Bringing Together Pleasure and Politics: Sexuality Workshops in Rural India

Jaya Sharma
January 2011
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Summary

Why is a positive and political approach to sexuality important? How might such an approach be actualised in trainings and workshops? What are the linkages between sexuality, gender justice and access to rights such as those related to bodily integrity? These are some of the key questions that this paper addresses. The paper is based on learnings that emerged from a programme initiated by Nirantar, a women’s NGO that has been working on issues of gender, education and more recently, sexuality. The programme constitutes one of the first efforts in the Indian context to build perspectives on sexuality, through intensive workshops, with women from rural, poor communities as well as the organisations that work with. Through participatory exercises Nirantar introduced sophisticated and challenging ideas such as: women’s right to say ‘yes’ to sex and ask for what they wanted as well as to say ‘no’ and how the two are closely linked; how control of women’s sexuality oppresses women more generally; and how sex, sexuality and gender are socially constructed.

Based on detailed minutes of the trainings, an external review of the impact, and on the author’s personal experience as a facilitator, this paper describes the methods and shares learnings including the following:

- It is indeed possible and welcome to talk about sexuality, particularly for rural women in this context who were far more at ease than the more middle class urban participants.

- Sexuality and violence against women (VAW) are fundamentally connected. VAW may occur as a response to women expressing non-acceptable desires and women may return to abusive husbands in part because marriage is the only accepted place to fulfil their sexual desires.

- Sexuality is integral to women’s empowerment both because sexual fulfilment itself can be affirming, energising, and empowering, and because control of women’s sexuality inhibits women’s mobility, access to health care and education.

Keywords: sexuality; gender; participation.
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Disclaimer

Some sections of this paper contain explicit language and scenes of a sexual nature, which may offend some readers.
Preface to Sexuality and Development Practice Paper Series

Sexuality has been sidelined by development. Associated with risk and danger, but hardly ever with pleasure or love, sex has been treated by development agencies as something to be controlled and contained. The AIDS epidemic has broken old taboos and silences, and has begun to open up space for the recognition of how central sexual rights are to everyone’s wellbeing. But more is needed to take us beyond the confines of narrow problem-focused thinking about sexuality towards approaches in which pleasure and desire play as large a part as danger and death do today.

Sexuality is a vital aspect of development. It affects people’s livelihoods and security, their wellbeing, and sometimes their very survival. Sexual rights are a precondition for reproductive rights and for gender equality. Lack of sexual rights affects heterosexual majorities as well as sexual minorities – lesbians and gay men, bisexuals, transgendered and intersex people – who are so often denied basic human rights and subjected to violence and exclusion. In some countries, women are denied a choice of partner, subjected to coercive marital sex and restricted in their mobility. Pervasive homophobia places those married men who desire other men, their male partners and their wives at greater risk of HIV and AIDS. Adolescents schooled into abstinence learn little about their bodies or their desires, and may be more vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections as a result. And sex workers are routinely denied basic legal and employment – as well as broader human – rights. Rare is the environment which allows people to live out a fulfilling and pleasurable sexuality of their choice, and that empowers people with a sense of their right to say ‘yes’ as well as ‘no’ and enjoy safe, loving relationships free from coercion and violence.

Issues of sex and sexuality are all too often associated with silence, shame and stigma. Solutions that are framed by a discourse that problematises sex offer limited scope for transforming the way in which development actors work on these issues. It is all too easy to focus on the negatives that we highlight above and to conspire with a silence within them about unruly desires, about pleasuring the senses, and about love. The turn to rights in international development discourse may offer new openings for the articulation of sexuality and development, and new opportunities for realising sexual rights. This series of working papers and practice papers enters the debate about sexual rights from the perspective of development. Together, the papers seek to challenge orthodoxies and bring fresh thinking to the challenges of making sexual rights real. With thanks to DFID for funding this paper.

Susie Jolly and Kate Hawkins
Sexuality and Development Programme, IDS
Author’s note

A positive and political approach to sexuality – why is it important and what might it look like? This is what I hope to address in the paper. In the context of work being undertaken in the realm of sexual rights at present, there is, in many instances, a strong emphasis on the need for positive approaches to sexuality. There is however much more innovation and sharing required on how positive approaches can concretely inform such work. The paper also seeks to foreground the importance of a political approach to sexuality – an approach that recognises the linkages between sexuality and power in its various and interconnected dimensions – be it in terms of gender, caste, religion or class related ideologies, material realities and structures. In the paper I seek to share an effort to actualise a positive and political approach to sexuality undertaken by Nirantar, the women’s NGO I work with.

In working with a political approach to sexuality, Nirantar builds on its learnings as a part of the women’s movement. As part of the women’s movement we know that a mere assertion of rights is not sufficient, we have consistently built awareness about why these rights are critical and why they have sought to be denied us. The question of ‘why’ was and remains critical. This political understanding has been important both in terms of strengthening solidarity among women and collective processes of claiming rights. ‘Personal is political’ is therefore a slogan which is at the core of the women’s movement. Nirantar’s work on sexuality has sought to be informed by such a politics. Inspired by more theoretical and anthropological work that has been undertaken in the realm of sexuality, there was also an effort to build an understand how power plays out at the micro level in terms of how we negotiate, subscribe to, subvert and challenge norms. This too forms an important part of what I am referring to as a political approach to sexuality.

I’m dwelling on what I mean by a political approach to sexuality, because this approach was at the heart of the intervention on which this paper is based. Also, while work continues to be undertaken on the need for a positive approach to sexuality and what this might entail, the conversation about the need for a political approach to sexuality is one that needs to begin in earnest. I hope that this paper will contribute to such a process.
1 Introduction

Whenever I heard the word sexuality, I used to feel strange... During the first workshop, I felt shy but excited. I found certain things funny, felt nice inside... The discussions were so open, about different acts, about our bodies and our lives. I liked hearing about sexuality. I realized that others don’t have access to such information. People in our organisation used to say these are sugli-sugli baatan [bad things]. We thought that women in the village would turn around and hit us if we talked about such things! But actually they talk about sex anyway. They sing dirty songs during weddings and holi [a festival]. They have the freedom to sing such songs on these occasions. But they cannot talk about it [sic] openly otherwise.

Kesari Bai is an activist who has been fighting for women’s rights and the rights of Dalits (marginalised on the basis of their caste) for over three decades now. She is currently working with a feminist community-based NGO in Rajasthan, a state in the western part of India. Kesari, who had taken on a fierce battle with ‘upper caste’ people in her village to be able to draw water from the same well, who has led many a rescue operation, literally bursting into homes and getting back children of women who had left abusive husbands, was the same Kesari, who after going through a series of trainings on sexuality, confessed to being very, very nervous about conducting a workshop on sexuality with women from the community.

Kesari Bai was one of the participants in Younikta aur Hum (‘Sexuality and Us’), a programme aimed at building perspectives of five organisations working at the community level in different states of North India, on issues of sexuality. The programme was initiated by Nirantar, a women’s NGO which has been working on issues of gender and education since its inception in 1993 and on issues of sexuality since 2007. The programme constitutes one of the first efforts in the Indian context to build perspectives on sexuality, through workshops, with women from rural, poor communities as well as the organisations that work with them, in an intensive manner.

Kesari Bai’s words and experience capture much of why and what we would like to share about this initiative. The ‘Sexuality and Us’ initiative stemmed from a context in which interventions aimed at the rights of women from poorer communities tend not to address sexual rights. The trainings helped us understand better why players in gender and development fear working on issues of sexuality, the ways in which women from socially and economically marginalised communities relate to issues of sexuality and how to build perspectives and capacities of NGOs in order that they might be able to be more responsive to the ground level realities with respect to sexuality. This paper presents those learnings, based on detailed minutes of the trainings, an external review of the impact, and on my personal experience as a facilitator in the trainings. The programme is one that is particularly close to my heart. As someone who has been involved with the women’s movement and an
educationist for over two decades and part of the queer movement for a
decade or more, it brought my worlds together.

2 About Nirantar

Nirantar believes that sexuality is a dimension of empowerment that education
needs to address. We understand education as learning processes that enable
a critical understanding of lived realities and which enhance abilities to change
these realities towards greater equity and justice. Given that sexuality, like
gender, is an important aspect of lived realities, education needs to create
opportunities to un-learn and learn ideas about sexuality, as part of a
transformatory educational agenda.

