the verses of a particular theme in the *Qur’an* and, without privileging one verse over another, read them across¹¹. For Fazlur Rahman, the correct method of interpreting the *Qur’an* is central to Islamic intellectualism and requires a ‘double movement’ – from our present realities and situation, back to *Qur’anic times*, and then back again to the present time¹².

Amina Wadud, a female professor of Islamic Studies who created a controversy in the Muslim world by leading a prayer meeting for a mixed group of men and women in New York in 2005¹³, recommends that the interpretation of particulars should be contextual, because the principles that cohere in and permeate the *Qur’an* are eternal and have to be extracted and applied in various social contexts in each new Islamic society¹⁴.

Abdul Hassan concluded that some of these recommendations could present new ways of interpreting religious texts, not only to provide for gender equality but also an affirmation of diverse sexualities.

The third presenter, Dede Oetomo, an academic and a founding member and trustee of GAYa Nusantara in Indonesia, focussed on gender and sexuality in local religions. He noted that there are various gender constructions in

religion. Notions of the Mother Goddess and fertility deities have existed in many cultures, with a shift over time to male deities as well. Interestingly, there have also been inter-sexed and bi-gendered deities such as *Ardhanarisvara* and *Cintiya*. Some cultures have also had and some continue to have indigenous 'transgender' people, like the *bissu* in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. There are four genders among the Bugis of South Sulawesi and a fifth category that is a 'para-gender' identity. In addition to male-men (*oroane*) and female-women (*makunrai*) there are *calalai*, biological females who take on many of the roles and functions expected of men; *calabai*, biological males who in many respects adhere to the expectations of women; and *bissu*. The *bissu* act as priests among the Bugis and are imagined to be hermaphroditic beings embodying female and male elements as well as mortal and divine elements¹⁵.

Sexuality too is linked up with local religious beliefs and customs. People have engaged in various fertility rites through the ages. Fertility rites are still practised in agricultural areas in Indonesia. Peasant couples surreptitiously copulate in their rice fields in Java and practise spouse exchange rites in the fields in Asmat just before planting their crops in order to bring fertility to the land.

Fortune-seeking rites are also linked with sexual practices. For example, in Central Java, there is a custom of spouse exchange on a grave considered sacred¹⁶. This custom, like many others, has been made profane through the loss of its sacred status; not many female spouses agree to the exchange, so sex workers use the custom as a business opportunity. However, the original idea that it brings good fortune still prevails and people go there every 35 days to engage in this practice. A similar idea exists in Gunung Gangsir near a revered Hindu-Buddhist ruin southeast of Surabaya in East Java, where people go to a cemetery at night to have communal sex. At this location there are men, transgender people, women, and sex workers. Because it is

dark, people do not know who they are having sex with, but it does not matter to them because the idea is that it brings good fortune.

Another way in which sexuality is linked with religious and cultural customs is through initiation rites, such as the oral ingestion of older men's semen by boys (through fellatio) in Melanesia as a rite of passage to manhood. Another example used to be that of the *gemblak*. Ponorogo, a small town in East Java, is the home of the *warok*, a man who stages ritual dances in order to bring good fortune to the community. His dancers, called *gemblak*, were once attractive 10-16 year old boys with whom he had sex to maintain his mystical powers. That custom has been stopped by the government, and girls now form the dance troupe. It is also a well known fact that same-sex sexual behaviour is common in *pesantrens* (religious residential schools). Many of these practices are being challenged through modernism, purification, and silencing. For example, in the 60s the *bissu* were hunted down as communists or infidels, but they re-emerged after 1998.

During the discussion that followed these presentations, it was clarified that although the three presenters happened to be from Islamic countries the intention was not to focus only on Islam and sexuality; these speakers were selected to make presentations because there were no other participants at this meeting who had engaged in such depth with religion and sexuality.

Participants noted that verses from scriptures are cited in many religious arguments for or against certain sexual practices. Should activists and practitioners also cite from religious texts in their counter-arguments? Many participants felt that it was an exercise in futility, and as one said, "You cite one, they will come back with three. There is no end to it." In States that are not secular, the religious law may not be congruent with human rights principles,

and as an activist pointed out, it might be easier to work on the ‘rights to freedom from violence or harm’ (negative rights), rather than on the ‘rights to equality, information, and so on’ (positive rights).

Dede Oetomo shared his experience of working with the more progressive religious leaders. Using examples from lived reality helps, such as when a transgender person drowns by falling into the river while being chased by municipal police. Killing someone was unjustifiable for the moderate clerics that Dede engaged with, and they began to see the extent of oppression that transgender people face. Another strategy was to get the clerics to focus on other ‘sins’ like stealing, murdering, corruption, and cheating, and shift the focus from sex alone.

Sumit Baudh from India, felt that some of the ‘new religions’ like the Osho community and the Soka Gakkai affirm sexuality. In the Osho community, where sex is a means to spiritual advancement, women are considered to be superior to men because of their ability to have multiple orgasms. The Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a Buddhist group which is based in Japan. SGI takes Buddhism to the LGBT community in the United States and the UK. In the US it is called SGI – USA GLBT Group¹⁷ and in the UK it is called SGI – UK Absolute Freedom Group¹⁸.

Other strategies like forming alliances with religious groups were shared. In the Philippines, some LGBT groups have befriended the younger more progressive Protestant priests and nuns and some Protestant leaders because they shared some of the same feminist beliefs. As Ging Cristobal said, “There are no enemies, only potential allies. With dialogue, we learned many of their interpretations and they learned ours. So they become our friends.”

According to Geetanjali Misra, in many organised religions there is a focus on community service and door-to-door

organising as a strategy of engaging directly with people. How many activists are engaging with people on religion and sexuality issues, be it abortion, homosexuality, or even gender roles, at quite the same scale? She felt that the citation and interpretation of religious texts would always remain problematic, because whose voice was included and whose interpretation was accepted would still remain contentious.

Responding to the question of community involvement, other participants offered examples of how they have engaged with the community as well as with religious groups in their countries. In Singapore, there are four major religions – Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism. The Catholic Church is the most vocal against homosexuality, according to Daniel Tung from Singapore. However, his support group, Safe Haven, started as a gay Christian group in 2001, and over the years has grown as part of the Free Community Church. The first Methodist Archbishop of Southeast Asia who is supportive of sexuality issues is a part of their advisory group. Publicly stating that they are a gay affirmative church, the Free Community Church organises a church service every Christmas and collects money to donate to a charitable organisation like an orphanage. They also hold discussion group meetings with other churches and have open discussions about gender and sexuality issues.

Similarly, in the Philippines, the Jesuit community is supportive of some issues of sexuality. According to Alvin Concha, the Jesuits had declared that they despise patriarchy and were going to work towards supporting a community that affirms sexualities and elevates the status of women. On the other hand, however, Alvin pointed out that they still “actively oppose artificial contraceptives. So you can engage them in some issues but with other issues it is not possible yet.”


Sashikant Mane, who works with a sex workers' collective in a semi-urban area in Western India, reported that in the early days of their working on HIV and AIDS issues, people from different religions would deny that HIV was an issue for them, saying "this doesn't happen in our community". But slowly, as they began to see the effects of the work, they began to approach the NGO and say "Why don't you come and work with us and our women?" So a useful strategy may be one that combines issues of HIV along with rights and sexuality to work across religions.

It might also be useful to understand that people can engage with religion at either the doctrinal level of texts or the devotional level, or both. According to Neil Garcia, in the Philippines, people relate to religion "more from the devotional, ritualistic, spiritual level that is the personal relationship that people have with their own spiritual beliefs," so they are not trapped in doctrinal mazes as much. Also, as religion, or rather spirituality, seems to be so much of a point of convergence across many countries in this region, "people negotiate with their faith daily. That is a source of strength when we are confronting issues of great emergency like HIV. One possible strategy is to look at the spirituality of the communities we work with and to use that as an entry point to have more spiritually inclined consciousness-raising seminars or community formations."

Agreeing with this, Sheena Hadi from Aahung, an NGO in Pakistan added that the goal should not be to change or challenge people's personal religious beliefs, "but to flip this idea on it's head. For example, no matter how much someone tries to convince me of the opposite, I strongly believe that a woman has a right to choose. That is an ingrained belief of mine and will not be changed." Similarly, people have strong religious beliefs. Using concepts of spirituality or religion like those of tolerance or being nonjudgmental might lead them to reconsider their beliefs. In Aahung's work with clinical professionals on harm reduction, the

staff uses concepts of tolerance and compassion so that the professionals do not judge clients on the basis of their sexuality or sexual practices.

In wrapping up this very rich discussion, Shohini Ghosh, who moderated the session, posed four issues for further reflection. First, though there might be some merit in having theological debates among the believers, there is a problem in assuming that everyone is a believer and therefore there have to be other ways of negotiating religion. Second is the matter of equality. "If you believe that your interpretation is correct and that you have a right to that interpretation, like Julia's *jihad* for example, then why would you not let Osama Bin Laden interpret things in his way and give his interpretation the same validity?" she asked. It is also important to talk about people's lived experiences and the many ways in which one can live as a Muslim or live as a Hindu or as a person subscribing to any religion, even if one does not subscribe to doctrinal religion. Finally, she pointed out that even amongst secular people religion is given an elevated status in the hierarchy of belief systems, "Even people who say they are not religious say 'oh, but you cannot hurt so and so's religious sentiments'. Now, what about my sentiments? I am an atheist. Why should my sentiments be any less important? So, I would urge us to try thinking of displacing religion in the hierarchy of beliefs", she ended provocatively.



*What are the various forms of expression
and articulation of sexualities which are
outside of the central penetrative framework
of sex and the condom?*

*Affirming
Sexuality in
HIV/AIDS
Interventions*

The trigger presentations on Affirming Sexuality in HIV / AIDS interventions were by Michael P. de Guzman an independent HIV / AIDS consultant from Cambodia and Alvin Concha a medical doctor working on community health issues in the Philippines.

When Michael de Guzman was an outreach worker with seafarers and migrant workers in the Philippines in the 1990s, the concept of HIV prevention was summed up in the mnemonic 343; that is, 3 modes of transmission, 4 body fluids that contain the virus, and 3 ways of avoiding the infection. Listening to the stories of Filipino seafarers and migrant workers, he became aware that they engaged in various forms of sexual activity with multiple partners. Soon enough, he realised that a simple ABC (Abstinence, Be Faithful, Use a Condom) approach was not going to be sufficient. For the seafarers and migrant workers, abstinence and monogamy were not a choice, and they found condoms too restrictive as the third method of prevention as it did not cover every sexual act that they wanted to perform. So C, rather than referring to Condoms, became Careful sex and later became Creative sex. Being Careful meant being watchful over the condom while using it, making sure it was worn properly and did not slip. Being Creative referred to other forms of non-penetrative sex when condom use was not necessary or not possible. This opened up a gamut

of sexual activities they enjoyed and at the same time prevented infection. Looking back now, Michael thinks that was a sexually affirming approach to HIV prevention.

