

Beyond the headlines

To write about issues like public health and gender rights which apart from the occasional headline are not discussed in the mainstream media. Through this blog I hope to start a space where such matters can be discussed and debated

ARCHIVE FOR THE TAG “DURU SHAH”

Let's talk about it..

Let's face it. Most Indian parents are uncomfortable talking about sexuality with their children. An attitude shared by most schools. I vividly remember my biology class on reproduction. There we were a bunch of 14-year-old boys and girls, giggly and uncomfortable, trying very hard not to look at the pictures of male and female sex organs in our textbooks. I think the teacher must have spent all of 10 minutes on the subject and we were happy just to get it over with.

Some 25 odd years later, nothing has changed. Sex education remains a taboo for most schools. Health experts say this needs to change. They point to the countrywide National Family Health Survey 2006 figures, which show that one in six teenagers in India between 15 to 19 years had conceived or given birth. Most of these girls knew little about contraceptive measures or the consequences of unsafe sex.

Take the recently reported case of a 15-year-old living in a colony in suburban Mumbai. The girl, who comes from a middle class family, was in a relationship with a boy in her school for over a year. They used birth control rarely. She knew nothing about it and the boy claimed it was not required. She found out she was pregnant when her mother noticed a swelling on her stomach and insisted she gets tested. She is 4 months pregnant, too late to have an abortion. Her boyfriend has been arrested and she has dropped out of school.

“Sex before marriage is definitely more prevalent today, than say 10 years ago”, says Dr Duru Shah, former president of the Federation of Gynecologists and Obstetrics Societies of India. “Earlier people got married very young so sex was within marriage. Now they marrying later and they are having premarital sex. But most of them know little about protection. “

Dr Shah further adds,” People are going to have sex. Spreading information on safe sex will not increase sexual activity. It will ensure people have safe sex.”

Lack of information from proper channels forces teenagers to turn to the Internet or friends. “My 12 year old daughter came from school and told me babies are born when papas rape mamas”, recounts the mother of two teenagers. “I had rather they heard about sex from the school than the school bus. “

Media consultant and mother of two, Reeta Gupta believes sex education is “an important intervention that explains the consequences of reckless experimentation amongst adolescents.”

However, that’s not an attitude shared by most parents and schools. Information about sex, they believe will encourage promiscuity. “One school did not want me to even mention condom,” says social psychologist and sexuality educator, Chandni Parekh. ‘Some schools may call a gynecologist but there is no room for Q &A.” Parekh’s module on sexuality education for school and college students encourages discussion on forbidden subjects like masturbation, menstruation and HIV AIDS. “We tell them about pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. It’s about forming values that are respectful towards relationships and intimacy.”

Three years ago, education authorities at the central government level proposed starting an ‘Adolescent Health education” program in schools around the country. That has since gone into cold storage. It’s time to take a serious look at it because sexuality education is critical to save lives. Studies have shown unsafe sex is a huge health risk leading to sexually transmitted infections, including the deadly human papilloma virus or HPV, infertility and neonatal deaths.