As a Centre for Gender and Education, Nirantar has been engaged with work
at the community level, particularly with women and girls from Dalit and tribal
communities; research and advocacy aimed at educational programmes and
policies in order to ensure that they are more empowering; developing
curricula and teaching learning materials as well as capacity building,
particularly with community-based NGOs. Nirantar has been active in the
women’s movement since its inception and has also been engaged in other
movements for justice. As part of the women’s movement Nirantar has been
involved in fighting against sexual violence and violence against women more
broadly in different ways. Nirantar is an active member of ‘Voices Against 377’,
a coalition of groups engaged in women’s rights, sexual rights and child rights,
who have been working towards the rights of same sex desiring and
transgender people, including for the decriminalisation of sexual acts deemed
to be ‘against the order of nature’ (a struggle which in July 2009 won a
significant victory in the Delhi High Court).

In 2006, Nirantar began exploring the idea of addressing issues of sexuality,
beyond sexual violence and particular identities, in a broader perspective of
empowerment and justice. We wanted to engage with community-based NGOs
who work with women from economically and socially marginalised
communities because we believed that there were significant ways in which
their lives were impacted by issues of sexuality which were not being
addressed. We therefore decided to undertake perspective building through
workshops as well as by developing teaching material on sexuality in Hindi
which could be used by activists.

In the realm of education, Nirantar’s work has had a strong focus on adult
education, particularly for women from poor communities. This was also the
focus of our sexuality education work. The educational processes in the
‘Sexuality and Us’ programme were aimed at staff members of selected NGOs
as well as the women they work with. Other than this, Nirantar’s work in the
area of sexuality education has also involved advocating for the right of young
people to have access to empowering sexuality education. This has been
significant in a context in which several state governments across the country
banned sex education in schools in 2007. The ban was strengthened by a
Parliamentary Committee which recommended in 2009 that the ban continue. Nirantar has also designed and implemented sexuality education as part of a larger curriculum for adolescent girls in an eight-month residential course implemented by a community-based programme for Dalit and tribal women and adolescent girls.

3 Why women’s organisations are not engaging with sexuality in positive ways

Women’s movements have waged vital and tremendous battles against sexual violence and sexual harassment. However, women’s movements, particularly in the global South, have tended not to engage with more positive aspects of sexual rights. Dynamic movements for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people have been struggling and growing in different parts of the world. However, there has not always been a strong synergy either within the different sections of LGBTQ movements or between these movements and women’s movements. An engagement with sexuality and sexual rights – not circumscribed by the logic of any particular other agenda, not linked to particular identities and not limited to its negative dimension – is therefore rare.

Some of the above is reflected in what a staff member who participated in the training of trainers had shared.

I remember how once a woman [who approached the programme] said that her body ‘burns’ [with unfulfilled sexual desire]. Her husband is impotent. She wants sexual pleasure outside of marriage. There is another woman who is unable to find the sexual pleasure that she enjoyed with her boyfriend, with her husband, and therefore she wants a divorce from him. Others in the women’s empowerment programme with which I work, consider these women to be mad. They thought if the husband is not being violent with the wife, then why is she even thinking about straying outside of marriage. I myself don’t know about women’s right to sexual pleasure. Even to accept that women have sexual desire is a difficult process.

There is a need to understand why sexuality, and in particular the more positive aspects of sexuality, have not been engaged with by women’s groups and NGOs. One reason is that rights have tended to be viewed in terms of a hierarchy of rights, with issues related to poverty and violence against women being placed at the top of a hierarchy of rights of poor communities. This perspective does not take into account the significance of each of the dimensions of our lived realities. By considering some rights to be more important than others, there is a way in which life is fragmented into dimensions, some of which are considered important and others not. Within this larger problem of fragmenting rights, relegating sexuality at the bottom of
the hierarchy of rights reflects a particular attitude towards poor people which tends to consider them as asexual beings who do not have sexual needs. The framework of hierarchy of rights fails to recognise the indivisibility of rights.

The ‘Sexuality and Us’ programme brought to light other reasons underlying the resistance to engaging with sexuality in more positive ways. Many women’s movement activists are embarrassed or uncomfortable talking about sexuality. These ‘personal’ anxieties need to be understood in terms of the larger ‘political’ context which constructs sexual desire (other than in the context of reproduction within marriage) and therefore the realm of sexuality as being ‘bad’ or ‘dirty’. The responses from the ‘Sexuality and Us’ programme shared below also indicate that these anxieties are not insurmountable.

One of the fears expressed was that talking about issues of sexuality would invite the label of being a ‘bad woman’. The external review report quoted a respondent who said, ‘Earlier, I was seen as someone who rescued women which gave me an image of a “good woman”. Now I’m talking about sex and as a result dropping my status in their eyes. I’m a “bad woman”.’ Within the realm of sexuality, homosexuality was seen as being a particularly tricky subject. As one of the respondents said, ‘I was afraid that if we talk about homosexuality my programme will be shaken up.’

Another respondent interviewed offered an important insight related to the reluctance to talk about issues of sexuality:

_The hierarchy within the team obliges them (colleagues) to talk about outputs and maintain discipline. People [in the organisation] don’t talk about their concerns, like sexuality. That is why we’re kind of divided as a team. That’s a problem. The minute they are able to talk about sexuality they will be empowered fully... by opening up these spaces, the hierarchy will be challenged because people will feel closer to each other and more comfortable. They will challenge the hierarchy. That’s why they don’t want the discussions._

This fear did seem to be borne out by the trainings. Sexuality seemed to reduce power hierarchies, including those between facilitators and participants. Perhaps this is partly because we all have irrational, unresolved issues of sexuality that we are grappling with. As facilitators we were sometimes anxious about sharing aspects of our sexuality which might be considered non-normative. We found that often it was something that a participant said that gave us the courage to speak about ourselves. As part of one of the introductory activities each of us had to share two examples – a norm that we have challenged in our life and a norm that we have subscribed to. With respect to the norms that I had challenged, at the first workshop I spoke about how I chose not to get married, despite pressure from the family. At a later workshop, a participant before me, a young woman from a small town who worked at the community level, spoke about desiring a woman as the norm she had broken and this inspired me to ‘come out’ about being bisexual. At another workshop, it was when a participant spoke about being in a relationship with a man who was also involved with another woman, that I decided to share that I was at the time in an open relationship as the norm that I had broken.
4 The ‘Sexuality and Us’ training programme

The workshops aimed to enable women’s organisations to address sexuality in a manner that was both positive and political. The programme began in December 2007 and concluded in August 2008. The review was conducted in August 2009. The programme was designed as a series of workshops with five community-based partner organisations. Four of the organisations were community-based NGOs. The fifth is a government-sponsored programme which works on a much larger scale than the others. All except one of the organisations work in rural areas. The five organisations are Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti, Rajasthan; Mahila Samakhya, Bihar; Vanangana, Uttar Pradesh; Grammonati, Uttar Pradesh and Action India, New Delhi.

There are two key features of this programme that I would like to highlight. One is that dialogues with women from the community were an important part of the programme. This was essential because as mentioned above there are significant fears experienced by NGOs about talking to women in the community about issues of sexuality. Dialoguing with women from the community was also essential to build an understanding about lived realities of poor, rural women as they relate to sexuality.

Secondly, staff members who work with the community women were regarded as subjects of the intervention in their own right, and not merely in a functional way as conduits of inputs to women in the community. This is a shortcoming that is reflected, for example, in most of the manuals that are currently in circulation in the country – they describe activities that facilitators are meant to conduct without adequately recognising or responding to the learning needs of the facilitators themselves. Inherent in Nirantar’s approach was the importance of the staff members as learners themselves, with their own needs to learn and un-learn about issues of sexuality. This clearly has implications for their ability to work on issues of sexuality in non-judgemental ways. The design of the programme was therefore such that the capacity building was not limited to a one time input. The staff members were provided with substantive inputs in the form of a series of workshops as well as intensive support in planning, conducting and reflecting back on the follow-up workshops which they had to undertake.

Given that it was the first effort of its kind and the challenges entailed, Nirantar decided to seek the participation of organisations whose leadership had a feminist vision. The response to the initial dialogue that Nirantar had with such organisations was extremely positive. From among these organisations those who expressed an active interest in the programme were selected.
The structure and flow of the programme was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop – Participants</th>
<th>Conducted by</th>
<th>Duration – Residential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First training of trainers with selected members of partner organisations</td>
<td>Nirantar</td>
<td>Five days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up workshops with staff members of partner organisations</td>
<td>Partner organisations with Nirantar</td>
<td>Two to three days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second training of trainers</td>
<td>Nirantar</td>
<td>Three days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up workshops with rural women of village level collectives (some of which also included staff members)</td>
<td>Partner organisations with Nirantar</td>
<td>Two to three days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third training of trainers</td>
<td>Nirantar</td>
<td>Four days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 Who took part?

In all 13 workshops were conducted and over 300 women participated, approximately 100 of which were staff members of partner organisations and 200 of which were rural women linked to village level women’s collectives that the organisations worked with.