Talking about the work he has been doing in Cambodia for the past three years, Michael de Guzman said that the HIV epidemic in Cambodia is driven by a flourishing sex trade and a 'culture of tolerance' towards men having multiple sexual partners. Given that backdrop, most of the HIV prevention interventions and messages are targeted to heterosexuals in the country. According to him, there was a reversal in HIV prevalence in Cambodia – from 3% in 1997 to 1.9% in 2003. This is attributed to effective and well-placed prevention programmes. The push for 100% condom use normalised its usage in commercial sexual encounters. However, married and other couples refused to use condoms because condoms became associated with sex work. To overcome this, the government had to release different brands of the same condoms, marketing them to specific groups like married and non-married couples. Male-to-male sex has recently begun to receive some attention. The government's attitude to sex was not restrictive. Interventions have carried messages about physical pleasure, peace of mind, and enjoyment of the sexual act, when the sexual behaviour is safe.

These kinds of messages were endangered with Cambodia receiving money under PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief). NGOs doing HIV prevention work with MSM and sex workers were told to focus their messages on abstinence and monogamy. Some were even told not to promote condoms in the community that they work in. According to Michael, "The NGOs find this absurd. In typical Cambodian fashion, they smile and nod, but when it comes to their work in the community, they basically do what they think works."

The next presenter Alvin Concha, a medical doctor

specialising in family and community medicine, focussed on visual images (in posters) that are used to educate people to prevent HIV/AIDS and notions of sexualities that are consciously or unconsciously espoused in advocacy. On AVERT's¹⁹ website is a historical view of HIV/AIDS posters produced over the years from around the world, showing how the contents of the posters have shifted from clinical to behavioural to sociocultural. Present day posters tend to be more complex, dealing not only with the infection but also more importantly with people, especially persons living with HIV or AIDS and their needs. The more recent posters incorporate values such as monogamy, family, healthy choices and the importance of education in the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Alvin Concha displayed a collection of posters from South and Southeast Asia produced in local languages accompanied by an English translation. Many of the posters emphasised a heterosexual context, monogamy, and condom use. The questions that he asked were – What values of sexuality are we inducing in our health information campaigns on HIV/AIDS? In our condom-centricity, what notions of sexualities are we recognising, affirming or celebrating, and what notions are we silencing?

In the discussion that followed, participants emphasised that besides information, people needed skills and empowerment to be able to stay healthy and safe and to negotiate for safety. Many participants pointed out that there are no programmes for several groups of people. For example, women who are not sex workers or those who are lesbians are ignored.

There is no uniform situation as far as HIV/AIDS goes. There are different realities and different approaches that work, depending on which part of the South and Southeast Asia region and what particular timeframe one is looking at. According to Michael de Guzman, one of the reasons why there are few women's programmes could be because

women are not recognised as being at risk. In the Philippines, which is a low-incidence country, women are addressed only when they are perceived as being partners of men who are at risk, such as women who are married to overseas workers. In the case of Cambodia, which is considered a high-incidence country with a mature epidemic where HIV has gone beyond the initial group of sex workers, there are programmes for women, especially those married to men in the military, and there are programmes for young couples. Thailand, which is also considered to have a mature epidemic, also has programmes for women.

Though women are included in many interventions, lesbians and bisexual women are still left out. As Ging Cristobal noted, "When we talk about HIV/AIDS, it is always about heterosexuals, gays, transgenders, and bisexual men having sex but not lesbian and bisexual women having sex. What about lesbian sexual health? We need to be inclusive of all sexualities and sexual behaviors and not wait for some data about HIV incidence amongst lesbians on the rise before we do that. There are lesbians having sex with men, maybe for economic reasons or maybe to maintain an image of heterosexual marriage, and they have women partners on the side."

Several participants felt that HIV prevention programmes are too 'condom-centric' and that many NGO workers are facing 'condom fatigue'. There are other issues that are being ignored and other avenues of sexual expression that deserve exploration. Alvin asked, "What are we leaving out in terms of expression of sexuality? I would like to point to non-penetrative sex or other non-penetrative expression of sexuality, like cyber sex for instance. What are the various forms of expression and articulation of sexualities which are outside of the central penetrative framework of sex and the condom?"

Troublingly, in spite of the focus on condoms, young men

who have sex with men are not using condoms despite knowing about them. Daniel Tung remarked on this trend he has noticed in Singapore and wondered if instead of focussing on condom use, the emphasis should be on psycho-social empowerment, removal of the stigma attached to being gay, and teaching people to value themselves. Sharing Daniel's concern, Neil Garcia recalled a paper delivered by David Halperin at the AsiaPacifiQueer Conference in Sydney, February, 2007, in which he asked why bare backing²⁰ is becoming increasingly common in the US and Canada despite all the knowledge about HIV, leading to an increasing incidence of HIV among men who have sex with men. David Halperin's conclusion was that gay theorising and community work has not sufficiently addressed the root issue of shame and low self esteem that is at the heart of the matter. In Manila, too, gay men are "throwing caution to the winds", according to Neil. They are not uneducated Filipinos who are doing this – they are college students, college graduates, and professionals. "And they seem to not care. I think when we talk about affirming sexuality, we have to talk about affirming life and affirming the person and affirming something more than sexual pleasure," he emphasised.

Angela Kuga Thas questioned, "Can we broaden notions of safety to include ways in which people balance trust, desire, what is pleasurable and what is perceived as risky? Despite being knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS and condom use, people still take risks because of the notions of pleasure that they have, and that is a serious gap within the HIV/AIDS movement." Power is another important aspect, because negotiating for safety requires negotiating power. In situations of domestic violence where marital rape is a reality, how will a woman negotiate for safety? Groups that are stigmatised have even less power than people in the general population. Sex workers know all about condoms, "but when they try to negotiate using a condom, the client thinks that they are infected and they lose business", Sheena

Hadi pointed out, "How do you negotiate the power dynamics? You cannot separate HIV/AIDS from power."

In addition to considering power dynamics, interventions also need to take into account that people are not always at their most rational when they are engaging in passionate sex, Radhika Chandiramani reminded the group. Also, the TARSHI helpline experience has shown that people often want validation for their fears about safer sex leading to a loss of pleasure. "In our interventions, sometimes we forget this very human need to have our fears acknowledged", she said. Moving on to HIV positive people who want to be sexually active, she pointed out that their sexuality should also be affirmed. One of the assumptions that seems to underlie many interventions is that HIV positive people should stop having sex once they discover they are infected. She noted that in India there has been a growth of marriage bureaus²¹ that organise marriages between HIV positive people, and that allows for HIV positive people to find heterosexual partners, though it restricts their choice only to other HIV positive people.

During the session, participants brought up interesting ideas about expanding the frameworks around sexuality, safety and pleasure, for example, exploring the option of newer expressions of sexuality through cyber sex. It was quite clear that in HIV interventions, programmes need to move further than penetrative sex and condoms, and focus also on issues of power and perceived risks and safety, going beyond pleasure as the only form of affirming sexuality. An earlier session also pointed to how religion functions as a source of self-affirmation for some gay and lesbian groups and as a point of convergence for working on HIV prevention and AIDS care.

*We don't need a sewing machine,
what we need is human rights.*

Affirming Sexuality in Sex Work

This session had four presenters: Pornpit Puckmai from the Empower Foundation in Thailand, Khartini Slamah from The Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) also in Thailand, ErickYusufanni from GAYa Nusantara Foundation in Indonesia, and Shashikant Mane who spoke about VAMP, a sex workers' collective in India.

In her trigger presentation, Pornpit Puckmai (Porn) narrated some of her life-experiences and thoughts about sex work with the help of Liz Hilton, her colleague and interpreter. Pornpit Puckmai is a member of the Empower Foundation, which is a 22 year old sex workers' collective working towards protecting the rights of those in the entertainment industry in Thailand. The Empower Foundation raises awareness about 'sex work as work' and advocates for better working conditions for sex workers. Empower's members raised one million Baht²² and set up the Can Do bar in Chiang Mai in September 2006 as a model of a fair and safe working place that complies with labour laws.

Pornpit Puckmai likened Empower to a 'university for sex workers' where teaching and learning about sex workers' rights take place. The sex workers teach each other and their clients and also sensitise the media and other professionals about the rights of sex workers.

Pornpit Puckmai spoke about how the opportunities available in society are gendered – with men at an obvious advantage. Men have ample career and work opportunities, unlike women. Conscious of the manifold limitations society places on women, the presenter *chose* to join sex work. She said that she did not find it different from applying for any other job. Through her work she meets people with diverse sexualities. According to Pornpit Puckmai, "For sex workers themselves, it does not matter what another sex worker's sexuality is. They accept each other as fellow workers and colleagues and support human rights across the board."

Apart from working on sex workers' rights and HIV prevention, the Empower Foundation engages in many different activities. After the tsunami in 2005, the first people to receive aid were the foreign tourists. The sex workers in Phuket were ignored until Empower came forward to help them. She added that sex workers were part of the move to frame a new Constitution for Thailand and were demanding that sexual rights, including rights for LGBT people, be incorporated within it. Pornpit Puckmai also pointed out that though there has been an increase in medical tourism and Thailand is known as a place for affordable sex reassignment surgeries (SRS), there are no policies to protect the rights of transgender people in the country.

The second presenter, Khartini Slamah, an advocate for transgender and sex workers' rights from Malaysia, and Secretary of APNSW in Thailand, spoke about the lived-experiences of transgender sex workers. Given the confusion that still exists about the term transgender, male to female (M to F) transgender sex workers are categorised as MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) even though M to F transgender sex workers do not identify as men and should not be called MSM. The MSM discourse hides the HIV epidemic among transgender sex workers. As human beings, transgender people are entitled to human rights. The

rights of transgender sex workers include the right to self-definition and therefore, “donors, NGO professionals and researchers should not be the ones to decide if transgender sex workers are MSM or not. They should not bar us from joining sex worker groups.”

According to Khartini Slamah, clubbing transgender people in the MSM category denies not just their rights but also their existence. Transgender people face a range of discrimination in the areas of education, housing, employment and health because of their feminine appearance. Transgender sex workers do not have access to health services, and the syndromic approach is not effective in addressing their health concerns when they have a sexually transmissible infection. Additionally, they face sexual harassment by the staff at health clinics. There is also a high incidence of rape that is not acknowledged by the police, who dismiss it and refuse to report it on the grounds that M to F transgenders are not ‘real women’ or that they do not have ‘real vaginas’ (in cases where the transgender person has undergone SRS). In some cases, they also die or are killed as a result of discrimination. “We call this ‘Transgencide’. And, many in the HIV/MSM arena are part of it, or stand by and watch silently” said Khartini.

According to her, the way ahead is to affirm the right to life and the right to self-determination of transgender people and to treat them fairly in all areas of life. At the first Asian Transgender Health Workshop in Pattaya, Thailand, in 2006, transgender activists from Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and The Philippines formulated a Declaration of Transgender Rights that elaborates upon the human rights framed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

To conclude, Khartini Slamah said, “We don’t need a sewing machine, what we need is human rights. When donors try to

‘save’ sex workers, they give sewing machines. It shows their views about gender because not every woman, even straight women, would want a sewing machine. In Indonesia, they give them a hair drier and a mirror to set up a beautician’s business, and in India, in some places they give them a buffalo to sell its milk. These are all the interesting things they give to sex workers – buffaloes, hair driers, sewing machines. And, these don’t work because the buffalo has to be fed, and the money from the beauty or the sewing business is so little that we have to do sex work anyway. So we don’t need these, we need our human rights to be affirmed.”

