

"WOMEN'S HEALTH IS WOMEN'S CONCERN"

A Brief Overview of Health Issues in the Women's Movement

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Women's health status is closely linked to their social status. Even though the 'ideal' woman is supposed to look weak and delicate, she has to be able to perform all the domestic tasks necessary for the sustenance of the family. Her major role in society is that of a reproductive machine. The feminist movement aims at uniting women to raise their voices against the oppression of these stereotypes. Logically then, health issues concerning women must form an integral part of the women's movement. Why has the movement been generally apathetic to health issues? The author, a feminist-activist, briefly reviews the sporadic activities concerning women's health and strongly urges that women's health issues should preferably be taken up by women's groups.

All of us have a right to good health. The right to health means not only the right to be free from disease, but also to enjoy physical, mental and emotional well-being. Health cannot be separated from political, cultural or economic systems in which we are living. It cannot be isolated from the roles we are playing and the status we have in society.

My grandmother often used to tell us 'Beti, a woman cannot afford sickness. If she does fall sick then she can't complain, but has to bear her illness silently; for who will tolerate a sick-slave?'. Many of us have experienced this truth in our own lives or through those of our mothers, grandmothers.

Although it is true that in economically poor classes even the men do not get proper medical aid in sickness, it is the women who are the more neglected group. In fact, even among the economically better off, where it is possible for women to afford good care and proper food, they are found to be weak, or rather not as healthy as they could be. This is because of cultural influences. According to the ideal image of women perpetuated in society, a woman is supposed to be weak and delicate. A 'strong' woman thus becomes, in a sense, the victim of cultural norms. Women are traditionally supposed to eat only after the rest of the family members have eaten and then only what has been left over, even though in poor families it is hardly ever sufficient to keep body and soul together. It will not be an exaggeration to say that she ever gets sufficient rest only on her deathbed.

Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding, menopause, all these are considered to be 'women's issues'. In a way society at large has nothing to do with them, because women are not equal members of the society and therefore, complaints about these are treated as, 'psychological' or as 'women's sickness' and are not given the serious

consideration they deserve. Doctors and medical professionals produced in this male-dominated society are taught to either close their eyes and ears to such complaints or to immediately connect all women's complaints to their reproductive system. A woman is looked upon as a mere reproductive machine rather than as a human being. Politically also, it is the world-wide phenomenon, that all drives for population control or population increase, breast-feeding or the baby foods campaign have treated women as reproductive machines. Nowhere have these issues been treated in a manner where women's 'health' is given central importance.

In order to understand the location of women's health-issues in the context of feminist movements, it is necessary to broadly define feminism and the feminist movement. Feminism is a new concept in India, a concept not yet well-accepted or understood by the people at large. Broadly speaking one can say that feminism deals with all the aspects of a woman's life and her role in society - - male dominated society. Feminists are interested in changing a hierarchical society and in creating a society where everybody is equal. In today's society, women are at the bottom of the hierarchical structure. In any class, caste or race, whatever their status, women among them are always at the bottom.

No doubt women of the upper classes have more facilities and opportunities than the lower class males, but in their own class they are the least important. Not only that, but because they are women any man from any class can express his superiority as a male member of the patriarchal society. One example is rape.

So the main role of the feminist movement is to unite women to raise their voices against their oppression in a male-dominated society. In her family life, work place, place of education and in all

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the aspects of her life, women have a lower status than men. In our health systems too, the status of women is only as a reproductive machine.

In India, we cannot say that there exists any mass feminist movement. But at the same time it is a fact that there are several women's groups--feminist groups--who are involved in activities in various areas of women's oppression such as rape, wife-beating, legal reforms and so on. Their activities range from cultural activities to agitational marches and 'helping' individual women in distress to fight for their rights and the common cause.

But none of these groups have as yet taken health as the prime issue and worked on it. Many of them have touched on one or the other aspect of the issue at some point of time. But there has been no consistency shown regarding the health issues of women. This is because of various reasons which are rooted in our outlook (such as the cultural and social stigma attached to the discussion of women's problems about their bodies.) Many feminists have inhibitions which do not allow them to freely discuss these issues among themselves.

