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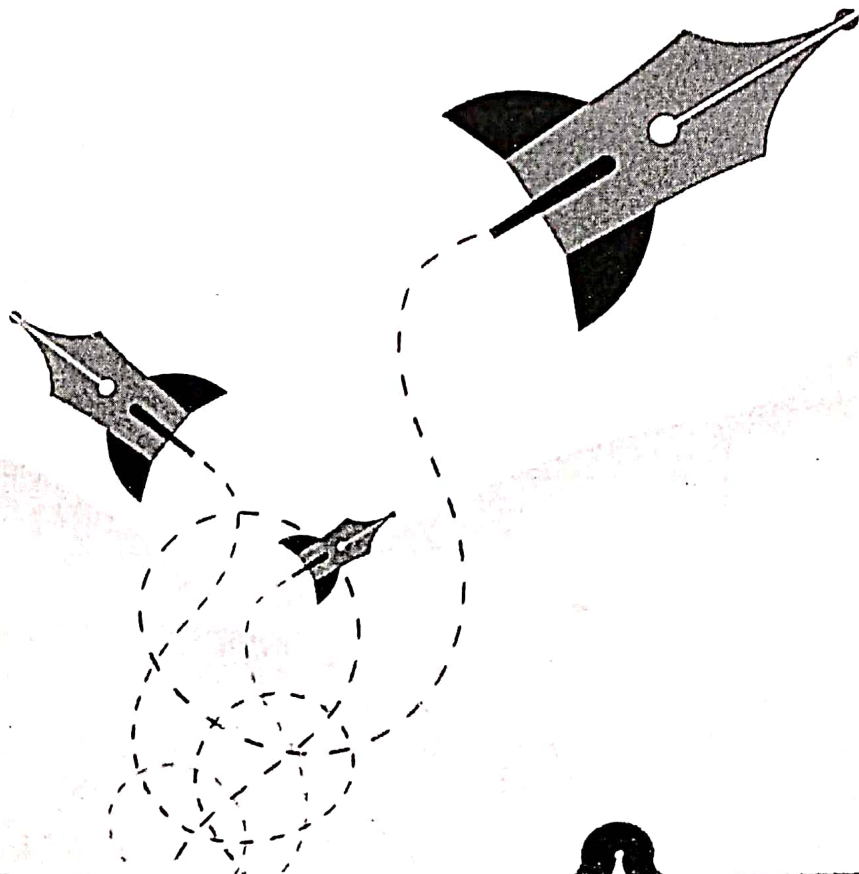
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A STUDY OF REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH EDUCATION AMONG WOMEN

Dr. Nalini Meera

ABSTRACT

The reproductive rights of women means the right of women to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health and at the same time achieving full participation in the social and economic life. Reproductive rights assure equality of relationship between men and women, respect for the integrity of the person, consent and responsibility for the sexual behavior and its consequences. The issue of right to reproductive health especially abortion, takes on special significance in the Indian context as various national and international stakeholders struggle to bring meaning to the important concepts of women empowerment, rights and choices. It is true that without breaking the barriers of cultural values and religious belief the achievement of reproductive rights as a basic right of women is impossible. In India, there has been neglect on the health of women especially reproductive health of women. There is a need for the serious look in the current health policies, programs and laws in India.

Keywords: Reproductive rights, equality, reproduction, sexuality, health care

Introduction

Reproductive Rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international laws and international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic rights of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes the right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents.

The reproductive rights of women means the right of women to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health and at the same time achieving full participation in the social and economic life. Reproductive rights also mean a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters and to its

processes. It includes various rights of women such as - right to abortion, right to make her own decision regarding her body and her reproductive life, right to sex, right to procreation and to have family etc. Reproductive right implies that the people are able to have satisfying and safe sex and that they have capacity to reproduce and the freedom to take decisions as to when and how often to do so. It also impliedly provides the right to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice as well as other methods of their choice for the regulation of fertility and the right to access appropriate health facilities that help women to have pregnancy and childbirth in a safe and hygienic condition and also help a couple to have a healthy child. Reproductive rights assure equality of relationship between men and women, respect for the integrity of the person, consent and responsibility for the sexual behavior and its consequences. Thus, reproductive right is the ability of women to control her body and to enjoy all other

rights including equality of men and women, right to free choice in matters of reproduction and sexuality and healthcare.

Historical Background of Reproductive Rights of Women

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) are international consensus agreements that strongly support gender equality and women's empowerment. In particular, the ICPD and FWCW documents, drawing on human rights agreements, clearly articulate the concepts of sexual and reproductive rights. Thus the reproductive rights were established as a subset of the human rights at the United Nations 1968 international conference on human rights.

From the mid-nineteenth century, feminist and social activists advocated for the right to reproductive choice as a basis of women's freedom. A reproductive right, no doubt, touches the sensitive issues of the rights of women and their autonomy. In all the liberal societies reproductive rights has been recognized as a part of human rights. The concept of reproductive rights comes from International endeavour. The first time when reproductive right was clearly mentioned was in Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1979). At Alma Ata Conference in USSR in 1978, primary health care was exclusively discussed and access to family planning, maternal and child health care was accepted as basic human rights. The Final Document of the Teran Conference on Human Rights, 1968, provides the "basic human right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of children and the right to adequate education and information in this respect." The Cairo Program further expanded the concept of reproductive rights as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being." The infant concept of reproductive rights matured with the Beijing Platform where it was held that "the reproductive health to women's rights means to have control over matters relating to their sexuality free of coercion, discrimination and violence." Moreover, the Convention on the

Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides "the obligation to ensure the full development and advancement of women for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights where men and women have equal rights". India is also a signatory country to the International Conference on Population and Development, 1994, and has determined to establish standards in family planning services including the right to reproductive autonomy and collective gender equality. The ability of women to control their own fertility is an essential criterion to enjoy all other rights and lays down the foundation for the equality between men and women.