The third speaker, Erick Yusufanni, who works with GAYa Nusantara, Indonesia, focussed on male sex workers called *kucing*. *Kucing* offer their services to gay men, *waria*²³, MSM, and sometimes to women. Some of them are afraid to state their profession because of societal discrimination. According to Erick, *kucing* have sex for any or all of the following three reasons – money, fun and pleasure.

Kucing operate in different locales. Those who work on the streets operate from 9 pm to 6 am and do not use pimps. Their prices are negotiable but the minimum is 100,000 rupiah²⁴, with the price going down closer to dawn. *Kucing* who operate from less expensive hotels and massage parlours are coordinated by pimps (there is usually one pimp for 10-20 *kucing*). There is no negotiation – if sex is to be had on the premises the price is Rp 100,000, and if the client wants to take the *kucing* home it is Rp 150,000. These *kucing* usually attract clients by advertising in newspapers as massage boys. Those who operate from boarding houses do not have a pimp and make their contacts and appointments on the phone, at the minimum rate being Rp 100,000.

In terms of services rendered, *Kucing* do not always penetrate the client but can also engage in oral sex, mutual masturbation, rimming, frottage and even just chatting. *Kucing* must know a variety of sexual positions and how to

use sex toys, as it is important for them to satisfy the client so that the client returns. Pleasuring the client reveals the professionalism of a *kucing*. For their own sexual pleasure, *kucing* turn to their girlfriends, gay partners, *warias* or other *kucing*, or simply masturbate. *Kucing* have a relatively low bargaining position, so ensuring condom use is not always possible, though there are outreach services for HIV prevention that promote safer sex methods like condoms, lubricants, and STI tests for *kucing* and their clients and partners.

The fourth speaker, Shashikant Mane, an activist working with rural women and sex workers in India spoke about his work with VAMP (*Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad*), a collective of sex workers which believes that sex work is work and sex workers must be accorded human rights. According to Shashikant Mane, sex work is time bound. “It starts from about 6 or 7 in the evening and it goes to around 1 or 2 at night, but in general people don’t think like that. If they see a sex worker on the road in the day time, they will treat her as a sex worker and violate her sexual rights as well as her other human rights.” Their children are also discriminated against and often have to drop out of school because of this. The homes of sex workers are sometimes demolished by the government, and there are many other violations that they face.

VAMP was registered in 1997 with the aim of upholding the rights of sex workers and believes in decriminalisation of sex work as opposed to legalisation. They fear that legalisation of sex work would be contingent on the conditions imposed and controlled by the Government and would consequently oppress sex workers’ rights. Through the collective, sex workers try to assert their human rights within the community and come together to protect themselves from violent pimps and corrupt police officers. It is important to have peer educators in the sex workers’ communities, as they best understand the lived realities of sex workers and

therefore make effective HIV prevention outreach workers and also a better claim for the rights of sex workers. The sex workers in the collective prefer to resolve their problems through their own community advisory boards. Shashikant Mane brought up the issue of the anti-prostitution clause attached to the receipt of PEPFAR money and said that many NGOs are withdrawing support to sex workers because of this²⁵.

In the discussions that followed participants pointed out that while it was necessary to look at the specific issues of women and transgender people in sex work, not much is known about men who are involved in sex work or about lesbians in sex work. Another area that is neglected is the families of sex workers. Enforcement agencies such as the police are blind to them and do not care what happens to aging parents or young children of the sex workers that they arrest.

Pornpit Puckmai pointed out that apart from the stigma, discrimination and violence that sex workers are subjected to, they are also exploited in another way. “There has been a lot of research on sex workers. Maybe more research on sex workers than on many other things. It keeps piling up and people keep getting doctoral degrees or making documentary films, but none of this research helps the life of sex workers in any tangible way,” she said.

Neil Garcia and Ging Cristobal from the Philippines said that it is difficult to talk about affirming sexuality in the context of sex work. There is no category or term in the Philippines for female sex workers who enter into sex work of their own volition. They are all called ‘prostituted women’. “And that phrase alone makes me to think that this is done to them, this is not something they choose. But we know that in the West some sex work is, in fact, volitional. The sex workers choose to do it and so probably talking about affirming sexuality in that context is easier,” said Neil.

“There are many NGOs working against the prostitution of women and they see all sex workers as prostituted women,” agreed Ging.

Ging Cristobal and Khartini Slamah shared their observation from meeting many lesbian sex workers in China, Fiji and in the Philippines. They found that butch lesbians among lesbian sex workers who service women were paid more than their femme counterparts. Ging questioned if this was a manifestation of “male-looking privilege”.

Khartini added that when male to female transgenders buy sex from male sex workers, rather than servicing the transgender client the male sex workers expect the transgender client to fellate them, so it might be worth considering the point of ‘male-looking privilege’ as it operates in sex work.

Although the session was meant to find ways in which sexuality can be affirmed in sex work, not surprisingly, it focussed more on human rights and the realities of discrimination, stigma, and oppression that sex workers face. It highlighted once again the challenges faced in addressing sexuality related issues in an affirmative manner.

Radhika Chandiramani, the moderator of the session drew attention to the fact that there are strategies of survival and resilience that sex workers use and that strong movements and collectives of sex workers have emerged. There are collectives such as the *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* and the *Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad* in India, the Empower Foundation in Thailand²⁶, and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW)²⁷ in the region that have succeeded in making a claim for rights and there is a need to listen to what these collectives are saying.

Also, although there is research and discussion on the sexual acts that clients demand and what they are willing to pay

for, there is very little known about the fantasies behind the demand or what it is that motivates certain sexual demands. More information about that might lead to creative ways in which people’s sexual pleasure and sex workers’ rights might be affirmed. It is also important to explore strategies that could be used to affirm the sexuality of sex workers themselves, in their personal lives in the same manner that we explore strategies for other groups of people.

*How do we tell the stories of our lives
and not constitute ourselves only through
violation and violence?*

*Affirming
Sexuality in
Anti-Violence
Interventions*

The two trigger presentations in this session were by Geetanjali Misra from CREA, and Shohini Ghosh an academic and filmmaker, both from India.

According to Geetanjali Misra, the definition of an anti-violence intervention itself needs greater examination. She said that when one talks about anti-violence programmes, terms such as ‘violence’, ‘gender-based violence’, ‘violence against women’, and ‘anti-violence’ find a place, but there is no holistic understanding of all forms of violence. Therefore, in some contexts sexual violence is privileged over other forms of violence, while in others sexual violence is not considered as being important.

Sexual violence includes many forms such as sexual harassment, for example, and is not limited only to rape. She questioned why gender-based violence was used only as meaning violence against women and not as violence against those who transgress gender norms. “Often when we say sexual violence against women we don’t include all women. We don’t include women sex workers, or adolescent single women who may have had sex outside of marriage, or women who are young because we don’t think they should be engaging in any kind of sexual activity,” she said.

Moving on to discussing rape, she said that one of the

ways in which legal anti-violence interventions have been disrespectful to women was by asking women their sexual history during rape trials. Sometimes, even the lawyer defending the woman does not intervene when her sexual history is being probed. She emphasised her point by saying “In war crime trials, men are never asked about their criminal histories and the focus of the trial is the act of torture or war crime. Why, then, should women who have been raped be expected to disclose their sexual histories? Moreover, why do their sexual histories even matter?” She suggested looking at other fields where there are anti-violence interventions, to see what strategies may be used in working on issues of sexual violence.

Taking the discussion further, she talked about how visual representations of violence against women often focussed on a ‘particular type’ of woman, creating a false impression that only some women are worthy of having their rights protected, while others are not. Women who may have transgressed societal norms of gender and sexuality are usually not depicted in anti-violence messaging and are seen as unworthy of the protection of their rights. To exemplify her statement she pointed out that in the anti-violence posters created by the women’s movement, she has never seen a sex worker or a butch looking woman, but only housewives or ‘heterosexual-looking’ women as subjects of violence. This needs to change.

The interventions of a majority of anti-violence advocacy centres revolve around morality and respectability. The idea that a woman can consent to sexual activity or the choice of her partner is not acknowledged enough. Drawing on Alice Miller’s work, Geetanjali Misra emphasised that mechanisms which are protectionist are different from mechanisms that protect the woman’s right to choose²⁸.

In terms of choice, there seems to be general agreement amongst women’s groups and feminists that women have

the right to choose their sexual partners or the right to choose to have an abortion. But when it comes to more complicated and contentious issues like sex-selective abortions, there is very little agreement. “If we believe in women’s right to choose, our interventions would be more around issues of why son preference still exists in our countries rather than on criminalising the women who are choosing a sex-selective abortion because of the oppression from a patriarchal society,” she stated²⁹. Even the language used in addressing sex-selective abortion slides insidiously into an anti-abortion stance. For example, in language like ‘female foeticide’ or ‘aborting the girl child’, the ‘rights of the unborn’ are privileged over the rights of the woman, whereas human rights are guaranteed to people after they are *born*. Geetanjali Misra concluded her trigger presentation by emphasising the need to protect choice while designing anti-violence interventions.

The second speaker, Shohini Ghosh, a media scholar and an independent filmmaker from India, aptly titled her presentation ‘The Unhappy Marriage of Violence and Victimology.’ She began with two anecdotes. One was about how her film *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2002) based on the lives of sex workers in Kolkatta was not accepted at The Human Rights Watch International Film Festival because the Festival organisers thought that the film was not about human rights violations. In fact, the film is about the demands of sex workers in a sex workers’ collective, *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya* Committee (DMSC) with approximately 65,000 members. Their demands are to decriminalise sex work, and to assert their rights to retain the custody of their children and to raise them, to form trade unions, and, to live a life free of social stigma and discrimination.

The second anecdote was about a conversation that Shohini Ghosh had with a friend who is affiliated to a Left political party in India and had to do with the inclusion of lesbians in their Women’s Day parade. The friend said that lesbians could

march with them but could not carry any placards as she did not want the Party to endorse lesbian sexuality. The friend, however, added that if a lesbian became a victim of violence, they would support her. Shohini commented, “I thought that it was a rather torturous route to acknowledgement – you have to first be battered as a victim of violence and only then be acknowledged. In both these cases I think what is being asked is for the people concerned to be positioned as victims.”

When she was growing up, Shohini Ghosh was told that the worst violence that could be perpetrated on a woman is that she should have to have sex with many men and therefore prostitution was the worst kind of violence. She was told that nobody in their right mind would opt for prostitution and those few who did, if there were any, certainly deserved neither compassion nor sympathy and were not worthy of any kind of intervention. Therefore, it is not uncommon for people who think that prostitution is violence against women, that the ‘reluctant prostitute’ is the one who qualifies to be rescued and the rest do not deserve any rights.

While working with the women of DMSC, Shohini Ghosh quickly realised that they would tell middle-class people that they had been forced into prostitution because that is the only way they would be accepted. They would say this all the time while nudging and winking at each other. She added, “What we understand to be violence and what they understand as violence is very different. People think that sex workers face a lot of violence from brutal clients, from ruthless pimps and from greedy madams. Now that could well be true in certain cases, but ironically, the worst and the most systemic form of violence is something that we have never talked about – that is the brutal violence that the police unleash on the sex workers which occurs regularly and frequently in the form of brothel raids.”