The participants of the series of three training of trainers conducted by Nirantar were staff members of the partner organisations who had substantial experience of working on issues of women’s empowerment – typically ten years of experience. Most participants were in middle level leadership positions, although some were senior. A majority of the participants were educated, high school or university graduates. The economic background of most was lower middle income. Most participants were Hindu from middle level castes. There was only one Muslim and one Christian participant. Most of them came from and were based in small towns. The same set of participants came for all three workshops, although there were some exceptions. The age range was 25–55 years.

The women from the community with whom workshops were conducted were all rural. A majority were Dalit reflecting the priority placed by most of the organisations to work with women from poorer and more socially marginalised sections of the rural communities. The vast majority had low levels or no formal education. The participants were active members or leaders of village level women’s collectives supported by the partner organisations. A majority had therefore been involved in collective actions related to violence against women or demanding entitlements related to livelihoods, health, etc. A majority had received some capacity-building inputs from the organisations, such as those related to gender issues or livelihoods. The vast majority of rural women were Hindu, with few Muslims and no Christians.
5 Training content

5.1 Food and sex

One of the most popular and effective ways in which we talked about core ideas related to sexuality was by talking about sex and sexuality through food. Rural women often described a need for sex as ‘shareer ki bhoo’ – ‘hunger of the body’. One of the participants spoke, for example, of how if one wants to eat five rotis (pieces of bread) and gets only two, one will have to find the other three, even take from a neighbour if necessary. On the other hand, if a woman is forced to eat seven rotis she will suffer from indigestion.

As facilitators too, we would ask participants a series of questions related to food. What do you like eating the most? What do you dislike most in food? Has your taste in food ever changed? Have you learnt how to cook anything new? The patterns in the answers emerged clearly.

First there was the amazing diversity in tastes. Once participants got into the mood, there were elaborate discussions about preferences. For example, a fine tuned discussion about food involved details about how someone liked fish cooked in mustard and another one like fish cooked in tamarind, while others had their own variations and favourites even within these categories. Secondly, from the listing of likes and dislikes, there were many items of food that were common to both lists. ‘What I love you might hate’ was a clear pattern. Often there was a reason behind a preference – because of where someone lives, what is culturally acceptable or required in terms of religion, gender, caste, region or class. It was also clear that our taste in food changes. Often participants while recounting food memories shared stories which made clear why their tastes had changed. Many times an aversion turned into a preference. Although sometimes there was no reason for a change of taste in food, there were many factors that emerged, for example, gender. One of the participants said it was particularly difficult for her to pursue her desires related to food because she started living in a joint, extended family after she got married. She also had to change her style of cooking dishes according to the preferences of members of her marital home. At this point in the discussion another participant asked whether we cook to please others or ourselves. ‘To please our husbands, of course’ said someone. Another participant said, ‘Even I cook according to the tastes of others in the family, but when it comes to sweet things, I cook according to my own preference.’

The pattern seeking related to our tastes in food, led into a discussion about whether we saw any similarities with sexuality. One participant shared that her mother had told her ‘Don’t eat good food. If your body is healthy you’ll have greater desires, so keep yourself thin’. In one of the workshops, the commonalities that emerged included diversity – ‘the possibilities in both are limitless’ said one participant. One of the trainers pointed out that like quick bites and long drawn out banquets, sex can be slow or hurried. She also shared the terms that her husband and she had coined for the kind of sex they had depending on whether it was leisurely or fast. Another commonality which
emerged was ‘what I like you might hate’ – just as true for sex as it is for food. Sexual desire and taste in food are both fluid, they can change, was yet another commonality. We built upon these similarities to argue that although sexuality, like food and taste, seems to be natural and instinctive it is socially constructed. Again like taste in food, sexual desire seems to be located in the domain of the body, the biological, but it is influenced by gender, class, region, etc.

Despite the many commonalities, significant differences between food and sexuality also emerged. We can’t talk about sex with the ease with which we can talk about our habits and preferences related to food. Differences in tastes related to food are by and large tolerated (although food can also assume great symbolic importance in certain politically charged situations, such as when there is a clash of religious identities). However, differences in sexual tastes can evoke violations ranging from censure in the form of taunts to extreme violence including murder.

The food activity was one that was often drawn upon in other discussions during the workshops by trainers as well as participants – be it in the context of same sex desire, gender transgression or non-monogamy. We felt that the food activity was highly effective as a pedagogic tool because it evoked an experiential, instinctual understanding which was critical in order to challenge existing deep-rooted ways of relating to sexuality. The activity was effective we felt because it operated both at a cerebral as well as a visceral level.

5.2 Good women bad women

Another set of examples which shows the importance of drawing upon personal experiences was related to deconstructing the idea of the ‘good woman’. Examining the construct of the ‘good woman’ was a critical theme in the programme since it is at the heart of why women find it difficult to articulate their sexual desires and why society seeks to control women. We sought to deconstruct the good woman through several activities. One of the activities involved participants, in small groups, writing the qualities of a good woman on white ribbons. Members of the group would then tie them on a woman who the group would ‘make’ a good woman. As much as possible ribbons were tied symbolically on the part of the body which the quality related to. So, for example, if a ribbon had written on it a good woman ‘lowers her gaze’ (she is modest, she should not look up), it would be tied on the woman’s eyes. Or if a ribbon said a good woman ‘does not go out of the house at night’, it would be tied on her feet. When the good woman was ‘created’, the visual effect was powerful. She was disturbing to look at. During one of the workshops with community women, a participant said ‘It felt good to be listing the qualities of a good woman, but it is scary to see her.’

In another activity, we played snakes and ladders on a large sheet on the floor. Four representatives of four teams stood on the sheet. If the dice thrown by a participant landed on the mouth of a snake, a statement was read out such as: ‘You continue your relationship with a man from a different caste despite
opposition from the family’ or ‘You are a widow in a sexual relationship with a lover from your youth’ and other statements which represented breaking of sexual norms and being punished for them. When players landed at the bottom of a ladder, the statements that were read out included ‘You were attracted to the woman who lived next door but you suppressed your desire’ or ‘Yet again you do what your husband likes during sex, even if you don’t like it’. We inverted the rule of winning and losing. The player who wins is the one who is the lowest on the board i.e. the one who has been pursuing her desires and breaking sexual norms. The ‘winner’ was garlanded with a placard – ‘Leader of the alliance of bad women’. The expression on the face of the winner was inevitably confused – there was happiness at winning the game but grave discomfort at being the bad woman who had broken sexual norms. How the winner felt on winning became one of the important points of reflection after the game. Why are we so uncomfortable with being labelled bad women, when all that we are doing is pursuing our desires, was the question that we left the participants with.

Discomfort with being the bad woman was also about the sanctions that society decrees and this too formed an important part of the discussions. We also spoke about how we felt about being good women who subscribed to sexual norms. It emerged that although in our performance as good women we suppress our desires, we also enjoy a certain respect and social status in society. The game was therefore useful in generating a discussion on privileges and punishments. The conversation about privileges tended to be more difficult because these privileges are often taken for granted and not visible to most of us, while the punishments for breaking sexual norms are more evident. As activists perhaps we don’t like to acknowledge privileges and prefer to focus on punishments.

5.3 Challenging the pleasure vs danger binary

We drew into the programme an important learning gained during an earlier workshop on gender and sexuality conducted by Nirantar with non-formal education teachers in rural Rajasthan (a western state of India). We had a discussion on a scene in a documentary film in which a group of young boys talk amongst themselves about their sexual experiences with girls. One of the boys comments on girls’ responses and says that even when girls say ‘no’ they actually mean ‘yes’. This was a comment which resonated strongly with the male teachers in the workshop. One of the women teachers however said that if a woman says ‘no’ to a man who makes a pass at her, it is common for him to dismiss this by saying ‘when a woman says no, she actually means yes.’ And if a woman says ‘yes’ to a man who has expressed interest in her, she will immediately be labelled a ‘loose’ woman. Women don’t have the space to say yes, even when they want to. This opens up the space for men who are rebuffed to invalidate women when they say no. The discussion concluded with the learning that women will have the right to say ‘no’ only if they have the right to say ‘yes’.
Yet while social sanctions may genuinely penalise women who say yes or ask for sex, there are still some spaces for women to initiate sex. For example, in two workshops there were discussions related to the extent to which heterosexual women are able to initiate sex with men and what happens if they do. In both instances, the discussions began on a negative footing. The tenor of the discussions was that women are not able to initiate sex and if they do they suffer negative consequences. As facilitators we tried to open up the possibility for the conversation to take a more positive turn if needed. We found that in both cases, the discussions turned more and more towards instances of how women do initiate sex and that men tend not to have a problem with this. As one of the participants said, ‘They want it anyway, so why will they mind it?’

