

Breaking the Silence: Exploring Women's Sexuality

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In order to feel empowered, it is important for women to become aware of and explore their sexual needs and discover how to express them in newer, more fulfilling ways.

When we speak of rural women, we must remember that they are not a homogenous group. They have, their own caste, class and ethnic identities - upper caste, other backward castes (OBCs), dalits and tribals. They are also women who are landless laborers, artisans, workers in road construction and other employment schemes and those who work on their own land.

It is observed that among tribal communities sexuality is handled more liberally and is somewhat less male-centered. Among dalit working women, sex is often described as a daily household chore, while for a Maratha woman sexuality is protected and secured within the four walls to safeguard the honor of her family and caste.

It is often said that women are not open to talking about their sexuality Our experience has been that women are open if a space is created for them which is non-judgmental, non-threatening, sensitive and respectful to their sharing. They just need someone whom they can trust and feel comfortable with. They are not inhibited but definitely cautious.

In almost all community's women's sexuality is either repressed or suppressed. When we facilitated 'self-help training for women' in Andhra, Maharashtra and Gujarat, we found that most of the participants had been married off at a young age. The parents and community are constantly wary and find it advisable to get young girls married off at puberty so that they do not bring shame to them by giving into their so-called wild desires. Women's sexuality is sacrificed to safeguard the honor of the family, caste and religion.

In our training programs, we had young women who were deserted, divorced, widowed or single. As Ratna (see box) has pointed out, all of them were exposed to some inhuman restrictions for the other as an attempt to kill their sexual desires and urges. For a single woman it is even more difficult to express her sexuality. She has to deny herself all her sexual urges or be prepared to be available to all.

My father-in-law insisted I bathe with cold water. Always I was given curds and rice and nothing else to eat - no spices, no chillies, no pickles or Chutney. They made me work till I was tired and made me sleep on a bare cold floor. In spite of all this, very often I felt an urge to have a friend, to relate to someone. When thoughts like this came to me I would quickly blank my mind, believing that even to think like this was a sin and a sign of unfaithfulness to my dead husband.

We have all grown up in an environment, which propagates the myth that, sex is only for the young and that older women are sexless 'When they no longer need to prevent pregnancy and once the pressures of child rearing are past, many women in their 50s experience a reawakening of sexual interest. They want to love and be loved, express themselves sexually and feel and be useful. But they feel terribly ashamed and inhibited to express themselves. In our various groups we had women in their early 60s, even widows, who were sexually active. We loved their simplicity when sharing this with us.

The state's view

Before proceeding to look at how we ventured to open up the issue of sexuality, it would be useful to have a glance at how the state/ government has determined sexuality. One cannot talk of the state's role in controlling sexuality without looking at the recent controversy over the film **Fire**, which talks of the issue of women's sexuality. The film speaks of the search within women for a new space for their experience and expression. It also questions the accepted norms of male and female sexuality in a patriarchal family. Sexual preferences are the inalienable right of every adult. **Fire** raises serious questions about the autonomy and independence of women.

When Shiv Sena activists disrupted the screening of the film forcing its withdrawal, the state was silent and failed to condemn the undemocratic act. It also ordered that the film be re-referred to the Censor Board. In doing this, the state supported the self-appointed protectors of Indian culture, defining areas of restrictions and norms, which set one standard for men and another for women.

One way in which the state has tried to control women's sexuality is through its legal machinery. If we look at the personal laws or laws relating to marriage, there is an implicit definition of what normal sexuality or acceptable sexual behavior is. It is always determined within the parameters of marriage. In the restitution of conjugal rights, the state even goes further and denies the concept of marital rape.

In the area of reproductive health, the state views women as mothers and recognizes only their reproductive potential, not their sexuality. Hence, all the services targeted towards women are to control their fertility. The state gives the impression of being progressive by co-opting feminist language and diluting our demands.