During the raids the police, accompanied by social workers

and often also by the media, go into the rooms of the sex workers and drag them and their family members – including their children – out in a most inhuman and degrading manner. They are put into jail until they can pay to get out. These incidents are reported on TV and in the newspapers but are not seen or recognised as violence against women. “I have a scrapbook of raid stories. These stories have a particular kind of narrative. It is the narrative of hapless victims of devious brothel owners, of people who are in the ‘flesh trade’, and it is about the bravery of the policemen and the self-righteousness of social workers. This narrative is very different from the way the sex workers read the story of the brothel raids,” said Shohini Ghosh.

In Shohini Ghosh’s film, there is a real-life character called Mala, a sex worker, who relates how she was picked up when she was younger and taken into police custody where she was gang-raped in the police lockup, her thighs were slashed, and the police finally sent her back when they had finished with her. Later in the film, Mala tells another story of how she took revenge on the police. Once when the police raided the red light area and took the women to the police lockup, Mala went with a big group of women, picketed the police station and filed charges against the police for violence and for violations of bodily integrity. The superintendent of the police station begged her to withdraw the charges. Finally, the women negotiated a contract with the police that they could enter the red light area only under certain conditions. Mala ends the interview in the film by saying, “You know muscle power is very easy to exercise, but we have always suffered under the tyranny of paperwork and today we are beating them at their own game.”

Shohini Ghosh pointed out that in her film, when one follows the story of Mala’s earlier violation with the story of holding the police accountable, Mala is not constituted only by victimhood and violence. The idea of victimhood that is not alleviated by anything else, and constituted only

by violence, is what creates the conflation between sex work and trafficking for sexual exploitation, according to Shohini.

Trafficking hinges on the idea of victimhood, of being forced into something. Sex trafficking is a story of victimhood and thereby the only way to intervene is to rescue the woman. She said that more often than not, people intervening on anti-trafficking issues talk about eliminating prostitution but not about ending violence against women in prostitution.

Shohini Ghosh concluded with three questions to think about collectively – Why do certain narratives and discourses need abject victims? What would happen to those narratives if they did not have abject victims? What will we unravel if we were to look at women and men and transgender people as subjects of violence and not objects of violence?

A rich discussion followed. A participant was concerned that representing sex workers as having agency might hide the larger macro-economic forces pressurising people into sex work and said that women in the Global South may be disadvantaged by this. Shohini Ghosh responded that DMSC has over 65,000 sex workers who talk about consent and are opposed to sex trafficking. They make choices, however limited those choices may be. She added that the discourse of trafficking is embedded in a larger mythology of women not having the freedom to move around. She suggested that participants visit red light areas to see how women actually get there.

In her film, *Tales of the Night Fairies*, there is a sex worker who talks about how her mother was a sex worker. She grew up hating it and never wanted to be a sex worker. She worked as a domestic help, as a rag picker, in a toy factory, and then finally decided that the best thing for her to do was to be a sex worker. She made a choice. Shohini Ghosh and Geetanjali Misra also reminded the group that there

was no homogenised ‘Global South’ or ‘Global North’ and cautioned against simplistic notions of women in the ‘Global South’ having less agency as compared to their counterparts in the ‘Global North’.

Shashikant Mane emphasised the importance of encouraging sex worker communities to make their own decisions and devise their own strategies. According to him, because of the peer-education model, the women in the VAMP collective have achieved 90% condom use. Similarly, when it comes to other issues, like those of minors engaging in sex work, the collective is strategising on how best to prevent it and how best to oppose sex trafficking. In the meantime, there are ongoing raid and rescue operations that are violating the rights of sex workers and their families. “If we want to stop minor girls coming in to the trade, we have to involve and strengthen the community *gharwalis* (madams or brothel owners) and sex workers to prevent that”, he said.

Remarking on the perceptions of the ‘Global North’ about the ‘Global South’, Dede Oetomo offered a humorous account of how a TV crew that had gone to film the gay and *waria* group in Indonesia was surprised to see them smiling and happy. “They seemed to think: you must suffer if you are in the third world”, he said.

The discussion moved on to other groups of people who are left out of anti-violence interventions. Ging Cristobal remarked that lesbians, especially butch-appearing lesbians are left out of domestic violence interventions in the Philippines because of the assumption that a femme-appearing lesbian could never be the perpetrator of violence. A study in the University of the Philippines showed that this assumption was wrong.

Further, when butch lesbians are raped the police officials do not believe them saying “You look like a man; who will rape you?”, when in fact police officials have also raped

butch lesbians. In the Philippines, there are no support facilities for lesbians facing violence because the women’s groups, counselling groups, and even legal agencies do not know how to handle these issues. More anti-violence programmes need to be offered for specific groups of people like lesbians.

In response, Geetanjali Misra said that interventions also need to factor in the reality that not all women who engage in same-sex sexual relations identify as lesbians, and providing specialised services for lesbians might exclude these women who do not want to be identified as lesbian. There is also the fact that many lesbians are in heterosexual marriages, and, some women who appear to be lesbian are actually heterosexual and are also facing violence, and so anti-violence work needs to be cut across different sectors.

Angela KugaThas added that in Malaysia there is no women’s movement but there are women’s rights groups that are trying to dialogue with each other. Women’s rights groups say that they do not know enough to be able to handle issues of violations of transgender people or lesbians or sex workers, but in actuality, there might be other reasons. A programme working on domestic violence included migrant workers but not lesbians in its purview citing the lack of a legal framework to deal with lesbian issues as a reason. Angela KugaThas pointed out that some groups are so used to using the legal framework in order to advocate and push issues forward that they do not look for alternatives across different areas.

However, women’s groups may not be the ideal place to address issues of violence against M to F transgenders according to Khartini Slamah because they are not seen as ‘real’ women’ and also because not all their demands for rights are the same as those of other women. Also, those who are sex workers face double discrimination and have no place to turn to when raped.

DanielTung shared his experience of working as a counsellor with the LGBT community in Singapore. In addressing issues of violence in this community he tells his clients (both the abuser and the abused) about their rights and helps build their self-esteem.

Moving on to other issues, Sophea Khun from Cambodia added that sexual harassment in the workplace also needed to be addressed, and that sexual assault should not be joked about, as often happens in the Cambodian media. She also added that entertainment workers should not be harassed just because they work in an entertainment industry, like in bars or cabarets.

Sumit Baudh from India offered a positive example of inter-caste or inter-religious marriages as initiatives which could be geared towards peace and conflict resolution. “When people choose to marry outside the norms that are dictated to them, and there are groups and ideologies which are supporting these choices, they are affirming sexuality in a big way,” he said.

Shohini Ghosh agreed that we need to tell stories that are not only negative but also positive and affirming. “How do we tell the stories of our lives and not constitute ourselves only through violation and violence?” she asked. In addressing issues of violence against particular groups of people like transgenders or sex workers she suggested a focus on sexual rights in addition to looking at violence.

Geetanjali Misra added that in other areas of work such as HIV prevention the participation of the community is essential in designing interventions. Similarly in designing anti-violence interventions that affirm sexuality, members of different groups and communities should be involved.

Radhika Chandiramani summed up the discussion by pointing to the need to look at what values and principles

anti-violence interventions are based on. If the programme emphasises consent or respect as a value, is the principle of nondiscrimination being used to ensure that consent is sought from across all categories of all sorts of people? To do that, requires the recognition of different categories of people so that everyone – the invisible butch lesbian that Ging Cristobal talked about, the transsexual sex worker that Khartini talked about, the woman in the rice field, the man at home – is covered.



When two worlds collide, freedoms can be perceived as threats, and barriers can be perceived as security. This is where censorship plays a crucial role and it is manifest in preventing access to information and making sure that access does not spread to people who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged.

Affirming Sexuality in the Media

Angela Kuga Thas, from KRYSS, a human rights organisation in Malaysia, Moammar Emka, a journalist and freelance writer from Indonesia, and Jajang Noer, a film actor from Indonesia, made trigger presentations in this session.

Angel Kuga Thas focussed on Affirming Sexuality in Virtual Spaces. She began with acknowledging that not everyone has equal access to the Internet; not everyone who has access to the Internet is fully informed about how to engage with it; and, not everyone who has access to the Internet is technically savvy.

Quoting Howard Rheingold, she said that virtual spaces meant “the usage of latent technical power that must be used intelligently and deliberately by an informed population, to bring about intellectual, social, commercial and most importantly political leverage”. Rheingold also cautioned that, “What we know and do now is important because it is still possible for people around the world to make sure this new sphere of vital human discourse remains open to the citizens of the planet before the political and economic big boys seize it, censor it, meter it, and sell it back to us”.³⁰

According to Angela Kuga Thas, spaces alone are not empowering unless people claim them, remain in them and make them empowering. That is why it is important for

activists to be familiar with the excesses of the Cybercrime Convention that give States increased surveillance powers at the cost of personal privacy³¹. In this context it is crucial to work on Communication Rights. She defined these as being different from the human right of freedom of expression because they are about “the right to not only receive information but to access it, process it, exchange it, apply it, adapt it and create new knowledge that will remain a global public good.”

The virtual world provides windows to a variety of worlds, not just worlds of physical places and cities, but worlds of thought, creativity, innovation, and more importantly, self-definition. This means that the power to affirm one’s own sexuality is within reach and many people do this through self-identified spaces to engage in, each with a specific purpose, whether through mailing lists, chat rooms, blogs, websites, personal ads, message boards, instant messenger, and voice over internet protocol (which is like Skype). These facilitate usage by different kinds of people for different kinds of activities (from individual to community action, from acceptance to hate, for example).

However, when two worlds collide, freedoms can be perceived as threats, and barriers can be perceived as security. This is where censorship plays a crucial role and it is manifest in preventing access to information and making sure that access does not spread to people who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged. According to Angela Kuga Thas, “Virtual space is still the most conducive space that allows us to carry through who we truly are into that space, and, in finding acceptance, becoming empowered.”

Angela Kuga Thas offered some provocative food for thought by stating that the Internet was earlier regarded as a tremendous boon for the pornography industry, creating a global market of images and videos accessible from the privacy of a home computer. However the online availability

of free or low cost photos and videos has taken a huge toll on the sales of X-rated DVDs and the Internet is now being blamed for the decline of the pornography industry. Such is the power of virtual spaces.

So, in moving from the virtual to the real there is a continuous need to transform virtual spaces, through workshops, talks, dialogues, activism, and advocacy. There is also a need to interrogate and unpack the scripts that define us by examining social acceptability, desire, and our value systems and by continuously negotiating the 'freedom to' with the 'freedom from'. Many individuals are part of virtual communities formed on the basis of self-identified preferences through which they affirm their sexuality, and they jealously guard their virtual spaces, excluding others from joining. The challenge lies in changing this position of 'the right to exclude' to a movement of solidarity and activism.

The next presenter, Moammar Emka, a journalist and freelance writer from Indonesia said that sexuality was a taboo topic in his country. While he worked as a newspaper and magazine journalist, he wrote articles on sexuality for two local entertainment magazines for men and was confronted by the problem of language. He could not mention the words penis or vagina and instead had to use substitutes like Mr. Big, The Banana, or Mr. Johnny for the former, and V or Miss Veggie for the latter. Additionally, he could not describe sexual activities in his articles. So, though he could write about sexuality in a circuitous fashion, linking it to entertainment and lifestyle, he could not address it directly.