Some groups have made an attempt to raise their voices against oppression through medical systems. For instance, the Women's Centre in Bombay held a meeting with other feminist groups to discuss the effects of "amniocentesis" as a sex-determination test, which gave rise to demands and concerted action in Bombay. Two of these demands were: (1) Amniocentesis facilities should be allowed only in research institutions with proper machinery and control; (2) The government and the medical profession should be brought under pressure to abolish pre-natal sex-determination. It was pointed out that unless and until major social upheaval takes place regarding the status of women in society, female babies will continue to be murdered. (See article on Amniocentesis.)

Recently, another meeting was held by the Women's Centre to discuss the issue of Depo-provera, the controversial injectable contraceptive. Womens magazines - feminist ones such as *Baija* (in Marathi) and *Manushi* (in Hindi and English)

have given importance to the health and reproductive activity of women by bringing out special issues on the subject. *Baija's* special issue was on women and health in which the whole problem had been discussed from the feminist point of view.

Organisations which are working in health such as the People's Science Movement, Medico Friend Circle (MFC) have also touched on the women's health problems. The Lok Vidyan Sanghatana, Maharashtra, had prepared an exhibition on women and health which received a tremendous response from various women's groups as well as others working among the toiling masses. This was the first attempt made to discuss the woman's body and her health, reproduction and social biases about it. The exhibition was taken to many villages and it was a thrilling experience to find that women are able to relate to one another while discussing their experiences about their bodies from menstruation to menopause. They were all encouraged by the fact that as women, irrespective of educational status, caste or class background, they have gone through the same experiences and feelings of inferiority because of their physiology. The explanations we had received were shrouded in myth and the actual scientific explanation of the various functions that a woman's body has to perform had been denied us.

The exhibition criticises the social outlook and stigmas attached to the female sex in society and superstitions about women's bodies and child bearing especially with regard to producing male children. Mainly the posters about sex-determination and about fertility, entitled "Who is responsible for not getting a child?" have made a great impact and have very positively put forward the view that a woman is not wholly, nor mainly responsible. The exhibition emphatically argues that a woman is not merely a reproductive machine. In adivasi areas as well as urban areas like Bombay, Nasik, Pune, Miraj the exhibition attracted large numbers of women.

This exhibition was shown by women and only to women. It is only in this situation that women can become vocal about their problems. It is very important to realise that women can relate only to other women when it comes to health and their bodies because only women can truly understand one another's problems. I feel very strongly that women's organisation mainly should handle the issue of women and health, as male activists, although sincerely interested in understanding the problems, are not able to evolve a movement or even a group around the subject.

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At Anand the MFC held an annual meeting in 1983 where many women were called from various groups which were interested in women and health. Majority of the women, who were educated and were working in one or other organisation found it difficult to discuss their problems in the meeting when men were present as even with the desire and sincerity to understand the problems, male participants were unable to understand the intense emotional severity of the problem. At the session where only women were present, there was a live discussion and a free exchange of experiences.

Here I do not intend to devalue the male-activists, who are really helping to raise the voice of women against the medical oppression of women. MFC activists have brought out various articles and debates on the problem. Peoples Science Movement groups have made attempts to make people aware through health exhibitions, the posters and pamphlets on Anaemia. In both the organisations, it is mainly women activists with the help of male activists who have worked very hard for it.

We can conclude that women's organisations should take prime responsibility about the women's health issues, and other organisations in the health area can help them in a number of ways. With this mutual co-operation, one can hope for a strong women's health movement.

The Women's Centre in Bombay is planning to start some health activities. They will be mainly (1) Educational - making women aware of their body and its functions, to help them to tackle the social prejudices and superstitions and to create a healthy outlook about themselves; (2) Preventive; and (3) Curative - With the help of sympathetic medical professionals to help women in preventing and curing health disorders.

Most of us have very little control over the health care system, very little say in the decisions as to what kind of health care is available to us. Women perhaps, are most affected by the health care system

or the lack of it. In all phases of our lives, we face difficulties and become the victims of health care system. As potential mothers, as mothers, as housewives, as consumers in order to keep ourselves in accordance with the beauty norms of the society, women are either neglected or misguided by the health care system. To raise our voices against this, women's groups should start (and are actually starting) to organise around health issues. Only this can lead to a strong and united fight against all sorts of oppression in male-dominated society.

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