An effort was made to build an understanding of social norms as rules laid down by mainstream society which we are expected to follow but which we have some leeway to negotiate. This was sought to be established by evoking and drawing upon personal experiences in a range of contexts, including but not limited to sexuality. In one of the workshops, the discussion on desires was on the verge of entering into a victim narrative. It seemed as though sexual norms were dictating entirely the choices that people were making in their lives. At this point one of the younger participants, who was a staff member, turned around and said ‘but… we do find a way, somehow, don’t we, to fulfil our desires.’

An understanding of norms as rules that we negotiate contributed towards an approach that sought to create the space for the recognition of agency and not only violations. That there is a space between norms and how we lead our lives was an empowering realisation, and much closer to the experiences that were being shared, than a discourse of complete victimisation. We also sought to establish that, beyond the recognition of negotiation with norms, there was a need for existing discriminatory social norms to change.

The approach, which was not always easy to traverse, of highlighting ‘agency’ as well as the oppressive nature of social norms was an effort to bridge the binary of ‘pleasure’ and ‘danger’. We often find that in work related to sexuality it is either celebrated as being ‘positive’ or it gets dominated by a ‘negative’, violations oriented approach. We tried in these workshops not to fall into either trap. We sought to talk about desire, pleasure and agency and at the same time to analyse why sexual rights are denied and why punishments are meted out to those who break sexual norms. This was enabled by placing power at the centre of the approach. It was also enabled by continuously touching base with lived realities which revealed organically and clearly how we negotiate or subvert norms.

Salma shared that when she was a young woman, she had fallen in love with a boy who was also Muslim but from another community. She knew her parents would never allow her to marry him, firstly, because she had chosen the boy herself and secondly, because he was from another community. Salma did not even tell her parents about her lover and married the man that they chose for her. The husband was violent. Within a few months of marriage, Salma left him and returned to her parents’ home. Reflecting back on her experiences, Salma said that she broke a social norm by leaving her abusive husband but she had
subscribed to the norm of being a ‘good daughter’ when she broke off with her
lover and did not even tell her parents about him. During the discussion the
collective understanding that emerged was that it was more difficult to break
norms and gain support when a woman is asserting her desire, as compared to
when she is being violated by someone. When a woman is a ‘victim’ she is still
seen as a good woman (worthy of ‘protection’) but when she is a desiring
person with agency, she falls out of that category and finds it difficult to gain
support.

Although there was a highly open, positive, intimate and often fun-filled
atmosphere with respect to discussions and activities related to sex, we as
participants and trainers did not talk much about our personal sexual lives. We
were overly cautious. For example, in the first workshop there was a session
on sexual fantasies in which everyone, including the trainers, wrote their
fantasies, on pieces of paper which they then put in the middle of the room. As
trainers, we made sure to give instructions that participants did not have to
write their names. The person doing the documentation was chosen as the one
to read out the fantasies. This was to reassure the participants that the person
reading the slips of paper would not be able to recognise anyone’s handwriting.
We need not have worried so much about anonymity because immediately
after the activity, during the tea break many participants giggled and laughed,
saying ‘I know which one was yours…’, including to the trainers!

Humour played an important role in creating an environment to engage with
issues of sexuality relatively free from inhibitions. Humour was not ‘adopted’ as
a conscious strategy but it turned out that we had loads of fun, laughed a lot
and that this helped not just the participants but also the trainers to deal with
inhibitions about talking about sex and sexuality. I for one was someone who
could speak endlessly about issues relating to the politics of sexuality but sex
itself was another matter. Over the course of the first workshop itself I found
myself laughing uncontrollably and using words related to sex in fun, crazy
ways, with participants. This was an empowering experience. The energy we
all experienced during the workshops, which participants linked explicitly to
empowerment, owed much to this humour.

5.4 A political perspective

I share here some of the examples of how we sought to actualise an approach
that is both positive and political. When analysing the control over women’s
sexuality we drew upon history to build an understanding of why this control is
sought to be exercised. We took participants down the ages to the hunting-
gathering phase and saw how with the coming of settled agriculture and private
property, there was a need to establish paternity of the child and therefore
control was sought to be exercised over women’s sexuality.

The workshops addressed ideologies as well as structures, including the
institution of marriage. The inclusion of the topic of marriage in the workshops
needs to be located in a context in which marriage as an institution is no longer
examined critically even within the women’s movement. Participants were
asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of marriage. In workshops with community women, one of the advantages that was listed was that marriage secures housing. A trainer from the partner NGO commented, ‘When we commit a “mistake”, even a small one, we might be thrown out of the house.’ If someone from my family, like if my sister wants to come to stay in my house because of her studies, she can’t. After marriage we can’t go and stay in our parents’ house. The house in which we grew up becomes paraya (belonging to the “other”).’ The benefits emerged clearly as being fragile and conditional.

Capturing some of the shifts in perspective with respect to marriage, one participant interviewed during the external review said ‘In the past I thought marriage was the end all and be all. And I always helped [sic] single girls by getting them married without asking them. ¹ Now I understand that it’s not everything. It should be her wish’.

Another example which illustrates how the programme sought to approach sexuality is that of listing sex acts. Participants were divided into small groups and a competition ensued of listing all the possible sex acts that members of the groups could think of. This highly animated activity yielded lists that went up to 50 or even over 60 acts. It also led to discussions about why, when there are so many sexual acts, penile vaginal sex is the only one that has legitimacy. We introduced the concept of the sexual hierarchy, wherein penile vaginal sex is at the top and all other acts are at varying distance from the pinnacle of respectability. Those lower down the hierarchy include anal and oral sex, which evoke a wide range of violations including silencing, censure, taunts and social pressures to conform. From a highly fun, pleasure-oriented activity we seamlessly moved to talking about these political dimensions. The instruction given to participants was that only acts, not the sex of the people performing the acts, were to be listed. This enabled participants to see that there is just one act that can be performed by a man and a woman; the penetration of the vagina by the penis. Other sexual acts can be performed between people of the same sex.

As with the issues related to sexuality, the approach towards transgender issues sought to be political. Building on the examples that came up, we analysed why gender transgression poses a threat to patriarchy. During one of the workshops a participant shared how in the small town in which she lived, there was a person who lived near her house, born male but feminine, a friend of hers. This person used to like doing housework. When she used to go out to the hand pump to fill water, men in the neighbourhood would laugh and jeer at her, saying look at him, just like a woman. Another participant said ‘If a man starts doing housework then other women will say men in our homes should also work.’ We built upon the experiences and discussions to point to how gender transgression poses a threat to the patriarchal division of labour between men and women. Similarly when we spoke about intersexed people, we raised questions such as if a child is intersex, who will inherit property?

¹ This refers to arranged marriage, where the opinion of the girls would not necessarily be sought.
In order to build an empathy and understanding about the realities of transgender people’s lives we gave participants a real life story to read, of Nandini, a person who was born male but identifies as ‘murat’ – an indigenous transgender identity in Gujarat, a state in the western part of India. The story was recorded by a queer activist and writer Maya Sharma. Published by Nirantar, it is one of the first pieces of original writing about a transgender person’s life written in the Hindi language. Nandini’s life story speaks about the trials and tribulations of her life but also about the joy and the pleasures, not least of which are her sexual pleasures. Although Nandini – transgender, Muslim (a minority community), working class – is at the margins in many ways, she does not come across as a victim. Her vivaciousness, flamboyance and theatrical ways help ensure this. It was also clear from Nandini’s story that when she did sex work, it was not just for money, it was her desire. After reading the account, participants were struck by Nandini’s boldness and the challenges she posed to mainstream society. They were particularly struck by her sexual life. ‘There was a “give and take” in Nandini’s sexual relationships. Nandini tried to seek pleasure for herself as well as pleasing her partners. It was not one sided.’ ‘She is living her relationship not just surviving it’, said another participant.

The workshops sought to build an understanding of why sexual norms exist. This understanding is necessary in order to strengthen the ability to resist and challenge norms and to build solidarity among those who do so by establishing that there are others who fall outside the norms who are posing a challenge to them. The political dimension is critical. We know this from other transformative endeavours and movements. The women’s movement has historically sought to visibilise ‘why’ and ‘how’ patriarchy seeks to maintain control over women. Transformatory paradigms of education have also underlined the need for education to enable a critical understanding of lived realities.

5.5 Sexuality and gender as a continuum

The understanding that we sought to build during the programme was that of sexuality and gender as a continuum, and as not being fixed. The paradigm was one of diversity. We made an effort to build an understanding that diversity exists not only around us but also within us. We used analogies such as sprouting of seeds or the spectrum of colours to communicate these ideas. The idea of possibilities and the unexpected was captured in ‘Kya pata’ (‘who knows?’) which became an oft exchanged joke about many situations in the workshops. It first came up during a discussion on the fluidity of sexual desires and the silence around same sex desire.