In 2002, Moammar Emka wrote a book, *Jakarta Undercover*, that explored Jakarta's nightlife in massage parlours, restaurants, saunas, strip clubs and other such venues. According to him, this was the first book in Indonesia that exposed sex in the city. The book sold more than 400,000

copies. However, even in this book, Moammar Emka used initials to describe sexual activities; X for sex (as in massage XXX or sauna XXX) and the + symbol (Sauna ++, massage boy ++, girls++), and metaphors such as 'making love with full body contact'. The book became a best-seller with people being shocked at what he had uncovered and questioning whether it was true.

On a TV programme, Emka received more than 400 text messages and 200 phone calls about his book in one hour and a half, showing how interested people were in it. As a result of the book's success, he was able to talk more freely about sexuality on several different TV channels and became a presenter on the TV station RCTI's lifestyle programme *Silet* that covered nightlife and sexuality. However, some of his material was censored by the Ministry of Communication and Information in accordance with the following rules: No lip-kissing to be shown; no 'sexy' clothes (bikinis, lingerie, under wear), no 'dirty' talk.

The same thing happened on radio. Though his radio programme for young people on sexuality, *Guys Talk*, got a good response from young people it had to be shut down after a year because of repeated warnings from the Committee of Indonesian *Ulemah* (Muslim scholars trained in Islamic scripture and jurisprudence) because it was considered to be 'dangerous for young people'. Moammar Emka's presentation highlighted the conflicts, contradictions and tensions within Indonesian society with regard to sexuality.

Adding to this theme, the next presentation by Jajang Noer, a film actor from Indonesia, pointed out that after the Reformation in 1998, Indonesians were freer to express themselves but at the same time, the anti-pornography movement is still strong in Indonesia. As late as 2006, as part of the anti-pornography regulations, the government was trying to impose a dress code on women, requiring them to dress 'modestly' and not reveal any part of their body.

Censorship of films was rampant before the Reformation and Jajang Noer gave examples of scenes that were cut in popular movies because of their allusion to sex. She added wryly that in Indonesia, only sex was considered immoral; stealing, corruption and killing were not.

Now, film scripts are no longer censored and a lot of information could be provided through the medium of movies and theatre. Because films are an effective medium, Jajang Noer wants to make movies on sexuality related issues. In particular, she wants to make a film on menopause which will be more affirming of older women's sexuality. Women do not know enough about how menopause affects their sexuality and doctors do not usually give them the right information on what foods and supplements to take.

Many of Jajang Noer's friends say that they have lost interest in sex after menopause and now have a 'brother-sister relationship' with their husband. Jajang's reply to this is, "If you have a brother-sister relationship, with your husband, he will run away!" Therefore, she feels sexuality education must go beyond only biological factors and must begin right from Grade One. According to her, the media has a responsibility to provide accurate information about sexuality and rights.

In the discussion that followed, Julia Suryakusuma pointed out that local popular magazines in Indonesia were actually quite graphic about sex. She also pointed to the mushrooming of sexually explicit literature by young women writers and gave the example of a short story titled *Suckling my Father's Penis*. The uproar over the introduction of *Playboy* magazine in Indonesia in 2006, she thought, was more about the opposition to the brand that was seen as 'Western' than to the content of the magazine which was 'quite tame' compared to what is available in local magazines.

Moving to strategies for dealing with the media, other participants also shared the view that there is a lot of

coverage of sexuality in the media, but as Michael de Guzman said, "The challenge is in monitoring the quality of this coverage so that it is not reinforcing stereotypes or is otherwise gender insensitive."

Along the same lines, Haitao Huang said, "I would not blame the media without telling them how to develop new strategies or new ideas to cover issues, for example, the violation of women's human rights or other so-called sensitive issues related to sexuality in China." According to him, the only topic related to sexuality that is covered by the newspapers in China is that of rape. Usually, the reportage is only in commercially oriented newspapers that depict an incident of rape in salacious detail to attract more readers. On the other hand, the official newspapers avoid words like 'vagina' or 'rape' in their reports. What Haitao Huang's group does is to find out how these incidents can be reported in a way that is acceptable to both types of newspapers. After an incident of date rape, they were able to introduce the concept of date rape into the newspapers and also translated the term into Chinese so that it could enter common language.

The media in India often misrepresents sex workers and other marginalised communities, according to Shashikant Mane. The media should check with the subjects (e.g., sex workers) on how they would like to be represented. After seeing how they were represented in popular cinema, the sex workers of VAMP developed a theatre performance that they enacted themselves and used as an advocacy tool. Daniel Tung gave an example of how only certain cinematic representations of gays and lesbians were allowed in Singapore. "They have to come to a bad end ...die or something. *Brokeback Mountain* was accepted because he dies in the end. But the ones where they are happy, those movies are not allowed," he said.

Censorship, regulation and control operate in cyberspace

as well, as Angela Kuga Thas had pointed out in her opening presentation. Different groups such as ICANN Watch³² are working on a campaign to look at issues of ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), and the ownership and the control of the Internet. There has been an increase in censorship and banning under the guise of security after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the US on September 11, 2001 and it is important to monitor this and advocate for communication rights.

However, the Internet still offers a safe space for people. In Singapore, people prefer chatting online to chatting anonymously on a phone helpline. The Internet allows people to choose which aspects of themselves they wish to reveal and which identity they want to take on and project. According to Angela, “Virtual spaces allow certain freedoms but it doesn’t mean that they also don’t reflect some realities.” Unfortunately, however, the freedom that allows people to build and live in virtual communities also cocoons them. “They are scared to even write a letter to the editor when there is a particular violation that happens through the media. That to me is very sad because they don’t see it as affecting their life. They think their lives are in this cocoon and the other person’s problem is not going to overlap with theirs. How do we broaden the space so that others are affirmed as well?” she asked.

Some participants said that the Internet has a tremendous potential for advocacy initiatives; but then again, based on his experience in Singapore, Daniel Tung believed that the Internet has created ‘armchair advocates’ as sometimes there is a lot of on-line discussion, but it is hard to mobilise people into action.

In summing up the session, Pramada Menon reflected that everyone knows that the media uses sex to sell stories. It is important therefore to talk with the media, influence them

to write or represent issues differently, have groups create their own representations like the sex workers did, and examine our practices with the Internet that has insidiously become such an important part of our lives.



*Transgenders state a greater claim to rights
than do gay and bisexual men, and, 'tops'
claim superiority over 'bottoms' who in turn
claim superiority over 'versatiles',
and so it goes on.*

Affirming Gender and Sexual Non-Conformity

This session focussed on affirming the expressions of gender and sexuality when they do not conform to social expectations. The broad rubric of gender and sexual non-conformity was chosen so as to include all expressions and not confine the discussion only to the 'LGBT' category. Trigger presentations were made by Sasi Bhusan Gurung, Cruisaid-Nepal, Ging Cristobal, of Lesbian Advocates Philippines (LeAP), Daniel Tung from Oogachaga in Singapore, and Neil Garcia who is a poet, critic, and Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of the Philippines.

Sasi Bhusan Gurung, Cruisaid-Nepal, made the first trigger presentation based on his work on HIV/AIDS and STI prevention with MSM, male sex workers and transgenders. Nepalese society exhibits a range of sexual and gender diversity. *Metis* are biological men who perceive themselves as feminine and belonging to a third gender, that is, they are neither men nor women. They have sex with men but are also married to women because of heterosexist pressure. There are also women, called *mardana*, who see themselves or are perceived as being male.

The law in Nepal treats peno-vaginal sex as the only form of 'natural' sex and clubs all other forms such as anal sex, sex between people of the same gender and oral sex as 'unnatural' sex³³. The law leads to men who have sex with

men being harassed and arrested by the police. Lesbians are also attacked. Notions of 'vulgarity' have also been used to justify harassment. Transgender sex workers have been beaten by the police for 'promoting vulgarity and obscenity'. They react by using foul language and pulling up their skirts to reveal their genitals in public, attracting further criticism of 'vulgarity'. Sasi Bhusan Gurung also gave examples of HIV prevention outreach workers being harassed by policemen for carrying condoms and materials depicting 'vulgar' images.

Though there is no mention of homosexuality as offensive or bad in the Constitution, sometimes political figures make remarks that "homosexuality is a product of capitalism" or that, "We support homosexuals, but we do not encourage homosexual activities". At the time of the consultation, a new Constitution was being written in Nepal. Sasi Bhusan Gurung emphasised that there is an ongoing campaign in the country as well as a case in the Supreme Court of Nepal to decriminalise homosexual sex and to recognise transgender people in Nepal as *Tesrolingis* (third gender). They are demanding that they not be discriminated against. One of their demands is that their citizenship cards and other important documents mention them as people of the Third Gender³⁴. Sasi Bhusan Gurung noted that just a few months before this consultation, a transgender person was awarded a citizenship card with both male and female mentioned on it. Sasi said that each person should be able to enjoy equal socio-economic, political and other human rights without discrimination based on caste, religion, ethnicity, language, gender identity or sexual preference.

The Nepalese Government was aware of the positive work that his organisation was engaged in and the State was now more supportive about the health issues of MSM, male sex workers and transgenders. The National Centre for AIDS and STI Control has recognised that MSMs and male sex workers as the most 'at-risk population' in terms of HIV/

AIDS and STIs. In terms of advocacy, the organisation has been doing work in Nepal without government interference. The organisation has successfully run LGBT film festivals, and Pink Pageants. The annual Pride Parade is held alongside the *Gai Jatra*, one of Nepal's traditional festivals to commemorate the dead as well as to express public opinion through social and political satire without reprisal.

Ending his presentation, Sasi Bhusan Gurung pointed to the need to end discrimination within the sexual minority community itself. For example, transgenders state a greater claim to rights than do gay and bisexual men, and, 'tops'³⁵ claim superiority over 'bottoms' who in turn claim superiority over 'versatiles', and so it goes on.

The next presenter, Ging Cristobal, co-founder of Lesbian Advocates Philippines (LeAP), said that they faced the same issues in a different context. There is discrimination, harassment and violence against LGBTs in the form of verbal, emotional and physical abuse. They also have limited access to education, health and the opportunity to work. LeAP wants to incorporate lesbian issues into existing laws, provisions and ordinances. They are often told that this would cost a lot of money and effort. Their response is, "It does not involve money. We have to change behaviours, perceptions, attitudes, and consciousness which will take some time we know, but we have to start somewhere." So LeAP has been engaged with legislative work, research, educating people, talking about ethics and values and raising consciousness amongst the mainstream heterosexual community as well as the LGBT community.

In strongly Catholic Philippines, LeAP has been proposing an Anti-Discrimination Bill (ADB) since 1999 to legislate against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. In October 2000, the local councillors in Quezon City passed the Quezon City Ordinance (1309) against discrimination in the workplace. However, the ADB

is still pending approval in the Senate. The Lesbian and Gay Legislative Advocacy Network (LAGABLAB), of which LeAP is a member, has also made allies in both the Senate and the Congress. The Pride March, that is undertaken every year in the Philippines aims to raise awareness and visibility of LGBT issues.

