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When Sexuality is Violence

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Violence and sexuality share a circular relationship: violence not only sets the parameters of individuals sexuality, it also affects their sexual persona and makes sexuality a space of fear and shame.

Our notions of sexuality are moulded by the many influences in our lives. In the realm of poetry and literature - from Rumi to Byron to Margaret Mitchell - it is a spell of love and passion that mere language is poverty stricken to capture. Evolutionary biology sees sex as the most basic form of survival, from a smoking, lonely planet four billion years ago to the present day. Modern-day advertising negotiates sexuality within the parameters of economics. Medicine defines sexuality as an exquisitely orchestrated dance of hormones and organs. And art still hasn't worked out its connection with life, leave alone sexuality. So its understandable why defining sexuality is such a difficult task.

Though the body is the most obvious, mistakenly thought to be the only, vehicle of sexuality, it exists in many different forms. Sexuality is also a social construct that takes on the form and shape that a given society dictates, incorporating the social, religious, political, economic, and cultural history of that society. Sexuality is such an intrinsic core that it is present in every part of the individual identity such as sexual knowledge, sexual acts and partnerships, fantasy and desire, guilt and shame, culture and religion, imaging and repression, the mind and gender, violence and surrender. In working on sexuality, it becomes important to acknowledge the multifarious influences on an individual and recognize all aspects of the sexual persona, however 'immoral' or 'bizarre' they may appear to be. Understanding human sexuality in the framework described below is based on counseling and workshops conducted by IFSHA, a Delhi-based NGO. Our perspective on sexuality considers the individual's life cycle, looking at the different factors affecting his/her life.

How an individual is sexualized or becomes a sexual being incorporates these dimensions of sexuality. The process of sexualization takes on a distinct pattern for men and women, who experience similar and different situations that are processed different because of the socio-cultural co-ordinates of gender.

The experience of child sexual abuse, for example, is perhaps the first instance of the interplay of sexuality and violence.

Child sexual abuse

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult. NGO research demonstrates that it is a pervasive phenomenon in Indian society with a prevalence rate of approximately 55-60 percent (Sakshi 1994; Samvada, 1994; RAHI, 1998), often occurring within the supposedly safe confines of the family. Both boys and girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse. CSA leads to feelings of guilt, shame and, above all, silence. CSA is a child's introduction to sexuality, one that creates a warped sense of self, body image, and body boundaries that lasts through adulthood, and links connotations of parent/provider and trust/affection with fear/ aggression/exploitation. There is no language or rationale that a child can find to make sense of sexual abuse. So the mind begins on a journey of creating masks and fences to give some 'acceptable' form to the terror within, leading to a number of complex issues in adulthood.

Women survivors find that sexual relationships in adulthood follow a pattern that was set at the time of abuse, creating distorted sexual dynamics and needs, often struggling to find a hold on the 'normalcy' that society prescribes. Our experience of counseling with CSA survivors shows that women survivors generally either fall into a pattern of avoidance or fear of sex and sexual intimacy, or begin to use sexual relationships as a search for comfort and intimacy. The latter leads to the survivor entering multiple sexual relationships which are often abusive, earning her the label 'promiscuous'; the message left by CSA is that sex is a violent act that only intimate relationships provide. Therefore, adult survivors of CSA commonly experience rape fantasies. Warped though this might sound, it is the reality of a legacy of shame and silence that women survivors grapple with.

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The reality of male child sexual abuse is under-identified, under-recognized and misunderstood, and is generally determined by a constellation of myths and beliefs about what it means to be male or female. Male socialization as unemotional and powerful prevents boys from expressing their fear and pain in an emotional form that is 'reserved' for girls, leading to their outlet in behaviours expected of men, such as aggression.

