

A Women's Best Friend

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MASUM, a women's health centre in Saswad, Maharashtra, promotes women's sexual health in the widest sense. It teaches women to explore and learn about their own bodies, and educates them about STDs, AIDS, depression, contraception and sexual exploitation

A few kilometers outside the lush greenery of Pune, the drought belt starts. The arid landscape is dotted with remnants of farming communities eking out an existence from the parched soil. Most men have long since left to seek work in urban centres such as Mumbai, returning home every few months with some of their meagre earnings.

In recent years, local men have been contracting HIV in the big cities and bringing the virus back to their villages, where they have sex with their wives and other partners. Few people in the area know that they are HIV-positive and even fewer have developed AIDS, but the virus has almost certainly penetrated into many communities already. It is now only a matter of time before HIV infection and AIDS emerge as major health and social problems.

The Feminist Health Centre

In the heart of this seemingly backward area, a narrow dirt road winds its way to the collection of tumbledown mud huts that form the village of Saswad. Outside one mud hut an incongruous-looking sign announces the presence of the Streewadi Arogya Kendra - the Feminist Health Centre. Inside, a nurse and a village health-worker are busy tending to the local women's health problems. Twice a week, a gynaecologist and a counsellor are also in attendance. Most of the women have gynaecological complaints such as vaginitis, white discharge and pelvic inflammatory diseases, along with more general problems such as depression.

The Centre was established in February 1994 by MASUM, the Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (Rural Women's Association), which grew out of an action research project sponsored by the Indian Council of Medical Research. Founded in 1987 at the request of local women, MASUM aims to identify the

various forms of exploitation and abuse faced by women, and to help them organise themselves to deal with these problems.

The women using the Feminist Health Centre earn barely enough to feed their families from their small plots of land and part-time work on other farms. Most belong to oppressed castes and minority religions, and are plagued by problems such as alcoholism among local men, and sexual exploitation within the home and community. Many young women are unable to refuse the sexual advances of fathers-in-law or brother-in-law. Sexual abuse of young girls is also common and many mothers are silent witnesses to this form of exploitation. Although there is no organised prostitution in the area, some women sell sex on an occasional basis.

The Centre educates women about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), which are fairly common, and also provides basic treatment for these infections. Women requiring further diagnostic tests and more specialist care are encouraged to visit primary health centres or hospitals. Some women also bring their husbands to receive information and treatment for STDs. In addition, the Centre provides a range of allopathic medicines and herbal remedies for common ailments, and dispenses condoms to couples and individual women. All clinical examinations, information, medicines and condoms provided by the Centre are free of charge.

Sexual Health

MASUM aims to promote women's sexual health in the widest sense. The Centre provides women with basic sex education and helps them to understand different sexual practices. With guidance from the nurse, each woman examines her own genitals with a speculum and a mirror. Women also learn how they can protect themselves from STDs through condom use and non-penetrative sex. "The aim," says Manisha Gupte, chairperson of MASUM, "is to help women define their own sexuality from a woman's point of view, and help them realise that there are safer ways of enjoying sex."

Women are encouraged to talk about their sexuality, to place their ailments in the context of their domestic and working lives, and also to relate their physical problems to their emotions and feelings. Small groups of women with similar physical, sexual and emotional problems meet at the Centre to share their experiences of ill health and sexuality with one another. Only rarely are they reluctant to talk frankly with one another about sex. Groups of women perform role-plays about the various forms of sexual and economic exploitation, which they and their daughters face in their daily lives.

Groups of adolescent girls also meet to discuss issues related to reproduction, sexuality and self-assertion. Young girls who have suffered sexual abuse, usually within the home, are offered counselling and emotional support.

HIV and AIDS: An Invisible Threat

The women's close contact, through their menfolk, with Mumbai has made them aware of the huge but largely invisible threat posed by HIV to their own health and survival. Women sometimes come to the Feminist Health Centre to ask for an HIV test. MASUM does not actively promote HIV-testing, but women wishing to know their HIV status are offered counselling and are informed about places where they can have an HIV test carried out. MASUM's message is that everyone, regardless of whether or not they are HIV-positive, needs to behave responsibly - not only to avoid becoming infected, but also to avoid passing HIV and other STDs on to others.

Media reports have already created a widespread fear of AIDS throughout the region, creating a social climate in which people infected with HIV are likely to suffer stigmatisation and rejection. MASUM encourages nondiscrimination and support for people with HIV and their families. When cases of HIV infection and AIDS start appearing in local communities, the women will be able to make an informed, compassionate response.

Most importantly, MASUM does not treat HIV/AIDS as a separate issue, but as a health, social and economic problem caused by double standards in sexuality: "The problem," says Manisha Gupte, "is to do with how we have constructed sexuality. If we were able to manage our relationships more openly, more honestly, if sex wasn't bought and sold in the markets; if sex wasn't coerced... There is a total lack of concern for women's sexual and reproductive rights, and I think that AIDS is a symptom of that problem."

It is no easy matter for women to negotiate with their husbands safer sexual behaviour. In practice, women find it extremely difficult even to discuss sex with their husbands, let alone persuade them to adopt safer practices such as the use of condoms (except perhaps as a method of contraception).