LGBT issues are appearing in local and national elections as well. Danton Remoto, an openly gay man, attempted to run for a seat in the Senate in the last elections but was not allowed to do so by the Commission on Elections. He then ran for Congressman in Quezon City district but lost to another contestant who allegedly paid for votes. He is determined to stand for senator in the next election in 2010 and his platform is that of education and rights protection of LGBT people. Ang Ladlad is the first LGBT network that applied for party-list status but was denied it.

Using another strategy to work for LGBT rights, LeAP documents violence against lesbians in the Philippines, in order to substantiate their demands to change laws and policies. *Unmasked: Faces of Discrimination Against Lesbians in the Philippines* (2004) was the first published documentation of violence against lesbians in the Philippines. LeAP also does qualitative research on lesbian sexual and reproductive health issues for the same purpose. *Hidden Health: Exploring the Knowledge, Attitudes, Beliefs and Practices of Filipino Lesbians on Sexual and Reproductive Health* (2004) was the first research report of this nature. *Wanted: Magic* (2004) is an information tool kit on what women want to know about lesbian sexual health, safe sex and other matters. Interestingly, Ging explained that lesbians are often called "magic" in the Philippines, but was not quite sure why.

In addition, in order to affirm the rights of LGBT people, LeAP tries to instate LGBT rights into the Human Rights framework. It integrates Gender Sensitivity Training into Gender and Sexuality Training for trainers to be more gender

sensitive, by going beyond gender stereotypes and women's empowerment issues, to discuss sexual behaviour, LGBT and other issues so as to include everyone in the discourse. Ging also pointed out that in the Philippines lesbians who looked 'like a man' were treated as men and were trapped in that box and expected to show 'masculine' behaviours. She questioned the claiming, reclaiming and expressions of identities.

The third presenter, Daniel Tung from Oogachaga, an LGBT affirmative counselling agency in Singapore talked about the ongoing debate on Section 377 A³⁶ in his country. Section 377 (unnatural offences) applies to both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Section 377 A (outrages on decency) was introduced in 1938 specifically to penalise sex between men. The Ministry of Home has been carrying out a review of Singapore's Penal Code since 2006. All laws are being reviewed but the national debate is on whether 377 A should be repealed or not. Gay rights activists want both Section 377 and 377 A to be repealed. This has met with strong opposition from the Church as well as public figures like the Minister of State for Education. The Church claims that homosexual acts, and not homosexuality or homosexuals, are wrong. The Church propagates the belief 'love the sinner, not the sin'. Neither does the Church say that homosexual acts are necessarily sins, only sinful. Similarly, conservative public opinion wants to retain 377 A³⁷.

According to Daniel Tung, despite its conservative attitude to sexuality, Singapore is one of the few Asian countries that allows for change of gender in a person's identity card after Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). Singapore had legalised SRS as far back as in 1973. In January 1996, post-operative transsexual people were granted the right to marry a partner of the opposite sex.

In spite of resistance from society at large in Singapore, the LGBT community is highly resilient. There are online forums

and websites such as Blowingwind, SGButter, RedQuEens, Fridae.com, Trevvy.com, Sayoni and Yawning Bread as well as support groups such as Safe Haven, Heartland, Free Community Church, Pelangi Pride Centre, ADLUS (Adventurers Like Us – an LGBT sports group), PLUME (People Like You and Me), CACTUS (Community Action for Us), Oogachaga, SAFE Singapore (a support group for parents and friends) and PLU (People Like Us) that work with the LGBT community.

As mentioned in the session on religion, the Free Community Church is LGBT affirming and is a non-denominational Christian Church. Their website clearly states, "The Free Community Church affirms that all individuals are persons of sacred worth and created in God's image. Given the discrimination that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) persons still face in society, our Church affirms that same-sex relationships are consistent with Christian faith and teachings, when lived out in accord with the love commandments of Jesus. Instead, it is discrimination based on sexual orientation and homophobia that are inconsistent with Christian teachings. We welcome all LGBT persons to our family"³⁸. The Church holds Sunday services, sermons and other activities as well as a support group called Safe Haven for gay men. There is also a Buddhist fellowship called Heartland for gay Buddhists³⁹.

The last presenter in this session, Neil Garcia is an academic, researcher and an advisor to the first officially recognised organisation of LGBT students at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City. According to him, LGBT studies were intermittently carried out by Filipino scholars in major Universities in the country. But the studies did not take into consideration the colonial history of the Philippines, and merely reproduced versions of 'western' knowledge. He also said that fortunately some scholars were doing LGBT work bilingually i.e. both in English as well as Filipino.

Neil Garcia noted that we keep using terms like acting ‘like a man’ or ‘like a woman’ because we sometimes have no choice but to perform norms around gender and sexuality. According to Neil, sexuality is the innermost secret or truth that defines who a person essentially is. He clarified that while it is possible to intellectualise sexuality as being constructed, he cannot argue with his preferences and with his own affect. “Paradox is what we live with and we may not be able to explain everything consistently” he said.

Referring to his work at the Academe, he had helped articulate and champion what he thought and believed to be “pleasures, excesses, secrets and longings” of those who do not conform to norms of sexuality and gender. He encourages cultivating the imagination through creative writing and poetry as well as creative non-fiction. In his individual capacity he has published articles, edited gay literature and anthologies. He also maintains a website and a blogspace.

Neil Garcia believes that there is more merit in revealing personal truths about oneself than in presenting studies/ research. He said that he has been able to affirm complexities in his own life. He talks about LGBTIQ issues with students, friends and colleagues. He admitted that ‘coming out’ was difficult for many Filipino gay men and lesbian women but through his writings and teaching methodology, he has been effectively advocating for the rights of LGBT people. He had also formed committees and conducted workshops where persons who identified themselves as ‘straight’ were interested in studying and getting to know more about LGBT issues.

In the discussion that followed, participants shared experiences about inter-generational dynamics within the LGBT communities that may be interesting points to consider. For example, younger gay men are often uncomfortable with older ‘flamboyant’ gay men, and older

trans-people are sometimes uncomfortable with how the younger generation expresses itself. Participants felt that when it came to queer people there are a number of questions that arise, such as, can one wear ‘outrageous’ clothes to the National Commission of Human Rights meetings? Who gets invited to these occasions and who gets left behind?

Though there are inconsistencies in laws, participants discussed that the strategy should not be to seek consistency. Within inconsistencies there are spaces for people to bring in other issues and keep pushing the boundaries.

. . . the mothers will very clearly say that when they started menstruating, they were terrified, nobody explained what was happening to their bodies. Yet, having gone through that experience, they will still not talk about menstruation with their daughters.

Affirming Sexuality with Young People

The trigger presenters at this session were Sophea Khun from CARE, Cambodia, Sheena Hadi from Aahung in Pakistan, Prabha Nagaraja from TARSHI in India, and Haitao Huang from the Sun Yat-sen University in China.

Sophea Khun, Technical Officer at CARE's Reproductive Health programme in Cambodia works with government factory workers and urban youth. In Cambodia, at least 36.5% of the total population is in the age group of 10 – 24 years. Because the topic of sexuality is still taboo in Cambodian society there is immense confusion in young minds. With limited information, youngsters explore different avenues for information on sexuality, such as pornography which gives inadequate and inaccurate information. A CARE study in 2006 revealed that Cambodian young people aged between 13 and 18 years explored 'hardcore pornography'. To help young people understand sexuality better, it is necessary for reproductive health programmes to include a component of sexual health. The programme staff in CARE Cambodia attended various training programmes and then developed a sexual health curriculum for the HIV-AIDS programmes as well as the reproductive health programmes. The curriculum was translated into the local language for the benefit of the field staff.

According to Sophea Khun, it is important for young people

to know about 'pleasure' – a concept most of them may not acknowledge. As women and girls, they have the right to know and learn about sexuality. Earlier condoms were used only for protection against diseases and unwanted pregnancies but now given the range of condoms available (flavoured, ribbed, vibrating) they could also be used for enhancing pleasure. It is imperative that through their training, trainers impart much needed information to young people about their sexual organs, functions of these organs and also how to be safe. From Sophea Khun's experience, contrary to what many people think, young people are very comfortable discussing sexuality issues even within a mixed group of boys and girls. She stated that in order to have positive discussions on sexuality with young people, there needs to be a safe place for everyone including the programme staff, trainers and young people. It is important that the trainers are non-judgmental and non-critical. Changing the environment within the organisation is also crucial. She emphasised forming networks at all levels in society that could advocate for and inform the public about the importance of sexual and reproductive health.

The next trigger presentation was by Sheena Hadi, Life Skills Education Manager at Aahung in Pakistan. Citing statistical data, she said that over 60% of Pakistan's population is below the age of 24 years and they suffer a dearth of information on sexuality. Many myths and misconceptions about the body prevail. A great deal of the focus of sexuality awareness with young people globally is on the prevention of infections and unwanted pregnancies. For example, there is a lot of work being done in Pakistan with regard to HIV awareness and prevention. But looking at sexuality holistically reveals a host of other problems. There are several negative examples: parents or concerned adults get upset when children touch their genitals; girls are told to walk hunched at the onset of puberty so that their breasts are hidden; boys are told that nocturnal emissions are a result of 'shameful and dirty thoughts'. Sheena Hadi revealed that women in

rural areas in Pakistan bathe with their clothes on because looking at one's naked body is 'sinful'. She said that 50% of adolescent girls who were interviewed for a small research study in a low income area in the city of Karachi did not understand the link between menstruation and pregnancy. She added, "Now, what's interesting is that when you talk to their mothers, the mothers will very clearly say that when they started menstruating, they were terrified, nobody explained what was happening to their bodies. Yet, having gone through that experience, they will still not talk about menstruation with their daughters."

Adolescents are not recognised as a group with the special needs to develop the skills of decision-making and communication. Affirming sexuality is much more than making sure that people are free from infection and unwanted pregnancies. Aahung is trying to inculcate analytical thinking and remove fear-based messages about the body among young people. This is done by using the language of rights in workshops and trainings. Aahung wants to develop and use resources to translate texts from English to Sindhi and other local languages. The organisation also aims at working with key stakeholders, young people, parents, teachers, healthcare providers and community workers. Using participatory methods that can contribute to skills building and decision-making, the organisation aspires to help young people affirm their sexuality.

Sheena Hadi emphasised the need to work on taboos that are not talked about in society. She said that parents, for example, could be sensitised through resource materials and public awareness through theatre, films, and television. Talking about various teaching methods, she said that newer ways must be found so that teaching could contribute to skills development with regard to sexuality education, decision making, negotiation, confidence and other skills. She ended her presentation with several questions: How could values such as being non-judgemental and being tolerant

be encouraged within rigid fundamentalist, religious and cultural viewpoints? How does one let young people have the space to think for themselves?

Taking the discussion forward, the next presenter, Prabha Nagaraja from TARSHI, India, said that self-affirming sexuality goes beyond the absence of disease, violence and fear. It is a celebration of and respect for people's choices and diversity. The vision that guides TARSHI's work is that all people have the right to sexual well-being and self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality. TARSHI has been running a telephone helpline for over 12 years and responded to more than 57,000 calls. The youngest caller has been about 12 years old and the oldest around 73. The kinds of questions that people ask on the helpline are to do with changes in the body, conception, contraception, abortion, homosexuality, abuse, HIV, relationship issues and many more.