Meaning of Reproductive Rights

The WHO defines reproductive rights as follows: "Reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have information to do so, and right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence."

Reproductive rights include the following aspects :

1. Right to legal or safe abortion.
2. Right to control ones reproductive functions.
3. Right to access in order to make reproductive choices free of coercion, discrimination and violence.
4. Right to access education about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases and freedom from coerced sterilization and contraception.
5. Right to protect from gender based practices such as female genital cutting and male genital mutilation.
6. Right to health, Reproductive health and family planning.
7. Right to decide the number and spacing of children.
8. Right to be free from gender discrimination.
9. Right to be free from sexual assault and exploitation
10. Right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel.

11. inhuman or degrading treatment.
12. Right to life, liberty and security.
13. Right to privacy
13. Right to modify customs that discriminate against women.
14. Right to enjoy scientific progress and to consent to experimentation.

Understanding Reproductive Rights in Indian Context:

India, as a signatory to the International Conference on Population and Development, 1994, has committed itself to ethical and professional standards in family planning services, including the right to personal reproductive autonomy and collective gender equality. The National Population Policy, 2000, affirms the right to voluntary and informed choice in matters related to contraception. The issue of right to reproductive health especially abortion, takes on special significance in the Indian context as various national and international stakeholders struggle to bring meaning to the important concepts of women empowerment, rights and choices. The Indian setting combines a number of apparent contradictions in how family planning and abortion policy is set; how services are delivered; how demographic trends and desires about family size and composition shape the demand for contraception and abortion; and the social context defines the pressures, constraints and options for women's reproductive behavior.

Reproductive health and right to reproductive health is not only women issue it is a family health and social issue. The ultimate aim of the right to reproduction is well being of the family and individuals. At the same time it becomes the responsibility of the governments to give quality reproductive health care and protect the individual reproductive rights while being sensitive to local and cultural issues.

In India, there is: a) high incidence of marriage and pregnancy amongst adolescents, b) high maternal and child mortality, c) high levels of coercive and violent sexual behaviours; coupled with critically poor reproductive health education in schools. There is also a problem of girls being widely seen as inferior to boys and

having low self-esteem, with associated problems of high probability of dropping out of school, marginalisation in household decision making and in local and national politics, poor livelihood outcomes, and poor mental health.

There is health programmes – such as NRHM National Family Welfare Programme, National Family Health Survey, Integrated Child Development Services (1975), Reproductive and Child Health Programme (1996) etc. that has been launched for providing health care measures and awareness among women and girl child. But these programmes fail to focus on the issues of reproductive health of women. There is a need to deal with the issues of reproductive health of women by reshaping the health programmes and laws according to the reproductive health needs of women in India. The reproductive health ensures that people have the capacity to reproduce and to undergo pregnancy and child birth safely. It further, provides that in case of any gynecological or other disorder there has to be facility for the medical services. The state must provide such condition where every individual enjoy reproductive right and more so by women because reproduction mostly affects women's life.

The concept of women's right and their struggle for equal status in the society is incomplete without understanding their need for the decision making in every field whether it is relating to their education, career, marriage or procreation. They must be assured right to take decision in their life and reproductive right is an asset for the women to achieve this goal. There is no second thought that women are facing many injustices and inequalities globally, both in terms of protection and promotion of their rights. The most ignored part of this fact is their health. This fact points out that there is a need for a specific focus on women's health issues. Moreover, women suffer health issue generally because of their ability to reproduce. For this reason, when we talk about women's right it is important to focus on the reproductive health of women as right of women is incomplete without recognizing reproductive rights of women. Women's reproductive right can become an important instrument to change the status of women in the society.

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A focus on the health needs of women, their nutritional status, the risk of early marriage and child bearing is sensitive issue of concern and require urgent attention if condition of women has to be improved. At the same time, there is a need to provide health care information to the grass root level through awareness programme in the large scale. Moreover, there is a need for the proper legal framework to address and recognize the promotion and protection of reproductive rights of women in India. There is no doubt that the reproductive right is the basic foundation of all other rights of woman and is inalienable and inseparable from basic human rights. The reproductive rights are directly or indirectly derived from basic human rights and are the part of human rights. It is true that without breaking the barriers of cultural values and religious belief the achievement of reproductive rights as a basic right of women is impossible. The inclusion of reproductive rights under international human rights is a major gain. But there is still a constant effort to recognize reproductive rights in domestic scenario. The freedom and progress of women's status in the society is not possible without recognizing reproductive rights as basic right of women. Reproductive health of women is integral part of women's life and rights and freedom of women is meaningless without having reproductive rights of women. The right to life, right to privacy, right to health etc. is incomplete without having reproductive right. In India, there has been neglect on the health of women especially reproductive health of women. There is a need for the serious look in the current health policies, programs and laws in India. The health policies and programs have to be shifted from demographic target to much wider perspective. The health issues should cover the reproductive health needs of women and the services they require for the purpose.

Health awareness programmes should be made with more result oriented scheme. There is a urge to have legislation as Reproductive Rights (Protection) Act in order to protect and promote reproductive rights of women and to look after all the issues of reproductive health of women whether it is as regard to providing medical facilities or creating awareness or having health policies and programmes concerning women. Reproductive right is to be placed in a central point in the priority of government in order to promote the status of women and to protect her rights.

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