We consciously tried to steer clear of a narrowly defined framework of identities. In the Indian context for example, a majority perhaps of same sex desiring and transgender people do not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or even as one of the indigenous sexual/gender identities. We also pointed to the risk of creating hierarchies even among marginalised sexual identities. We challenged frameworks which clearly divide people along the lines of ‘us’ and ‘them’ based on sexual orientation. This allows, for example,
those who identify as heterosexual to gain a safe distance from same sex desiring/transgender people. It also negates the sexual possibilities that could accrue across the spectrum of identities (i.e. the possibility of a ‘gay’ man desiring a woman, and a ‘straight’ woman desiring a woman, etc.).

The external review confirmed that participants responded positively to the approach. According to one of the respondents interviewed, ‘…everyone knows, sexuality is fluid and people change… we know that. Maybe I get attracted to you (the reviewer interviewing her) tomorrow and then you the next day… our mind it can want someone one day and want someone another… it can want two people simultaneously as well.’ In the above quote the respondent is speaking of fluidity beyond the categories of opposite sex and same sex to a broader understanding of the changeful and diverse nature of sexuality, including a questioning of the premise of monogamy.

Similar to how we approached issues of sexuality, the framework with respect to gender was one of the gender continuum. We worked on the idea that we all break gender norms. Moving along the gender continuum we spoke of those who do not identify at all with the sex that they are born as and those who choose to change their biological sex.

As in the case of same sex desire, while we sought to establish the paradigm of a continuum in which all the participants could locate themselves, we also highlighted the human rights violations faced by those who visibly break certain gender or sexual norms. We also steered clear of the feminist framework that is typically used in the country – one that posits sex as ‘biological’ vs gender as ‘social.’ We sought to build an understanding of sex as also being socially constructed.

6 Learnings from the workshop (1):
It’s not so difficult to talk about sex!

It was soon obvious in the workshops that women who are less educated and from a rural background were more at ease talking about sex than the more educated middle class urban women working in NGOs. In workshops which brought both together, women from the community or staff members from a more rural background would respond proactively to questions which involved speaking about sex more directly. Other staff members, who were almost invariably more educated, would follow suit. It was like a domino effect, in which after some time, educated women also eased into and engaged with the discussion animatedly. It seemed to be more of an effort for them, and women from the community tended to make them feel more comfortable with the discussion.

During the course of the programme we also gained certain other insights regarding the intersection between education and sexuality. Women from the
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community spoke about how educated younger male family members have begun censoring women in the family and putting pressure on them not to sing the sexually explicit songs which are traditionally sung during weddings and festivals.

6.1 Sex is a public discourse

The tradition of singing songs which are sexually explicit at Hindu weddings as well as during certain Hindu festivals is particularly strong in rural areas in north India. At weddings the songs are sung by women of the family of the bride for the baraatis – members (traditionally men) of the groom’s family who come to the bride’s house before the wedding. The songs are meant to playfully insult the ‘in-laws’ to be. This stands in sharp contrast to the manner in which women of the family are meant to interact, or not, with men (older men in particular) from another family, particularly in-laws. Many of these songs are about women having sexual relations with men from the spouse-to-be’s family. There are even songs about consensual incest; in one song, for example, the bridegroom was supposed to be sexually involved with his sister. Many of the songs, including those that are sung at festivals, provide the space for women to express desires for men other than their husbands, and often irrespective of which caste they are from. Women will typically sing about the luhar, kumhar or sonar – ironsmith, potter or jeweller who are all of different castes.

Such songs are also sung after the baraat, the marriage procession (which traditionally meant only men), leaves the groom’s house to go to the bride’s house, where the marriage takes place. The groom’s house then becomes a ‘women only’ space, and a wild space at that! One of the women assumes the role of a man, wearing some item of men’s clothing, and all sorts of fun and play commence including sex acts being simulated. In some areas, the woman playing a man roams the streets the next day, demanding money from men, sometimes even beating them if they don’t oblige!

Although it is often said, and assumed to be a given truth, that there is silence around sex and sexuality in India, during the course of the workshops we found that in the rural context there were many ways in which sex and sexuality were ‘public’, whether in speech, songs or rituals.

The engagement with issues of sexuality in the public realm is not always positive. Since sex, even within marriage, is meant to be for procreation, newly married couples and brides in particular are taunted openly within the family, if they spend ‘too much time’ in the room which couples are given for a few months after marriage. (After this they do not have a room of their own.) If the son is perceived as being weak, the taunts to the bride are particularly vicious – ‘You will destroy our son’. ‘You will suck him dry.’ Clearly family members have no compunctions in talking openly about sexual behaviour that they do not approve of.

One of the activities in the workshops entailed participants listing what rights they thought they should be entitled to, in an ideal world. Our intention was to locate bodily and sexual rights within a broader framework of rights. As part of
this, the right to housing came up. When we posed the question as to whether the right to housing had any links with bodily rights and sexuality, several participants spoke about the greater likelihood of enjoying sex within the security of a house. Another participant added that because of a shortage of space in the house, couples have sex on the terrace and neighbours often complain about this. It is not just family members; neighbours too do not seem to have a problem in openly voicing their displeasure about sexual behaviour that they don’t approve of.

6.2 Not so normative – not so judgemental?

In all the workshops with rural women, participants made references to how common (heterosexual) relationships outside of marriage were in their village. This was also the perception of most staff members who participated in the workshops. Although these observations are not in the nature of survey or research findings by any means, they assume a certain importance, especially since they were voiced so frequently during the programme. They seem to pose a challenge to the notion of the passive, traditional rural woman in purdah [veil] who has undying devotion for her husband. Such categorical assertions regarding sexual behaviour in the rural context seemed to suggest that sexual relationships outside marriage were the norm and not the exception.

In a workshop with rural women, one of the participants, an elderly woman who tended to be highly conservative in her views, shared the story of how when she had gone to a sterilisation camp for her operation, a woman who was widowed also came to be sterilised. The nurse felt her stomach, found that she was pregnant and began cursing her. The woman’s lover, a local goon, was standing outside with a gun, which he carried as a matter of course. On this occasion he was presumably in a state of readiness to threaten those who might dare to refuse his lover the operation. The participant referred to the widow having had sex as *bura kaam* (‘a bad deed’). When the trainer from the partner NGO (trained by us) said that perhaps what the widow needed to have done was to have used a condom, most participants, including the old woman, nodded their heads in agreement. Examples such as these indicated that it was common for the sexual norm of ‘fidelity’ within marriage to be broken and that what seemed to matter more, even to those who referred to this as ‘wrong’, was that this should not be found out. That it happens was a given. Another telling case that was shared involved a woman who was sexually involved with her brother-in-law and became pregnant. One of the participants said ‘*Chori chupke karna chaheeye tha*’ (‘She should have done it stealthily’). The word *choiri* means theft and *chupke* means quietly. Once again we found that what was considered to be important was whether the deviation from the sexual norm was hidden or open. We also talked about participants using words like ‘*chori chupke*’, implicit in which is the judgement that something wrong is being done.

While participants seemed to be suggesting that the norm of monogamous marriage was being broken often without being ‘found out’, they also spoke about how when ‘found out’ the implications of breaking sexual norms could be
severe – including social boycotting, violence and being ‘sent back’ to their natal home.

This is not to claim as a generalisation that there is a greater transgression of the norm of fidelity in rural areas. Clearly, that would require an investigation of a different nature. What we can say is that in our experience rural participants spoke much more about transgression of sexual norms than educated, urban staff members.

6.3 Even same-sex desires can be talked about

Issues of same-sex desire were stated by participants as constituting one of the most challenging areas. To us it seemed that the fears and anxieties were not so much to do with their own attitudes as much as apprehensions related to how others in the organisation and the community will react. For example, they expressed anxiety about addressing questions related to a world that would end lest procreation comes to a halt as a result of all people eventually shifting to same-sex relationships. They also feared accusations from colleagues that they were talking about issues of sexuality because they wanted to promote lesbianism.

Although there is at present little or no engagement on the part of community-based NGOs with the issue of same-sex desire, in the discussions during the workshops many participants spoke about same sex desiring people, especially men that they knew of in their village/area. It was also clear that participants knew little about the lives of the same sex desiring people whose existence they knew of.

However, as captured by the external review,

All respondents expressed the need for greater social acceptance of same-sex desiring people in their communities... many respondents provided examples in which their perspectives shifted, reflecting greater tolerance and diversity. This awareness was also reflected in respondents’ reported actions that reflected both personal and work-related shifts. For example, a respondent who worked at the residential educational centre explained that ‘before in the centre, if we saw girls getting close we would separate their beds. Now I’m questioning this... because they are growing up and they have their desires’.