Adolescence

Further on into puberty and adolescence, there is a lack of information and communication about the body and physiological changes, which are a breeding ground for myths and misconceptions that make sexuality seem more mysterious and taboo than it should be. In a young girl, the onset of menstruation paints the female body as a site of shame and uncleanness, leading to a divorce from a healthy relationship with the body. Virginity becomes her dogma; the family's honour lies locked in her body and any deviation from this norm, be it sexual violence or harmless exploration, is tantamount to a loss of this honour. She realizes that sexual violence becomes her responsibility despite the outrage and anger it brings.

The representation of women as either good girls' or 'sluts' is firmly rooted in our collective unconscious, an image that both men and women call on to shape our morality stances. Masturbation is virtually unheard of for a girl, and unlike with men and boys, adult women never learn about their body and the pleasure it can give. For a young woman, sexuality becomes more about silence and pain than pleasure. Puberty in boys is similarly met with shame and fear. Wet dreams are a constant embarrassing reminder of the mystery of the body's workings; the body metamorphoses, leaving the helpless adolescent straddling childhood and adulthood in a confusing psychological limbo.

Imaging

Young people learn sexual scripts by recording images of sexual roles and expectations. Media representations and adult models are the most common guides to these sexual scripts. What an adolescent learns becomes the template upon which he/she will conduct adult sexual relationships, and create his/her sexual persona. In a community that shuns communication on sexuality, pornography is the only access to sexual information of any kind, and is the most common rite of passage into adulthood for boys.

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In a mixed gender sexuality workshop we conducted last year, we found men agreeing that pornography had affected how they constructed their sexual identities. Pornography depicts men as flamboyant attractive studs that all women are throwing themselves at, with unflagging erections that ensure nights of endless, even violent sex. How does this image affect a boy who has premature ejaculation, or a penis that he wishes was bigger, or who can't get a girlfriend? How does pornography shape masculinity and can it address men's insecurities and frailties thereof? Subsequently the images of sex and sexuality that these factors create stay on into adulthood and shape responses to the other gender.

Marriage

The important influence that shapes sexual behaviour is marriage as a contractual relationship for the purpose of procreation. Marriage is considered the only legitimate sexual awakening for a woman, strictly for the purpose of childbearing, and sexuality outside of marriage is taboo and an immediate signal for ostracism. For men, on the other hand, sexual exploration and freedom are condoned by an absence of censure; they are seen as 'sexual beings' with sexual needs that have to be satiated. This takes on serious proportions now that it has been established that the AIDS epidemic in India is primarily spread through monogamous (married) middle class men indulging in unprotected sex with multiple partners.

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Marriage as procreation defines the sexual roles expected of women as biological creatures, excluding the notion of pleasure, thereby invalidating her feelings of pain or violation within a marital sexual relationship. The sexual power plays that women experience in marriage also means that they are expected to be constantly sexually willing, are unable to control reproduction, and cannot expect pleasure as an inherent part of any sexual exchange. The rights and privileges bestowed upon a husband also condone other forms of psychological, sexual and emotional abuse within marriage; domestic violence is one of the most under-reported crimes against women within marriage.

Thus, the form and vehicle of sexuality and sexual partnerships is also defined by these reigning sexual norms of procreation. Homosexuality is therefore thought of as being 'unnatural' and 'perverted', sexual choice and freedom are considered irrelevant. What was once considered essential for evolution, has become prejudice and control. Religion and culture have been appropriated to become the cornerstone of morality, and any diversion from the heterosexual norm is strongly condemned.

This examination of sexuality within the life cycle framework underscores the many hidden, and ignored factors that shape human sexual behaviour. It shows that so much of an individual's sexual journey is riddled with violence, ignorance, prejudice and secrecy. Violence and sexuality share a circular relationship in women's lives: violence sets the parameters of a woman's sexuality, and violence affects her sexual persona either in the form of emotions, self-image or labeling. If women's experiences of rape, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, and sexual harassment are anything to go by, male sexuality also appears to be conditioned by power and aggression. By this token, violence makes sexuality a space of fear and shame.