The threat of HIV and AIDS has led MASUM to change the emphasis in the way sexual issues are discussed. In the past, according to MASUM, too much emphasis was placed on women as the hapless victims of sexual abuse and exploitation by men, thus reinforcing their feelings of helplessness. MASUM now encourages women to insist on their sexual rights within the family and the wider community, and to negotiate with their sexual partners about the most appropriate and safest forms of sexual behaviour. MASUM encourages women

to be assertive (without being aggressive), not submissive in the face of male exploitation and abuse. Says Manisha Gupte: "The major emphasis in all our activities is on creating assertive women, and all our projects are a means to that end."

Development Programmes

MASUM now works among women from the poorest households in nearly 30 villages. All its programmes are aimed at helping women overcome social, economic and sexual exploitation. A Savings and Credit Scheme makes loans to women not considered credit-worthy by banks, who otherwise would have to borrow money from moneylenders at crippling interest rates. A handloom centre and two tailoring courses provide groups of women with a regular source of income.

MASUM also holds monthly meetings with the women, some of whom are accompanied by their husbands, to discuss issues such as changes in economic and agricultural policies that will affect their lives. Such issues include, for example, the effects of patenting seeds and medicines by international corporations. Women also learn about how the government is structured and how it functions, how elections are held, and their voting rights.

Once a month, 25 college students come from Pune and work as volunteers for MASUM, for example, by conducting slide shows on sexual and reproductive health for groups of women. The volunteers also help women to defend their human rights, for example, by filing court cases on behalf of women who have suffered sexual violence from men.

In the village of Malshiras, about two hours drive from the Health Centre in Saswad, MASUM runs a Rational Drugs Counter, the Lokseva Aushadhalay, which sells basic drugs under their generic names. Prices are kept low - about one-fifth of the market price. Condoms are also distributed free. Attached to the drugs counter is a Pregnancy Care Centre, which helps women to prepare for childbirth; traditional birth attendants and teachers from children's day care centres are also trained in reproductive health and safe, aseptic techniques of delivering babies.

Alcohol is part of village life and its misuse often leads to the sexual exploitation of the women, exposing them to the risk of STDs including HIV infection. Over-consumption of alcohol also destroys the economic base of the household, forcing women to turn to prostitution and to risk becoming infected with HIV. To counter this problem, MASUM members organised a complete ban on the sale of alcohol in their villages for a period of three years. However, when

campaigning for elections started, the candidates and party members started selling alcohol again and sales have continued since.

Whenever the occasion arises, groups of women from MASUM also organise hunger strikes, protest marches and public meetings in support of particular causes, for example, in favour of better pay for women farm labourers, and against sexual molestation of women working in the fields. These activities have not endeared MASUM to local landowners who view the new assertiveness of local women as a threat to their interests.

All these activities are run by local women themselves, supported by a 10-member executive committee consisting of local people (including MASUM staff).

None of MASUM's running costs are funded by foreign donor agencies. The handloom unit and tailoring courses are funded from the sales of the products they make and by the State government. The Savings and Credit Scheme was started with a donation from a private company in Mumbai. Income from the scheme supports the Drug Counter, the Pregnancy Care Centre and the Feminist Health Centre.

Changes in Attitudes

Despite the many difficulties they face, the women of MASUM are starting to have an influence on community attitudes. One positive sign is the emergence of a group of local young men who perform street plays about the problems of deserted women, violence against women, illiteracy and (most recently) AIDS. In 1994 the group won first prize from the Indian Health Organisation for a powerful play about HIV and AIDS.

"We asked ourselves", says Vasanth, a member of the street theatre group, "what was new about AIDS. We felt it was the hysteria, the putting of people into different categories and saying that they had this or that bad habit. So we decided to write a play which would speak about that" "

Despite winning the prize for their play, the group felt dissatisfied:

"We felt happy about winning the prize, but had we really helped anyone with AIDS? We didn't want to just cash in on other people's sorrow. So we decided to improve our own social consciousness," explains Vasanth.

The group visited a drug de-addiction centre to understand the problems surrounding drug addiction, and then spent a day with a group of prostitutes,

trying to understand the difficulties in the environment in which they work. The next day they spent with AIDS patients in a hospital in Bombay.

"That helped us to understand the people we were talking about in the play," says Vasanth. "In the end, those people are more important than the prize we won. Now we feel closer to understanding AIDS from the inside."

To avoid adverse reactions from the villagers, the performers do not hand out condoms at their performances, but encourage their audiences to ask for them from MASUM staff and government health facilities. They plan to distribute condoms, however, when HIV/AIDS is a less controversial issue.

Since MASUM started almost a decade ago, its members have been able to initiate and sustain a sometimes painstaking process of social and economic development among rural communities. Their activities are helping to promote new attitudes and forms of behaviour leading to a social environment in which women are more assertive, and less open to exploitation and abuse. In this new environment, women are also becoming less vulnerable to HIV, because they are gaining greater power to choose and to insist on safer sexual behaviour.