The helpline provides anonymity and confidentiality and avoids making assumptions about a caller's gender, sexuality, marital status and so on. For example, the gender of the caller's partner/s is not assumed, and counsellors use gender-neutral terms like 'partner'. They do not use words like husband/wife or girl/boyfriend so that callers may talk about their experiences (which may not be within marital or heterosexual contexts) and their lives without fear of being judged. The counsellors provide a non-judgmental space on the helpline even as values are stated upfront. When callers reveal that they are abusive, rather than terminating the call or getting angry with the caller, the value that abuse is unacceptable is stated in a respectful manner. This is so that the caller knows that the helpline will not assist him in continuing with the abuse but will talk with him to find ways to change his abusive behaviour.

Apart from the helpline, the organisation also conducts trainings and produces publications for different audiences with a rights and a sexuality affirming perspective.

Working with parents and adult care providers of people with multiple disabilities and people with intellectual disabilities, TARSHI recognises the need to address the issue of disability and sexuality. Usually care providers are interested only in matters like preventing sexual abuse or preventing masturbation in public. People with disabilities have the right to sexual well-being, as does anyone else, and this means that sexuality and disability must be addressed from a positive perspective as well.

TARSHI has been holding brainstorming meetings with parents and teachers and asking them: Do you think sexuality education is important for young people? Almost unanimously everyone says “Yes”. When asked “At what age do you think it should begin?” no one is sure. Prabha Nagaraja’s continuing challenges were: At what age can young people be sexually active and express themselves? How to convince adults about the importance of talking about sexuality with young people?

The final trigger presentation was by Haitao Huang, Coordinator of the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-sen University and a member of Happy Together, the first legally registered LGBT students’ organisation in Mainland China. According to him, with the decline of communist ideology in China, young people have more space and rights to enjoy their own sexuality, especially at University. However, the general social response remains that of wariness about young people falling in love ‘too early’. Citing an example, he said that in Nanjing, East China, there was a regulation in the middle school that required all the girls and boys to ‘keep a distance of at least 44 centimetres’ to prevent them from falling in love and having a relationship ‘too early’. Another example of the regulation of gender and sexuality is that middle school teachers were asked by a department of education to add dancing lessons (like the waltz) to physical training so that in addition to fighting the rising obesity among school

children, “the boy should be more like a gentleman and the girl should be more like a lady”. Parents were not happy with this and worried that the dancing couples might fall in love⁴⁰. So the revised regulation is that the dance will be in groups with each group having at least four members, two girls and two boys, to prevent a one-to-one relationship between a girl and a boy. Haitao Huang feels that this idea is based on the system of heterosexuality because it operates on the physical boundary between a man and a woman.

In terms of homosexuality, though there is no law against homosexuality in China, the main pressure comes from the family. But at the same time, in the Chinese context it was difficult to affirm sexuality. For instance, the State regulates access to information on the Internet in the name of protecting young people. It is meant to discipline young people, but actually it sets a standard for the whole society. The strategy that the group Happy Together uses is to blur the boundaries of definition when asked if it is an organisation for LGBT students or an organisation for the study of LGBT culture. The second strategy is to use the media. Media coverage sometimes results in unwanted attention from the government, but it is precisely because of this coverage that the government cannot ban the group because that would result in even more extensive media coverage.

The discussion that followed largely focussed on how parents and other adults, like teachers, may be interested in imparting accurate information on sexuality to young people but are hesitant because they have their own fears. Shashikant Mane revealed that teachers implementing the nodal teachers’ programme at school and college levels in rural areas in India carry serious reservations on account of morality and their status in the school because they fear that students will call them ‘sex teachers’. In his experience, it has been useful to share strategies and models with the relevant government authorities who then understand and approve of the need for sexuality education. Fear-based

messages (e.g., related to unwanted pregnancy) only create fear amongst the parents because they see it as an accusation that ‘your daughter will get pregnant’ and are offended by it. The message should therefore be open and clear – that young people have the right to get information on sex and sexuality. Shashikant Mane found that when he explained to the parents what would actually be taught through sexuality education, they were relieved to find that their children would receive accurate information and would not have to depend on erotic books and films to learn about sex.

Angela KugaThas said that “We can’t talk about young people and sexuality education without looking at the sexual agency of the person who is providing the education.” Many young people develop sexual desires, attraction and consciousness in schools. It is unfair to place discomfort only on the teacher – the environment and the sexual agency of people within that environment must also be considered.

Agreeing with this, Sheena Hadi said that teachers and parents are important providers of services. Parenting is a service of a sort. Removing parenting from the equation will result in relying on basic information-giving through other sources. It is the parents’ responsibility, she said, to start teaching a child by age three how to make good decisions. Neither can teachers be taken out of the equation because they are also a primary source of information and skills for children. Along with young people, parents and teachers can also be empowered. At Aahung, 50% of workshop time is spent on sensitising parents and teachers, for example through body-mapping exercises with teachers who have never thought about their own bodies, let alone the bodies of the students that they are teaching. “Trying to create that sensitisation is one area where we can start to develop the actual understanding of why there needs to be sexuality education as opposed to just throwing information on certain topics at young people which doesn’t really stick in the long run anyway”, she concluded.

Geetanjali Misra cautioned the group about using words like *well-being*, *thinking positively*, *holistic*, and *tolerance* because these are words that are also used by people who oppose comprehensive sexuality education. It might be more strategic to use words related to rights.

Giving real life examples from the TARSHI helpline, Prabha Nagaraja added that though young people are accessing information on sexuality on the Internet, they “need human beings to help them sift through that information to figure out what they need to do in their life”.

Ging Cristobal spoke about her experience with LGBT youth in the Philippines. If their child’s being lesbian, gay or transgender is accepted by the parents, there is no problem. But if it is not accepted, the teenagers are thrown out of their houses, their schooling is stopped, some are made to undergo psychological testing and even electric shock treatment. Although those younger than 18 years of age cannot be members of LeAP (because of the fear of allegations of working with minors), they are encouraged to join discussions. They are advised not to come out to their parents, especially if their parents are not supportive. “Study hard, get a job and be financially stable before you come out” they are told.

Wrapping up the session, Michael de Guzman concluded that there are different strategies that have been developed to reach young people and to affirm sexuality. The issues might be the same – like addressing access to information and services, determining the right age to provide information or determining what kind of information is appropriate for each age group in the range of 10 to 24 years – but, as times are changing, what might have been applicable years ago might not be as effective today because there are many other media for communication that have been developed. When today’s young people become adults with children growing up, they may have a different set of issues to address.



Wrapping Up

There were animated discussions at the final session of the two day consultation on Affirming Sexuality as participants sought to bring strands together and to answer questions that had been raised in earlier sessions.

In earlier sessions the discussions were based on local contexts. Given the scenario following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, it is important to also look at global issues and how they influence local events. There are common challenges that affect all, but there are particular challenges for the Muslim world as spaces for Muslims are becoming more and more cloistered. With regard to sexuality, there is an increasingly stereotyped depiction in the media and a backlash following it. For instance, the beard and the headscarf have become a matter of global debate linked to sexuality and the simplistic arguments posited are worrying as they lack nuanced local and cultural understandings.

After the unleashing of the 'War on Terror', some countries in the South and Southeast Asia region have become more averse to the issue of 'rights', leading some groups to use HIV prevention interventions as a fore-front to affirm the rights of sex workers and men who have sex with men, for example. Other creative strategies go beyond customary protests and demands which are frowned upon in some

countries. For example, transgender groups have been using performance (dance, music, beauty pageants) as a celebratory way to affirm their rights.

It is also important to look at the way global economies and trends affect other issues like migration and its consequent effect on sexuality. Global currents are changing and shaping sexualities at the local level as well as the ways in which discourses are framed.

A 'globalised' discourse often leads to the falsity of assuming that everyone is speaking the same language, whereas in fact each term has its own history. Using the language of empowerment, agency and affirmation, for example, activists think that they understand each other, but in fact these terms are understood differently in different contexts. In the Philippines empowerment would mean rescuing 'prostituted women', whereas in India, collectivising women in prostitution would be a strategy for empowerment.

A theme that ran through the consultation was that of the language used to represent issues – is it one that reduces people to being no more than suffering victims? This cuts across the way many marginalised groups are represented – people living with HIV, sexual minorities, transgendered people, sex workers, as well as women. At the concluding session, an interesting question that was raised was: What will it profit us if we start moving away from a dominant discourse of 'victimhood'? Acknowledging that victims also have agency, participants wondered if it might not be more strategic to draw attention to the constraints that particular victims face and to the structures that create them, rather than to their attempts at asserting agency. The example given to illustrate this question was that of 'prostituted women' in the Philippines. Pointing out that sex work is not a 'choice', participants also mentioned that often sex workers say that they would not like their children to become sex workers when they grow up, implying that

they had not freely chosen to engage in sex work and that it should be abolished. The response to this from several participants was that we live in a world where none of us have absolute freedom to choose. We all make choices that are circumscribed by our situations. Why is sex work singled out for abolition simply because sex workers do not want their children to become sex workers? Ask cobblers, street vegetable sellers, or construction workers if they want their children to follow their professions. They all say no, they want their children to become teachers, or doctors, or engineers. All parents want their children to climb the social ladder, but we do not recognise the equivalence and conclude that sex work should be stopped, but never that cobbling or selling vegetables on the street or doing construction work should be abolished.

Responding to the question of the advantages and disadvantages of using a victim narrative, an Indian participant said that when she goes to the US and talks to people about being lesbian, she receives immediate support and responses like, “Oh, you poor thing! How do you manage in India? It must be really difficult for you”. The truth is that because of her class privilege, she is the same person whether she is in India or the US. Without denying the existence of other lesbians who are oppressed, why is the victim story expected to precede other stories? In terms of social movements in India, anyone who is arrested receives immediate support. However, she continued, “If I say I have not been arrested, I don’t fear the threat of arrest, I just want to live my life the way I want to as a lesbian, nobody is going to come and support me.” This is the cost of aligning with victimhood – the stories of those who do not feel a sense of victimhood are negated.

Another participant pointed out that agency and victimhood are not binary opposites and people are agents and victims at the same time. If the participants at this meeting can be agents and victims at the same time in their lives and

experiences, it should not be any different for anybody else and we should refrain from invalidating the agency of so-called ‘victims’.

What is to be gained from talking about agency? People’s right to make their own choices. There is an old feminist debate around issues like beauty pageants, for instance. In the mid 90s in India, most of the women’s groups opposed beauty pageants on grounds that women’s bodies were being commodified and that the contestants who said they had a right to participate in these contests had been duped and did not know what they were choosing to do, and, finally, that what the contestants were choosing was not a real feminist option. Those arguments are no longer so common and beauty pageant contestants are not all regarded as ‘bimbettes’. The notion of choice implies that people might make choices that are unpalatable to us. If as feminists we say that women have the right to choose, we must be prepared to accept that many women might opt for an arranged marriage and many of them might choose to lead what we may regard as conventional lives.

