

Local workshops conducted by WSG

The WSG has regularly held awareness workshops on sexual health, sexual rights and sexuality. With the help of resource people from our own group and other organisations, we have been to various rural areas to hold these workshops. Our main aim in conducting these workshops is to raise visibility of the WSG as a support group for LBT women. In most instances, we have held these workshops for women community workers who are leaders in their own villages and districts. By addressing these women, we hope to bring attention to the stigma and discrimination faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in their own surroundings. Issues of sexuality and gender are intrinsically connected, and therefore, in our outreach activities we focus on gender awareness in relation to our society. The atmosphere created by our interactive sessions allowed them to relax and narrate many anecdotal stories to us about people in their communities who have lived lives that were "different." We and our participants have both learnt from these workshops.

Workshop on HIV / AIDS and Sexual Health Rights, May 31, 2009, Bandaragama

The WSG was invited to do a one day workshop on HIV / AIDS and Reproductive Health Rights by the Women's Centre in Ja-Ela for the Free Trade Zone workers. This workshop was jointly conducted by the Women's Support Group and the Equal Ground.

The workshop was organized by the Women's Centre and it was held at the Sarvodaya Center in Bandaragama. 30 women from 3 garment factories participated for this workshop. After a brief introduction about the WSG and about the agenda of the day the participants were asked about their ideas on health. This was followed by an introduction to HIV and AIDS. After which the participants were given a thorough knowledge on infection ways and prevention methods of HIV / AIDS. The evening session was about sexual health rights. This was a productive programme as it was participated by participants from areas that we have not worked in earlier.

Members Workshop on Gender, May 13, 2009

A one day workshop was held by the WSG for our own members to discuss issues related to gender and gender identity. Around 10 members attended this interactive workshop which commenced with an activity that showed the biological differences between males and females. The larger part of the discussion thereafter was committed to discussing the socio-cultural differences accrued to men and women to understand how we are socialized to believe in these 'differences'.

Many questions and issues pertaining to the topic were discussed as well as many myths. The WSG ended the day's session with the plan for monthly workshops on gender and sexuality related areas to delve deeper, broadening the minds of their members.

Workshop on Sexual Health, Gender and Sexual Rights, 20th & 21st May, 2009, Kataragama

The workshop in Kataragama was held on request by our funders as they had identified it as an area that had reported many problems related to sexuality. This was a two-part workshop that was organised with the help of a partner organisation in Kataragama. Though we organised this event for 30 participants in the areas surrounding Kataragama, there were close to 60 women attending the workshop. They were from all walks of life, young and old, self-employed, unemployed, and even students.

The first day's session consisted of HIV/AIDS awareness as well as STIs and preventive methods, including prevention of STIs. The second day was organised around concepts of gender and sexuality, with a discussion focusing on the problems facing women in the area. The participants felt that this was a very important workshop for them as they had never participated in a workshop discussing sexual health before.

Workshop on Sexual Health, Gender and Sexual Rights, 25th & 26th March, 2009, Katunayake

Katunayake was chosen as part of our workshop on HIV/AIDS project because the Free Trade Zone workers are known to be vulnerable to sexual harassment as well as being marginalised. This was a two-part workshop that we organised with the help of a partner organisation, the Da Bindu Collective. There were nearly 30 participants from organisations working in the FTZ area as well in surrounding villages, going up to Negombo. A few of them were also working in trade unions, which we felt would be helpful in talking of the rights aspect, the sexuality part of which is usually ignored.

The first day's session consisted of HIV/AIDS awareness as well as STIs and preventive methods, including safe sex. The second day was organised around concepts of gender and sexuality, with a discussion focusing on the problems faced by the FTZ workers, who are mostly young women. This was an extremely successful workshop as the participants were actively working with young women who are in a vulnerable situation both sexually and socio-economically.

Workshop on Sexual Health, Gender and Sexual Rights, 14th & 15th February 2009, Anuradhapura

This was organised with the help of the Rajarata Jana Pabodini organisation from the Anuradhapura district. There were over 30 participants from areas around Anuradhapura, some from very remote areas as well. All participants were active members of their respective areas. However, this workshop was special in that there were both male and female community leaders at this workshop, which is unusual in a sexual health workshop. However, it was a very productive workshop and there was much debate and discussion amongst the participants on these issues.

Workshop on Sexual Health, Gender and Sexual Rights, 18th & 19th October 2008, Moneragala

This was a two-part workshop that we organised with the help of a partner-organisation in Moneragala. The Uva Wellassa Govi Kantha Sammelanaya (the Uva-Wellassa Farming Women's Organisation). There were 36 participants from areas surrounding Moneragala such as Butthala, Badalkumbura, Siyambalanduwa and Kataragama. All of these participants were active members of their respective areas and women's organizations. A few of them are also working as Samurdhi animators and assistants to the MOH which places them at an advantageous place in working with women in the area.

The first day's session consisted of HIV/AIDS awareness as well as STIs and preventive methods, including safe sex. The second day was organised around concepts of gender and sexuality as well as the problematics of working as and with women in heteronormative contexts. A discussion of the gender socialisation process ended the second day's session.

This was an extremely successful workshop as the participants were activist and could relate what they were experiencing with the issues that the WSG discussed with them.