The workshops provided the space for some of the participants to feel more comfortable about their own sexuality. Two of the participants ‘came out’ openly and there were others who seemed to experience a greater sense of comfort about expressing their desire for other women through what they wrote and the roles that they performed in plays during the workshops.

6.4 When it’s not easy to talk about sex... are you trying to make money off us?

Although it was largely the case that it was easier to initiate dialogues with the...
rural than urban women about sex and sexuality, this was not always so. We had conducted a workshop with leaders of village level Dalit women’s collectives prior to the commencement of this programme. There was a dual purpose to this workshop. One was perspective building on sexuality and the other was to collect local songs of the kind mentioned above. We wanted to collect songs to explore the possibility of drawing upon them for triggering discussions on sexuality. The participants were extremely suspicious regarding our intention to collect songs. They asked us, ‘How do we know you are not doing this to make money?’ Although not stated clearly, we believed that the participants felt that we were trying to sexualise them. The response to this perceived attempt to sexualise was particularly strong we felt because the participants were Dalit women. Dalit women have been perceived as highly sexual and sexually exploited through the ages by upper caste men. The mood of the workshop changed entirely as it progressed but the experience left us shaken up. We were perhaps overly cautious in the workshops that we conducted later, about talking directly about sexual experiences with participants.

That the sense of ease with sexuality depends on whether or not participants felt that they were being sexualised became apparent in a workshop in which several of the same participants came who had come for the workshop mentioned above. This time around the experience was very different. There was a sense of openness in discussions related to sex and sexuality. This sense was particularly heightened outside of formal sessions; for example, during the lunch break I remember being (playfully) mauled by a participant who was perhaps in her seventies, and loving it!

7 Learnings from the workshops (2):
Sexual desire and violence against women are connected

The experiences and insights shared by staff members and community women revealed the fundamental ways in which sexuality is linked to violence against women (VAW). Why women experience violence, how they experience it and whether they can exit from the violence – are all closely linked to sexuality. It is significant that most of the staff members who participated in the programme have been directly involved in dealing with cases of VAW for around a decade. Time and again participants said that sexuality was at the heart of the vast majority of cases of VAW that come to their organisations.

7.1 Sexuality as a cause of VAW
As mentioned above it is only in the case of sexual violence that the role of sexuality in VAW has thus far been recognised within the discourse on VAW in
India. Sexual violence relates to the nature of violence being sexual. Sexuality as a cause of violence is a broader framework which includes violence against women who break sexual norms such as single women, widowed women, sex workers, women who desire women and women who have sexual relationships outside of marriage.

Relationships that cut across caste and religious identities often meet with violence. In the workshops the extent and nature of violations faced by couples in such relationships were discussed, and included efforts to separate the couple, false allegations, threats, violence, emotional blackmail, disinherit the ‘errant child’ and in-house imprisonment of the woman. Family members who are supportive also suffered, including being falsely implicated and imprisoned. In most of the case studies shared during the workshops, the police played an active role in harassing the couple, in support of the family and were effectively, as one participant said, ‘society in uniform’. The judiciary, especially in the lower courts, was also most often not supportive of the couple. In one of the case studies, the judge was reported to have said, ‘If you step outside of your place in life, this is what will happen.’ The media tended to be sensational as well as moralistic. Most NGOs were also not supportive.

The workshops sought to build an understanding of why there is such strong opposition to inter-caste and inter-religious relationships. The following quote from interviews conducted as part of the external review shows that participants could relate to this analysis.

*A woman and man should be of same caste – being of different castes will affect the next generation, the children – if a lower caste woman has relations with an upper caste man, the child will be of upper caste... the lower caste will disappear. If an upper caste woman has relations with a lower caste man, the child will be of lower caste. Sexual relations are to be maintained within caste to maintain the continuity of the castes. There is a fear in society of castes breaking. Sexual relations have been tied to religion also – a Hindu boy should have sexual relations only with a Hindu girl. A Muslim boy should have sexual relations only with a Muslim girl.*

### 7.2 Sexuality as a factor impacting ability to exit abusive relationships

A pervasive and recurrent phenomenon encountered by organisations that work on Violence against Women is survivors of violence going back to their abusive husbands. Staff members of these programmes often feel bewildered, disappointed and even betrayed when this happens and according to participants, this happens more often than not. Presently the understanding of why women return to abusive husbands includes factors such as economic dependence, the stigma of being divorced, the internalisation of the importance of marriage and the lack of social support. However, women’s sexual needs as one of the factors underlying why women return to abusive husbands is yet to be recognised as one of the important reasons why women are unable to leave abusive situations. Survivors of violence often fear that they might not be able
to satisfy their sexual needs if they leave their husband. One of the many cases shared by participants was as follows. ‘There is a woman I know whose husband sold their house, married another woman and began living with her. He occasionally comes to visit the first wife and continues to be violent with her. Despite this the woman does not want to leave him. She says, “My husband beats me a lot, but he also loves me. Physical happiness drives away all the pain.”’

Looking back at responses to survivors of violence who return to their husbands, participants had important reflections to offer. One of the participants said, ‘These days there are NGOs who will even make the woman write that she will not go back to her husband.’ Someone else responded by saying ‘It’s not just this. It’s part of a bigger problem. It seems like everyone but the woman gets to decide what direction her life should take.’ Another participant said, ‘The woman who is in trouble has the space to talk about her problem but not about her desires.’

During an interview conducted as part of the external review one of the respondents said, ‘In case work, we see that sexuality is a need. Women are told they can experience sexuality only with their husbands. Many women will stand up in court and talk about difficulties in their relationships. But at the end of the day, they’ll compromise and go back to husbands who torture them. Women also have sexual needs. They say, “We have a need, where will we go?”’

### 7.3 Sexuality as it impacts perceptions of violence

Perceptions and socialisation impact on what women regard as ‘violence’. Non-normative sexual acts that male partners expect women to participate in are often considered by women to be ‘unnatural’. Examples that emerged during the workshops included husbands expecting the wife to remove clothes during sex. The men wanting to perform anal sex with women and to have oral sex performed on them were cited frequently by women who approach VAW programmes. In many cases the very expectation of such acts was considered violative and in other cases the husband coerced the wife into these acts against her will.

### 7.4 Changes required in VAW work

On the one hand there are gaps in the way that violence within marriage is being addressed; on the other hand marriage being the framework within which violence is being understood is in itself highly problematic. ‘Violence against Women’ translates in effect as ‘Violence against Women in Marriage’. As stated above this excludes many women – young women who have pre-marital sexual relations, women who are widowed and are sexually active, women who desire men, sex workers, etc. These women tend not to even approach groups working on VAW when they face violations. The category of ‘women’ also excludes transgender people although the violence faced by transgender
people is essentially gender-based violence. Younger married women are also currently not within the ambit of VAW interventions. Initiatives against VAW need to be more inclusive.

The experience of the workshops conducted by Nరాటర్ provided a glimpse of the possibility of impacting VAW interventions through capacity building. These changes were captured by the external review. For example, in an interview conducted as part of an external review of the programme, one of the participants said, ‘For myself, I learned how to integrate it (sexuality) in case work. If a woman says she’s facing violence, now we know that we should ask more questions. Is there a sexuality issue there? How to raise it? The women who do the case work... we’ve never been trained like this.’ Another participant said, ‘We talked about violence, food, clothes (when dealing with cases of violence) but never talked about sexuality, in the past. When a woman wanted to go back to her husband after a beating, we generally did not agree. But, now we see that maybe she needs sex also.’ Another respondent said, ‘Earlier, when we did case work, if there was a woman who was in a relationship with a man other than her husband, we were critical. Now we’re more accepting. We work on the cases in a way that she can be with the other man, the one she wants.’

In terms of cases related to non-normative sexual acts within marriage, it was also heartening to learn from some participants about how when a woman comes to them with the complaint that her husband tries to make her have anal or oral sex, they have counselled both the woman and the man. They have made clear to the husband that he cannot coerce his wife and that it is only if he is able to make the act desirable for the woman can it be engaged in. They also counselled the woman by saying that there is nothing wrong with any particular act, as long as it involves the consent of those involved and that perhaps she also needs to explore what she might or might not find pleasurable.

As participants said there is indeed more space now for women to talk about violations and for these to be addressed. To reach this stage where women can begin to talk about the violence they face and for this to have legitimacy has taken the women’s movement years of struggle. More NGOs than ever before are working on VAW. The state too has been pushed to enact a law on domestic violence. However, it is also true that a majority of women who experience violence are perhaps unable to report it, for a variety of reasons related to gender and sexuality. Therefore it is not as though VAW has been addressed and we can now ‘move on’ to look at desire. It is not violence vs sexual desire. As argued above, sexuality and VAW are fundamentally linked. It is essential to address desires in order to address VAW more effectively. It is also critical to address desire \textit{per se}, as a sexual right, and not only because this ensures more effective VAW interventions.