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In the various government-run programs, sexuality invariably gets contextualised in discussions about sexual health, sexual practices, risk taking, safe sex - that, too, in the context of HIV/AIDS and population control programs. With this warped approach, the state looks at sexuality only as a sexual act and provides for safe sex by distributing condoms and setting up STD centers.

Culture of silence

Sexuality is one aspect of our life to, which we give least importance. We neither talk nor think about it because; it is surrounded by taboos, shame, guilt and fear. Yet, in some form or other, we express our sexuality at every moment of our lives, sometimes with painful experiences, at other times as a pleasurable event.

Getting in touch with our sexuality was an important part of our self-help training. But it was not easy and involved gut level effort. The training provided space for women to get in touch with their experiences of sexuality and to break the silence.

Looking at sexuality holistically demanded that we have an unbiased knowledge of our body and that we at least begin to regain control over it. To do this, we had to demystify the myths created around our bodies, our sexuality and fertility. We learnt body literacy through fertility awareness - observing our body

and its working by touching those forbidden parts, observing the secretions right through the menstrual cycle, maintaining fertility charts and creating a positive attitude towards one's body by making friends with it.

We had also to look at the body and the mind - the physical and mental status find connections and linkages and determine what disrupts the harmony between the two. When women talk of subtle coercion in their lives affecting their physical and mental capacities, it somehow gets linked to their sexual lives. Violence and coercion are becoming a common factor in everyday sexual relations, which do not represent just a freely chosen relationship between individuals but are embedded in institutionalized power relations.

Breaking down inhibitions

Our experience shows that women need to be put at ease when talking about sexuality. Games and other simulation exercises are good starters. We need to create an environment of trust and respect when talking of our sexual experiences. One of the games that helped us break down some of the inhibitions was writing our name or drawing a sign on any part of the body, which would be difficult for the partner to discover. This gave us an opportunity to explore and touch each other's bodies! We observed that very often this helped to start new bonds of friendship and we felt very relaxed and comfortable with each other.

Another game that we play is modeling. We ask the group to pair themselves. One woman has to work on her partner and create her into a model of a 'good woman', and then the partner takes over and shapes her into a 'bad woman'. Here we got all kinds of stereotyped messages about, who is a 'good' and who is a 'bad' woman. Their creations led us on to a reflective discussion on how our sexuality gets constructed by society. These and other trust games helped open up the women to share their experiences.

Lalitha shared: I'm 19 years old and I'm a widow. I would love to have sex, but I am afraid. Men get attracted to me since I'm single and good to look at. But in my caste, I cannot remarry.

Laxmi said: My husband has strong sexual urges. He wants to have sex every day and more than once. It's only penetration and I'm tired of it but I cannot say no, since he will go to someone else.

Sarojini asked: Why do we always need to be down when relating? And the man always on top? It makes us feel so helpless. I find great happiness just in someone touching me, stroking the back of my neck.

Among the married women, some said they disliked penetrative sex but had to put up with it only in order to get pregnant. A woman who refuses sex gets labeled as 'frigid' or is accused of having other relationships. Most often women just want physical closeness, warmth, appreciation and assurance. 'I want to be embraced. I just want to be near him, but I'm scared to tell him that. He will think I have learnt it from others.'

Double standards

Through another exercise we looked at the double sexual standards that prevail for men and women. The group was asked to think of descriptive phrases that people use when they talk about the sexual behavior of men and women. The phrases reflected an aggressive yet positive image of men's sexual behavior, while for women the image was one of deviance. For a man to be sexual is normal and good; a woman, on the other hand, is expected to be passive. The stereotypes reflected patriarchal standards, which permit men to act as they please. Women are often brainwashed into accepting and perpetuating these sexual stereotypes. The notion of a woman who demands control over her body is just not thinkable within the framework of these stereotypes.

Why do we always need to be down when relating? And the man always on top?

Shilpa shares: 'Ever since I started attending the training, I am feeling stronger and different. I wear bright colored saris, eat like a normal person, powder myself, wear a bindi, which I have not done since I was fifteen years old. I feel sexually active. Even my walk has changed. At first, the women in the village passed remarks, saying that the change in me is due to the training. But now they have got used to seeing me like this. I used to close my eyes while having my bath. Now I can look at my body freely. I feel really young.'