Workshop on HIV/AIDS, Gender and Sexual Rights, 29th & 30th August 2008, Puttlam

This workshop was organised with us by the Praja Diriya Padanam (Community Encouragement Foundation) in Puttalam. Day 1 was on STIs and HIV/AIDS, of which the STI section was conducted by a medical officer of the state health services. The second day was spent on discussions of sexuality and gender issues that affect women in their daily lives. This was an interesting workshop as a diverse group of nearly 50 women including Sinhala and Muslim women as well as some IDPs attended this workshop. Since most of them were not activists there was a lot of awareness raising work necessary. The WSG hopes to work with them in the future.

Sexual Rights Network Meeting, 30th September 2007, Anuradhapura

Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) from Anuradhapura, Puttlam and Buttala participated this month at the SRN Meeting that was held in Anuradhapura. This time, we had organised for a representative of Women in Need (WIN), an organisation working with women affected by violence, to make a presentation on the services offered by WIN. During the short discussion that followed, we talked about how silence on women's sexuality negatively affects dealing with violence, since most women and girls are afraid to report instances of violence. After the SRN meeting, which took place in the afternoon, the WSG also visited another very small CBO that had just started. It was heartening to see these women, young and old, gather together to discuss their issues, and we really enjoyed their beli and hibiscus flower drinks and the sweets!

Integrated Workshop on Gender, Sexuality and Sexual Health, July 2005

This workshop was planned to bring together women from all three of the previous workshops from the areas of Mahiyanganaya, Butthala, and Kekirawa. The integrated workshop brought together women from all three areas so that they could have a more in-depth discussion of the issues discussed at their regional workshops. One of the key points of this workshop was that it included invited resource people from other organizations who talked of current topics that were being debated. One presentation was on the amendments proposed to the Domestic Violence Act. The women participants were given an explanation of the legal rights of women and families with regard to the Act. This is especially important since the WSG has at times had to support women who were being harassed by their families. Another presentation was on the consequences that criminalization of homosexuality leads to in the country.

The 2 day workshop was held as a residential workshop in Negombo so that the evenings could also be used for networking purposes. Many of these women participants had not attended a residential meeting such as this and enjoyed discussing various issues with women from other regions. All in all, this was a very successful workshop.

Workshops in Matara, 23rd and 24th October 2004

Women's Support Group held two one-day workshops in Matara (Southern Province) in collaboration with INFORM (Human Rights Documentation centre). The first workshop was held for provincial reporters from the Southern Province (Galle, Matara and Hambanthota districts) on "Sexual rights, sexual health and the responsibilities of the Media." The resource people on sexuality, human rights and media ethics were professionals in their respective fields.

The second workshop in Matara was held for community workers. Unlike in our previous workshops for community workers, this workshop included men as well as women. Sessions on sexual health, sexual rights, gender, stigma and discrimination were some of the topics discussed.

Workshop in Moneragala, 23rd and 24th July 2004

This was a two-day workshop in Moneragala (Uva Province) with young women from all over the district. More than 20 women, including active members of the community-based organisations in Moneragala, participated in this workshop on "Sexual health, sexual rights and sexuality". The discussions – on gender, discrimination, sexual health - were lively and participatory. We were joined by resource people from other organisations. It was held with the help of the Uwa-Wellassa Farming Women's Organisation who were extremely helpful.

Workshop in Kekirawa, 28th and 29th November 2003

This workshop on "Women's sexual health and sexuality" was held in Kekirawa (North Central Province) and was participated by about 25 women from the district, the majority being in their early twenties. The workshop session on sexual health was conducted as usual by a resource person from a community-based organisation and the rest of the sessions on 'sex, gender and sexuality' as well as 'stigma and discrimination' were by WSG resource persons. The participants also took part in a productive session to come up with stories for the Clothesline Project.

Workshop in Mahiyanganaya, 22nd and 23rd August 2003

A group of about 25 women participated in this workshop from a number of organisation in Mahiyangana area (Uva Province), including but not only Galeyya Diriyakathun sanvidanaya, 13 kanuva kathun sanvidanaya, Bintenne Women's Front. In addition to our usual sessions on sexual health and sexual rights, we also conducted a session on 'networking with different organisations' which was conducted by an Australian volunteer working with us at the time. The pictures show the various activities during the workshop.

Inter-Organizational Workshops

The WSG invited many representatives from non-state human rights and women's rights organizations in Sri Lanka for its first Inter-Organizational Exchange Workshop held by the Women's Support Group on 20 August 2002 at the CENWOR auditorium, which was designed to discuss the possibilities of networking in the areas of human rights and women's rights. Unfortunately, only 15 attended the workshop, even though these few participants displayed great interest in discussing networking to work on issues of sexuality and gender.

However, rather than being discouraged, the WSG organized its second Inter-Organisational Workshop in May 2003 and to our surprise there were more than forty participants. The participants were representatives of more than 15 organizations in the human rights, women's rights and mental health fields.

In the lively discussions following the panel presentations extending over three hours, the participants expressed their concerns regarding sexuality and how it affects their own clientele. There was general agreement that such discussions should be promoted amongst other organizations working on human rights to enable them to address relevant issues for themselves, and to encourage inter-organisational networking opportunities in the future. The members of mental health support services were concerned about the differing ideas on sexuality in Sri Lanka, which mirrored our own concerns of conflicting ideas regarding homosexuality amongst the mental health professionals. This second Inter-Organisational Workshop also showed us that even one year could make a difference in the visibility of the WSG. It was also indicative of the comparative importance given to issues of sexuality.