

MUSKAN-2011-2012

Results and Reflections

Men who have sex with men and transgenders (MSM-T) encounter familial and social violence because they are female presenting or refusing marriage. Same-sex desire is perceived as unnatural. The stories of sexual difference illustrate how MSM-T struggle with similar issues of internalised shame because they fail to conform to hegemonic versions of masculinity. They are invariably estranged from their families who disrespect them, try to 'change' them, and attempt to deny them their right to property. Leading double lives, many MSM are married to women. Extraordinary as it might seem, there can be love and a great deal of respect in these unions, despite the truths concealed. While vilified by men - sometimes verbally abused, physically attacked and through blackmail – MSM-T are simultaneously desired by them. These men's stories reflect both the jubilation and disenchantment of same-sex desire.

While HIV positive people have to deal with life-threatening health issues, they are socially alienated by stigma and prejudice. HIV positive women demonstrate how the medical profession and family members violently react to a positive status. Couples are forced apart and the women are beaten or cruelly treated by partners, members of family and/or in-laws. Undeterred, they struggle towards claiming their rightful property and maintaining dignity in the face of this violence.

On the one hand, these all of these lives could be singularly defined by despair. Too often, the NGO typically foregrounds the victim narrative above all else. Misery is an excellent selling point. However, to do this would neither be true to the beneficiaries, nor would it challenge others into 'thinking outside of the box' about those who make up the 'minorities', or the discriminated against. It is important to pay heed to their resilience and many acts of compassion. The simple, yet life changing, action of a sex worker who provides shelter to an unknown girl she finds sitting on her doorstep. A member of the positive women's support group takes care of a pregnant woman, abandoned by family, husband and lover because she is positive. The refuge offered by Hindus to a Muslim family with the mob on their doorstep; and the many other acts of kindness which result from a common understanding of what it means to survive the violence of stigma.

Regaining agency through a rights-based approach

In our experience, MSM sex workers are far less exposed to the rights discourse. Those who earn money through sex do so under extremely disorganised working conditions. This increases their vulnerability to violence and HIV. Female sex workers in Sangli district have been hugely influential in building an awareness of rights amongst MSM.

Working with MSM, transgender people and sex workers has encouraged us to opening address subversive issues in the villages such as those regarding gender norms, sexuality and sexual diversity. Reaching out to rural women with the language of rights and urging them to take control of their lives has been a struggle, but greatly helped by learning from these groups.