Time and again discussions in the workshops drove home the point that we cannot think in terms of Pleasure or Danger. Life experiences show the importance of recognising pleasure and danger and the linkages between the two, as Carole Vance does so powerfully in her article ‘Pleasure and Danger’ (Vance 1984). There is an urgent need for capacity building inputs which
enable a positive perspective on sexuality since only then can issues of sexual rights, needs, compatibility and diversity, which are at the heart of gender-based violence, be understood and addressed. A positive approach is also a necessary part of ensuring that women are seen as having agency and not viewed only as victims of violence.

8 Learnings from the workshops (3):
Sexuality and women’s empowerment are connected

‘If women can express their sexual desires, they will truly be empowered.’

(Violence Against Women Case Worker, External Review)

The workshops helped not only participants but also us as trainers to understand the many and important ways in which sexuality links with women’s empowerment.

8.1 Being able to focus on one’s own happiness

It came as a surprise to us when members of organisations who have been extremely active in working for women’s rights for many years, who came to the workshop said that ‘finally’ we are being able to ‘think about ourselves’ and not just others. After all, these were activists who have experienced many changes in their lives and being able to ‘think about ourselves’ is very much part of feminist politics. Why was it that participating in workshops on sexuality was triggering such a comment?

In the first workshop participants were divided into small groups and asked why they felt sexual pleasure was important. The outcomes of the group discussions written up on charts were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Pleasure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Sexual pleasure gives energy. If we have sexual pleasure we can do other things with energy too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When my partner gets satisfaction, this gives me the self confidence that I can do anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sexual pleasure takes me towards spirituality. It is not just physical, mental or emotional, it is the meeting of souls.(^2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Sexual pleasure frees me from tension.
• Sexual pleasure makes me feel more connected to my body.
• Sexual pleasure makes me feel more connected to my partner.
• Sexual pleasure enhances beauty, it is sexual happiness that brings a shine to the face.
• Sexual pleasure increases curiosity and eagerness, which is the basis for development.
• Sexual pleasure is a biological need.

Immediately after this, participants were asked to list what they meant by empowerment. They wrote the following.

**Empowerment is:**
- Economic – Property rights, autonomy, decision making
- Social – Against injustice, for education, development, health, information, solidarity
- Individual – Freedom from violence, ability to analyse situations, practical knowledge, giving importance to the self, self-confidence
- Political – Mobilisation, local governance, issues of caste.

And there was no mention of sexuality! There seems to be a connection between this omission and the articulation by the participants that coming to this workshop has meant that they have finally been able to talk ‘about themselves’. Perhaps in the other struggles they had waged as feminists, the framework was still one of the good woman. As feminist activists we have been able to challenge many forms of discrimination, but perhaps there has been a self-censorship at work about issues of women’s sexuality, including our own sexual desires. To win the battles against other forms of discrimination and injustice, we have had to maintain our image, and self-image, as respectable activists. These battles have after all often been waged at great personal cost, including confrontations with the family and community.

The concept of sexual empowerment is of vital importance given the construct of the good woman who is not meant to think about her needs and desires, and

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2 One of the participants shared that rural women in her area used the term ‘bodh’ for orgasm. Bodh means to know, to realise, which is also used in a spiritual sense for self-realisation.
certainly not her sexual desires. There is perhaps something particularly challenging about women thinking about their sexual desires. Women who fight for their right to livelihoods fight a difficult battle, but livelihood can be perceived as being something that can be for the good of the family or society, but sexual fulfilment is primarily important for the woman herself.

The understanding of sexual empowerment that emerged from the workshops could be articulated in the following way:

**Sexual Empowerment is**

- The ability to think about one’s own happiness, recognise the importance of sexual desires and to be able to express them
- Understanding the role of sexuality in why and how women are oppressed
- Recognising and striving to overcome barriers related to sexuality and the acquisition of rights
- Questioning judgemental attitudes towards each other and thereby strengthening collectives

The sense of liberation that can be experienced when the space for women’s desires is created was captured by the external review report. One of the participants interviewed said, “I’m a villager. I didn’t know anything when I came for the workshop. At first I felt angry. I told [my co-worker] ‘You shouldn’t have brought me to such a meeting.’ After three days of training I started understanding that this means something. That it’s not right that we don’t have rights over our body. I began to like it. I learned all these things. Everyone was sharing… we talked about masturbation, oral sex… I didn’t know about this, how it happens. When I returned, I said ‘You should have sent me years ago.’ Another respondent reported, ‘After this training I felt freer. I feel lighter. If I have to talk to someone, I feel I can do that.’ Yet another respondent said, ‘The difference is that earlier, I did the same thing before, talk to men… but before I used to feel scared of what people would say and whether I am doing the right thing’.

### 8.2 Enabling access to rights

An important linkage between sexuality and empowerment related to bodily integrity in terms of women’s ability to express their sexual desires and also to be able to say ‘no’ to unwanted sexual attention. Respondents felt that women should be encouraged to initiate sex if they wanted sex, which was not their custom. One respondent described her first time initiating sex with her husband after attending the workshops. Clearly challenging the idea of the woman being ‘passive’ and the man being ‘active’. “I went to my husband and said to him, “I want to have sex with you.” He replied, “Where did the sun rise this morning?”
How did this happen to you? "... Now, if I have a desire, then I will have sex. Earlier he was the only one initiating sex.' A respondent interviewed during the external review spoke about the difference between consensual and non-consensual sex. 'If my partner licks and kisses me it might fulfil my desire. But if a man forces sex on me that would not fulfil my desire.'

The workshops also provided the space for an articulation of the linkages between sexuality and a range of women’s rights, not only in relation to bodily integrity and desires, but also to the right to education, health, mobility, etc. In several workshops participants spoke about how a sense of shame, which is attached to certain parts of the body considered to be sexual, prevents women from talking about diseases that they suffer from. Several examples of common problems like white discharge and boils in the vagina were shared. In one of the workshops a participant spoke about how her aunt felt a lump on her breast, but she did not go to the doctor because of a sense of shame. It turned out to be cancer, because of which she eventually died.

Several participants spoke about how girls are forced to drop out of school, typically after class 5 (when they are aged ten or eleven), because the next level of school is a few kilometres away from the village. Parents fear that the girl will have sex on the way and/or that she might become pregnant. These fears, in the way that they are articulated (kahin unch neech na ho jaye – ‘something “untoward” should not happen’), do not make the distinction between whether the sexual encounter is consensual or not.

There was also discussion on women’s mobility more generally. Women not being allowed to go out at night in particular was clearly seen as being linked with not only the fear of sexual assault but also, and perhaps more so, with the fear that the woman might be meeting a man whom she is sexually involved with.

8.3 Solidarity

So deeply internalised is the idea of the bad woman that there is often a strong tendency among staff members of community-based organisations to judge each other about these choices, to ‘gossip’, taunt or laugh at others in the team behind their backs. At one level this might seem trivial. In fact, as shared by participants, it has serious implications for solidarity and trust, which are important dimensions of the desired work culture of such organisations. The irony is that even those who themselves are in non-normative sexual relationships judge others in a similar situation. There is a stark contrast between how members of the organisation lead their lives and how they respond to other’s relationships outside the norm of heterosexual monogamy within marriage. The same is also true of women’s collectives at the community level. In an interview conducted as part of the external review one of the respondents said:

*We did a counselling training with women survivors of violence. One woman in the group liked her devar (husband’s younger brother). When she responded to his phone call, the other women got enraged... One*
woman gave her own example: ‘My husband and I haven’t talked for five years but I don’t look at another man.’ The trainer explained that they were afraid to challenge these judgements for fear that women would stop coming to their workshops. Eventually however, they addressed the issue through discussion and relating to the other participants’ own lives. After this discussion… one woman said to us, ‘you should have had this conversation with us before; we haven’t talked to this poor girl for four days.’

The game we ran in the trainings of the alliance of bad women aimed to show how all women who break sexual norms are connected to each other. This helped resist the tendency to view categories such as lesbian, sex worker, married woman, widow, etc. as distinct and unconnected.

9 Learnings from the workshops (4): Men need sexual rights too!

Bigamy was an important topic of discussion in the workshops because community organisations often have to deal with cases of bigamy as part of their role as dispensers of justice. One of the concerns about the manner in which such cases are treated relates to the rights of the second woman, who is often seen as the ‘bad woman’, the home breaker, while the first wife is considered to be the victim whose rights need to be protected. In most cases, the man is not considered as having any rights at all. While it is true that men in bigamous relationships do exercise patriarchal privilege and tend not to be fair to the first wife, it is equally true that a rights-based approach needs to recognise that men also have rights in this scenario. Community-based NGOs and women’s collectives have been known to be extreme in the manner in which they have dealt with men in bigamous relationships. In one of the cases that came up during a workshop in the programme, the women’s collective had threatened to have the man removed from his job and even to tie him to the railway tracks if he did not agree to return to his first wife.