The media projects sex crime and pornography for the male and images of 'romantic love' for the 'female' psyche. In neither of these are women seen as autonomous, thinking, feeling and decision-making beings. To be mindless is considered a major virtue in women. Men constantly pretend they, know everything, while women, even if they know, have to plead ignorance.

In monogamous, heterosexual relationships, orgasm is given great importance. In a man orgasm is marked by ejaculation. Whether the woman has had an orgasm or not is immaterial. Orgasm is only a small aspect of sexuality but it is important because of its politics. Women are always given to understand that to reach orgasm, they need a penis to penetrate their vagina.

One of our participants said she got repeated orgasms long after intercourse but did not dare mention this to her husband.

'When my husband has sex with me, everything happens very fast. He always does it on top of me. Then he turns around and goes to sleep while I lie awake all excited. Sometimes I get that big surge of pleasure after he has turned his back on me! Once I woke him up, and he shouted at me angrily, "What do you want? Since when have you become like those women? Go to sleep!"

Because women's sexuality has been mystified, distorted and controlled, learning about the clitoris and about orgasm by direct experience is a political action, which challenges patriarchal oppression. In this context, it is important for women, and even for men, to validate the experience that orgasm is not the-end-all of sexual response. Feelings of shared comfort, warmth, gentle fondling and subtle sensations of sensuous pleasure can be just as meaningful.

Same sex relationships

Relationships outside marriage and women-to-woman bonding is not uncommon, but the stereotype of monogamy and marriage dominates and crushes these other friendships.

The women were quite willing to discuss sexual expressions other than the man woman relationship. In fact, some of them remembered and shared their experiences of the physical warmth, tenderness and love they had experienced with girlfriends before marriage. They regretted that they had to give up these friendships on getting married. With mischief written on their faces, they sang some of the folk songs, which depicted such friendship. Some even mentioned that they would feel safer with a person of the same sex.

Violence and coercion are becoming a common factor in everyday sexual relations

Our tribal friends told us about the times when they go off with other women to the riverside for their weekly baths or dash off to the forest to collect firewood once a fortnight. They immediately linked this looking forward to being together and enjoying someone rubbing their back and massaging with care the sore parts of their body, or just lying down next to each other under the trees, sharing their problems and consoling each other - with feeling good and happy.

Is sex and sexuality the same thing? What is the difference? Have we ever thought of what sexuality means to us?

Sexuality beyond sex

Women experience their sense of sexuality in diverse ways. Our sexuality is intuitive, sensitive and anticipating, allowing the other his or her space, time and feeling. We touch and feel the presence of the other. After much reflection we defined sexuality as 'a powerful, free inner energy of human beings - physical, emotional and intellectual - which relates with our social and physical environment. It is a source of refreshment, pleasure and passion, which increases our self-confidence and creativity and gives us an identity'.

Other ways of expressing our sexuality could be getting pleasure, sharing beautiful moments with ourselves or with our partner, having a nice, hot oil bath, singing, dancing, breast-feeding, getting wet in the rain, taking a brisk walk in the morning, having someone brush and comb our hair, seeing a good film alone or with someone we love, listening to music, reading a novel, dressing tastefully, writing to our friend or beloved, admiring a beautiful person, listening to the gentle flow of a stream, sitting alone or with a loved one wrapped up with the beauty of nature, especially sunrise or sunset, and fantasizing. There could be many more ways, too.

It gradually became clear to the women that sexuality relates to our body in totality. It is an expression of our personality an expression of pleasure, intimacy, desire and preference. Viewing sexuality in a broader perspective helped the women understand that it cannot be separated from the social and economic contexts and subordination. All the same, the discussions helped us realize that we need to be aware of our own sexual needs, negotiate with our partners for more safe, sensitive and caring sexual practices and explore new sexual expressions which become experiences of pleasure that empowers.