Some of the participants argued that by promoting agency, structural factors that lead to oppression or constraints are ignored. Others claimed that that is a fallacy. For instance, sex workers, especially those who are in collectives and are asserting their agency, are aware of changing structures in a transnational context. The entire debate on trafficking (not only trafficking for sexual exploitation) and migration has to do with these larger structures. Agency does not exist in a vacuum, but by not focussing on agency, women are constantly positioned as victims. The legal campaigns in the first phase of feminism in India focused on sexual violence, which was a stark reality of many women’s lives and needed to be addressed. However, since then, women have continued to be regarded only as victims and the negative association of sexuality and violence gets fore-grounded in the context of women.

Continuing with the theme of what may be lost by using a framework of victimhood, a participant shared that currently in India, there are two campaigns around sexual rights – the campaign to read down Section 377 and the campaign for decriminalisation of sex work. There is a huge national debate on reading down Section 377, which is the law that is used to harass, intimidate, extort money from, and on occasion even arrest men who have sex with men on account of their performing ‘an unnatural offence’. She said that it is ironic that when it comes to penalising sexual harassment in universities, the first thing the committees in charge of formulating the guidelines for this say is “You are going to be really happy to know that we have included gays and lesbians in the sexual harassment guidelines”. Gays and lesbians are immediately included in the violations list but their sexuality is not acknowledged in any positive way through affirmative action. That is what they have lost in positioning themselves as victims.

On the other hand, several participants also stated that at a practical level of NGOs seeking funds, there may be a lot to be lost because some funders want to rescue ‘victims’ whether they are sex workers or HIV positive women or gays and lesbians, and therefore a positive framing of the issues of groups who undoubtedly are disadvantaged, is less likely to gain support.

The discussion also highlighted that agency and empowerment are not absolute terms and do not by themselves lead to constructive actions or positive results. Women in the Hindu Right used their agency to indulge in hate speech, kill Muslims and participate in genocide. The key questions are – Agency for what? Empowerment towards what end?

Participants concluded that there are many cross-cutting issues across the eight sub-themes linked to sexuality and discussed at this consultation – gender, religion, HIV/

AIDS, media, sex work, violence, non-conformity, and young people – that can be addressed affirmatively by using a framework of rights. Apart from the useful strategies discussed in each sub-theme, three key principles to keep in mind are:

- the principle of bodily integrity which means my body is my own.
- the principle of choice through which agency is asserted.
- the principle of equality or nondiscrimination which means that taking into consideration diversity – taking into consideration who people are, where they come from, where they are placed in different hierarchies – these principles operate equally across *all* people.

These key principles would be useful in thinking through practical ways of formulating strategies and interventions that are affirming of sexuality, other than all those discussed at the consultation. Affirming sexuality requires affirming the ways in which people come to experience sexual pleasure; it also requires that we examine and go beyond pleasure and its politics as the rich discussions during this consultation revealed.

- 1 http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.htm
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- 17 <http://www.buddhawest.org/glbtt.htm>
- 18 <http://www.gmfa.org.uk/theguide/cultural-groups/spiritual>
- 19 AVERT is an international HIV/AIDS Charity based in the UK. <http://www.avert.org/postershst.htm>
- 20 Bare backing is slang for having sex without a condom.
- 21 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4595273.stm>
<http://www.thehindu.com/2008/03/09/stories/2008030950260100.htm>
- 22 Around US Dollars 30,000. 1 US Dollar = 34 Thai Baht.
- 23 *Waria* are biological males in Indonesia who dress, act like and often pass as women. Some retain their male identity and some do not.
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- 25 http://www.pepfarwatch.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23&Itemid=37 and <http://womensphere.wordpress.com/2008/04/21/reassessing-sex-work-the-anti-prostitution-pledge-embedded-in-pepfar/>
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- 33 Incidentally, it also includes bestiality in its purview along with special sanctions if the animal is a cow.
- 34 On December 21, 2007 Nepal's Supreme Court made a historic decision by ordering the government to defend and protect LGBTI people's rights as those of 'natural people'.
- 35 Tops and bottoms refers to individuals identifying according to the position taken during sex, versatiles are open to any position.
- 36 Outrages on decency. 377 A. Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years.
- 37 In September 2007 the Singapore Parliament decided to retain Section 377 A and repealed Section 377.
- 38 <http://www.freecomchurch.org/index.htm>
- 39 <http://heartlandsg.org/about/>
- 40 <http://in.reuters.com/article/oddyEnoughNews/idINPEK18896020070608>

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ARPITA DAS is a Programme Associate at the South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality hosted by TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues) based in New Delhi, India. Prior to this, she worked with the Special Cell for Women and Children, a collaborative project between Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the Maharashtra police. She holds a Masters Degree in Social Work with a specialisation in Family and Child Welfare. At the Resource Centre, her work focuses on contributing to programmes and initiatives to enhance capacities, disseminate knowledge and further dialogue on issues of sexuality and rights within the region.

BHIMAVVA GOLLAR is a Vice President of a sex workers' collective called Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad(VAMP) in India. She has worked in the field of sex workers' rights and HIV/AIDS for the last 14 years. VAMP believes a peer education model will strengthen the sex workers' communities and will help to reduce violence. Insiders within the sex workers' communities work more effectively than outsiders to achieve these goals. (Unable to attend due to visa problems)

CHUNG TO is founder and chairperson of Chi Heng Foundation, a charitable organisation founded in 1998. Headquartered in Hong Kong, Chi Heng has four regional offices in the rest of China. Chi Heng provides education and care for children orphaned by AIDS and works on the prevention of AIDS among vulnerable groups, including MSM (men who have sex with other men), gay men, male sex workers, MSM internet users, and MSM who are HIV positive. (Was able to attend only the first session)

CRISTINA CRISTOBAL (GING) is a member of Lesbian Advocates Philippines (LeAP!), Inc. and is also a member of the Ang LADLAD LGBT party list. She facilitates workshops and discussions on gender and sexuality, lesbian rights and basic lesbian sexual health and safer sex.

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JULIA I. SURYAKUSUMA is an independent scholar, columnist, author, women's rights and democracy activist and public lecturer. She has regular fortnightly columns in *The Jakarta Post* and English-language *TEMPO*, and is the author of *Sex, Power and Nation* (Metafor, 2004), and *Julia's Jihad* (forthcoming). In 1991 she was guest-editor of *Prisma* (a social science journal) on 'Sex in the Web of Power'. Her work on gender and sexuality is pioneering, and opened a new field of study previously unknown in Indonesia.

KHARTINI SLAMAH is the Coordinator, Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW). She says, 'I am a transgender from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I have been involved with HIV/AIDS work for the past 19 years. I am also an advocate for Transgenders and Sex Workers' rights.'

LIZ HILTON is a long term member of the Empower family. She has worked with Empower for 15 years and also has a background in women's health. She is based in Chiang Mai.

MICHAEL P. DE GUZMAN (MIKE), an avowed and active advocate of HIV prevention and control, is a nurse by profession and a writer and project developer by inclination. He has written a number of programmatic documents on HIV/AIDS, AIDS and migration, and Reproductive Health in the Philippines and in Cambodia. The empowerment of sexual minorities, specifically MSM, is his special interest. In Cambodia, he has contributed to strengthening the HIV prevention work of MSM groups and NGOs, including addressing the human rights dimensions of working with MSM through the development of modules for sensitising communities to the issues and needs of Cambodian MSM.

MOAMMAR EMKA is an entertainment journalist and a familiar face on

the celebrity circuit in Indonesia. He is a freelance writer and columnist for many of Indonesia's most popular magazines and newspapers. The subject matter of Emka's journalism is all the more unusual due to his background growing up in and receiving his education at Islamic religious schools. He has published many books, such as *Jakarta Undercover 1* (Sex and the City), *Jakarta Undercover 2* (Night Carnival), *Jakarta Undercover 3* (Forbidden City), *In Bed with Models*, etc. His film, *Jakarta Undercover* was released in April 2007.

NINUK WIDYANTORO is a psychologist working in the area of health – especially Women's Health since 1980. Since 2001 her attention has focussed on advocacy work to issue a new health law that will protect people's sexual and reproductive health and rights, and community empowerment including the empowerment of LGBT groups. 'Not young anymore, so I want to combine serious professional work with leisure and pleasure', she says.

PORNPIT PUCKMAI (PORN) has been a leader in Empower for 10 years and is the coordinator of the Empower Chiang Mai centre. The National Human Rights Commission of Thailand awarded her the first annual human rights award for defending the rights of women in 2005 in recognition of her work towards securing equal rights for sex workers.

PRABHA NAGARAJA has been with TARSHI since its inception (1996). As Manager, Programmes she has been involved with training and supervision of staff on the TARSHI helpline, conducting trainings on sexuality, reproductive and sexual health and rights, and developing publications on sexuality related issues for diverse audiences. She has a Master's Degree in Child Development from Delhi University and has worked with children with disabilities as a service provider as well as an advocate for rights of children with disabilities prior to joining TARSHI.

PRAMADA MENON, co-Founder and Director Programs of CREA, has worked in the development sector in India for over two decades as a women's rights activist. Her work has focussed on issues of sexuality and sexual rights, livelihoods, gender and development, violence against women and organisational development. She was the Executive Director of Dastkar, an NGO working to ensure sustainable livelihoods for traditional craftspeople in India. She is on the Board of Directors of several non-profit organisations in India including Dastkar, Janani and the North East Network and is on the Advisory Council of the Global Fund for Women.

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SHAMA DOSSA is a faculty member at the Department of Community Health Sciences (CHS), Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan. She is presently pursuing her doctoral studies at the University of Toronto in Adult Education and Community Development. Her present research interests include issues of health equity, reproductive health and rights, advocacy, action research, medical anthropology, feminist research and transformative adult learning methodology in community settings. She is affiliated with the People's Health Movement (PHM) and the Pakistan Reproductive Health Network (PRHN) and is part of the CHS Gender & Equity Research Interest Group.

SHASHIKANT MANE is working in the field of HIV/AIDS and human rights with sex workers and rural women in Maharashtra, India. He believes that rural women need more training and knowledge about human rights so that they will fight against violence.

SHEENA HADI is the Life Skills Education Manager at Aahung in Karachi, Pakistan. She has previous experience teaching advanced biology and while at Aahung, has been training for nearly four years on issues of sexual health and rights, primarily with teachers, community organisations working with youth, and adolescents. The objective of the life skills programme at Aahung is to equip young people with necessary skills and age-appropriate information, in order to empower them to have a healthy sexuality. Through the use of a learner-centered teaching methodology,

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The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality is hosted at TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues). The Resource Centre aims to increase knowledge and scholarship on issues of sexuality, sexual health and sexual well being in this region. It specifically focuses on sexuality related work in China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam. The Resource Centre has developed a range of programmes to enhance scholarship, increase access to information, and further dialogue on sexuality issues.

TARSHI believes that all people have the right to sexual well being and to a self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality. TARSHI works towards expanding sexual and reproductive choices in people's lives in an effort to enable them to enjoy lives of dignity, freedom from fear, infection and reproductive and sexual health problems. TARSHI runs a phone helpline, conducts trainings and institutes, develops publications, participates in public awareness and education initiatives, and provides technical support to advocacy initiatives. For more information, please visit www.tarshi.net