The importance of the rights of men as they relate to sexuality was highlighted during cases brought into the discussion by participants that related to young men who have entered into relationships of choice/love, not arranged by their families. In these cases, when there is suspicion or the relationship is ‘found out’, the family of the young woman may make the matter out to be non-consensual. The young woman is under huge pressure to betray the lover in order to protect herself from violations at the hands of the family and community. Young men in such situations have been falsely accused of stealing or kidnapping. According to participants, stealing tended to be the preferred accusation, rather than kidnapping, because the latter still held the potential to mar the reputation of the woman.

These discussions underlined the importance of staff members and members of women’s collectives understanding and bringing to the fore the issue of
consent. There is a need to investigate whether there is truly a lack of consent or whether consent is being disguised as coercion for other reasons. At a broader level these cases pointed to the urgent need to build an enabling environment in which there is space for expression of consent.

10 Learnings from the workshops (5): Transgender issues

Many participants spoke about transgender people in their village/town or in the area in which they lived. Many more such examples were shared than those relating to same sex desiring people. The examples were mostly of people who were biologically male and feminine. Participants shared many different local terms for male to female transgender people such as hijra, mehra, pindha and lala. Transgender people are clearly a part of the fabric of the local context in which community-based organisations work. This is important to highlight because currently such organisations, including organisations that are highly committed to gender justice, have not thus far worked with these members of the community or even acknowledged their existence as members of the community with particular concerns. During a discussion on transgender issues in one of the workshops, a participant who was a staff member, commented on this and said, ‘Hum to apne mein hee lad rahe hain’ – ‘We are busy fighting amongst ourselves’. She was referring to the gender struggle between women and men and how, in this fight, we have forgotten about transgender people.

Although most participants knew about the existence of transgender people, it took considerable effort to build an understanding of the issue from a human rights perspective. While there was empathy among participants, there was a tendency to relate to gender transgression as ‘shauk’ (‘interest’). We had to repeatedly ask that if it were just this then would transgender people be willing to suffer the violations that they have to face. In one of the workshops a trainer from a partner NGO (whom we had trained) said it is a matter of their ‘desire’, not just ‘interest’. We liked this use of the term ‘desire’ in the context of gender (not only sexuality).

One of the dangers that conversations related to transgender people often ran into was that participants tended to feel that somehow being transgender is ‘natural’. Even though they were clear that gender is socially constructed, transgender tended to be perceived in essentialised ways – i.e. someone who is born male feels ‘naturally’ like a woman inside. More effective than countering this through discussions was when participants met Revathi, a hijra activist working with an NGO and Madhu, a non-activist hijra. While Revathi, in the way that she dressed and in her mannerisms looked very much like a ‘respectable’ activist, Madhu was very feminine, dramatic and sexy in her gender performance. Participants were struck by the difference and this difference helped us establish that there is diversity even within hijra expression, which is impacted by other factors/identities, in this case, the identity of NGO activist.
In terms of the impact of the discussions on transgender issues, the external review reported several changes both in terms of perspective and behaviour:

All respondents recognised their own fear and prejudice against transgender people. Many reported that they were afraid of *hijras* and misunderstood them as a result of myths passed through their families. These prejudicial perspectives began to wane over the course of the workshops. After attending the workshops, one woman stated, regarding a *hijra* in her community: ‘So that man [sic], I apologised to him [sic] for hitting him [sic] with clumps of mud earlier. We then had a nice conversation…. in the future, I would like work to help transgenders to obtain their rights.’

One of the interviews also showed a shift in understanding about intersexed people (although the respondent used a wrong term ‘*hijra*’ instead of intersexed).

*In my maika (natal family), a niece was born, she was a hijra [sic] from birth, she didn’t have a vagina. There was a lot of talk in the family. Because of their unease, the parents took the baby to a doctor after her six day pooja (prayer). A procedure was done and an incision made. After 2–3 years she got an infection and died. It was a moneyed family…. If society did not consider it a problem, and did not get such operations, they would not die.*

11 Conclusion

11.1 Reflections on strategy

A key factor of the ‘Sexuality and Us’ trainings was the intensive nature of the programme. A selected number of participants were trained as trainers through a series of workshops. Nirantar provided intensive support in terms of enabling these participants to plan and conduct workshops with other women staff members in their organisations as well as with rural women that they work with. On reflecting back we feel that this intensive nature of capacity building was indeed required given the lack of opportunities to engage with issues of sexuality thus far and the extent of learning and un-learning required.

The workshops with rural women were also important in terms of building the confidence of staff members so that it is possible to talk to women from the communities about issues of sexuality. These workshops were also important for Nirantar to build an understanding about how rural women perceive issues of sexuality and to build a more contextualised understanding of sexuality.

Working with organisations who are committed to women’s empowerment was important to enable shifts in perspective. This was the first time that an intervention of this nature was being conducted. It was a good decision we felt
to have worked with organisations which already had an understanding of gender issues. Although the workshops challenged some of the existing ideas of gender, it was important that organisations already had a strong feminist understanding. This provided a base on which to build a political understanding of sexuality.

An element that we added to the strategy upon request from the participants was a workshop with men on issues of sexuality. We feel however, that more thinking is required about how to engage with men in the organisation. Another area that required greater attention was perspective building on masculinities. As the external review report states:

Interestingly, when the respondents did talk about men and sexuality it was often within the language of women’s oppression and men’s dominance. They expressed limited understanding about men’s vulnerabilities related to masculinity and social norms that are also oppressive, such as sexual-performance anxiety, and the social expectation to protect their families and provide despite being poor.

An area in which we felt much more effort was required was with respect to organisational leadership. Before the programme started a consultation was held in which the leadership of the partner organisations participated and in four of the five organisations, it was the leadership that expressed a keen interest to participate in the programme. The organisations also enabled the space for more intensive follow-up workshops than were planned. However, there was no process of sharing back how the programme was unfolding with the leadership of the organisations. If such a process had been undertaken, it might have led to the leadership enabling sexuality-related initiatives after the programme was completed.

Financial resources were also a key obstacle reported by the partner organisations. In a context in which NGOs work in a funded, project mode, there is a need to follow up a capacity-building intervention of this nature with a structured and resourced project which can enable partner organisations to take forward the learnings related to sexuality as part of their work in a sustainable manner.

### 11.2 Key learnings

An important learning that emerged from the programme related to the ease in being able to speak with rural women about issues of sexuality and the factors that might have contributed to this sense of ease. Rural participants tended to be more honest and less constrained by worries about whether their responses were ‘politically correct’ than the more educated staff members. This often made it easier to enter into debate and discussion. Rural participants tended to be less inhibited and more playful about issues of sexual pleasure. One of the reasons for this is perhaps, as emerged in the workshops, that there is a culture of expressions of sexuality in the public realm – be it positive, such as sexually explicit songs or negative, such as public censure of expressions of sexuality that fall outside of the norm. Another factor that might explain why
rural women had a greater sense of ease around sex and sexuality is the oft repeated perception of the need for sexual pleasure as ‘shareer ki bhook’ – ‘hunger of the body’. This perception seemed to lend itself to participants being open to less judgemental and less moralistic ways of looking at sexuality.

The workshops also provided the confidence that it is possible and desirable to approach sexuality in a manner which captures its complexities and nuances. There was no ‘dumbing down’ of concepts of sexuality required. We worked with ideas of sexuality and gender as being socially constructed, fluid and as part of a continuum. We sought to build an understanding of ‘why’ sexual norms exist in the form that they do. Linkages were made between sexuality and structures and ideologies related to gender, caste, class, dis/ability and religion. Participants engaged with the significance of gender and sexuality-based identities as well as the dangers of narrowly defined identity-based frameworks.

The workshops also showed us that it is important not to set up a false binary between ‘pleasure’ and ‘danger’. Even interventions related to gender-based violence, for example, need to be informed by a positive approach to sexuality. It was clear that a positive approach to sexuality is necessary if interventions are to fully understand and be informed by ‘why’ there is gender-based violence, ‘how’ violence is being experienced, ‘whether’ women can exit from the violence and ‘who’ is currently being included or excluded from violence against women interventions.

Lastly the workshops established the significance of a political approach to sexuality. Currently in the realm of sexual rights work, there is a degree of importance placed on pleasure-based approaches to sexuality. We would like to argue that a political approach to sexuality is also necessary, particularly if we are to collectively examine and challenge existing sexual norms and structures.
References

