

Pratigya Campaign marks International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women

Unified voice to break Silence around Abortion

Mumbai, November 22, 2019: *'Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most widespread, persistent and devastating human rights violations in our world today remains largely unreported due to the impunity, silence, stigma and shame surrounding it.'* - The United Nations

Violence is not just physical it has deeper psychosocial effects, and the silence around denial of safe abortion services is one such form of violence that is seldom spoken about. Denial of safe abortion services can disproportionately affect women's life and career choices. Abortion is healthcare and should be a key part of universal health coverage.

Pratigya Campaign for Gender Equality and Safe Abortion is working to address stigma and silence around abortion. In the recent months the coalition conducted a [study](#) that found that Medical Abortion (MA) Drugs, which are a priority for promotion of women's health and reproductive rights, are rapidly vanishing from the chemists' shelves. MA is the preferred method of abortion care in India, with an estimated [81% of the 15.6 million annual](#) abortions being performed using them. The study found that non-availability of these drugs is threatening women's' access to safe abortion, especially in a scenario where even today an [estimated 10 women die in India due to unsafe abortions](#), the third leading cause of maternal mortality in India.

The campaign, which works for gender equality and access to safe abortion for women in India, had also commissioned a [report](#) assessing the judiciary's role in access to safe abortion in India. The findings suggest that over the last three years, **194** women have filed petitions at the Supreme Court and High Courts, seeking permission to terminate their pregnancies. Among all High Courts, the Bombay High Court witnessed the largest share of petitions with **88** women appealing before the court. This alarmingly high number shows the number of times women knocked on the doors' of the High Court to seek access to their rights and safe abortion. In turn, this number represents the number of chances the High Court got to deliver guidelines and judgements in favour of women's reproductive rights, but to no avail in reality.

Maharashtra particularly, as pointed by the studies has not been able to provide gender justice to women seeking abortion. Due to misconceptions and over regulation by drug controllers, Medical Abortion pills are vanishing from the market and with lengthy judicial process and lack of awareness, women below 20 weeks of gestation are knocking at courts. This does not bode well in improving access to Sexual & Reproductive Health Rights in the state.

Marking the International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women, **the Pratigya Campaign for Gender Equality and Safe Abortion hosted a media roundtable discussion** at the Family Planning Association of India, Mumbai. Members at the roundtable included Mr. Anand Pawar, Pratigya Partner and Founder – Samyak NGO; Advocate Anubha Rastogi, Pratigya Campaign Advisory Group Member and Independent Lawyer; Dr. Kalpana Apte, Pratigya Campaign Advisory Group Member and Secretary General, Family Planning Association of India and Mr VS Chandrashekar, Pratigya Campaign Advisory Group Member and CEO, Foundation for Reproductive Health Services India. A free-wheeling discussion was held on the growing incidence of violence against women with a focus of hurdles such as denied access to safe abortion.

In today's day and age, the restriction around women's access to safe abortion is preposterous. The Pratigya Campaign aims to destigmatize the conversation around abortion. There is also a need to strengthen and simplify access to legal and safe abortion services, which requires comprehensive and clear amendments in the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act. *"In an ideal world every woman, whether married or unmarried, should have right to abortion. She should also have equal choice of getting it done at a recognised facility. Unfortunately, in India, particularly in rural areas, poorer people don't have access to free and low-cost, safe abortion services. When it comes to unmarried women, even those from better off backgrounds don't have access to quality facilities where they can have judgment-free services. If you look at accessibility, it is a big issue largely because of the way the MTP Act (Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971) defines who can provide legal and safe abortion services and the place where it can be provided. Often, when a woman seeks abortion, service providers have their own ideas of what is right and what is not,"* says **V.S. Chandrashekar, CEO, FRHS India, and CAG member, Pratigya Campaign for Gender Equality and Safe Abortion.** *"While the law permits a married woman to seek abortion due to contraception failure, if an unmarried woman seeks the same, legally the abortion option is not offered to her. That is one big challenge in the law."*

Throwing some light on the findings of the report, **Dr. Kalpana Apte, Pratigya Campaign Advisory Group member and Secretary General, Family Planning Association of India** said, *"The study attempted to capture chemists' awareness, knowledge and attitudes about abortions and MA drugs. In Maharashtra, 42.5% felt that availability of combi pack MA drugs contributes to gender biased sex selection. This is a wrong perception since combipacks are indicated only for use up to nine weeks gestation and the commonly used and affordable technology to identify the sex of the fetus, Ultra Sonography can detect the sex only around 13-14 weeks gestation. This misconception seems to be resulting in overregulation of MA drugs, significantly affecting availability of a safe, simple and affordable method of safely terminating a pregnancy, compromising the health, wellbeing and reproductive rights of women in India" she added.*

About Pratigya Campaign for Gender Equality & Safe Abortion: Pratigya Campaign for Gender Equality and Safe Abortion is a network of individuals and organisations working towards protecting and advancing women's rights and their access to safe abortion care in India. The campaign advocates with governments, organisations and media at the national and state levels on issues of women's empowerment and women's access to healthcare services. Foundation for Reproductive Health Services India hosts the secretariat and a dedicated eight-member Campaign Advisory Group guides and offers strategic direction to the coalition and its advocacy efforts. The Campaign focuses on four thematic areas: a) Extending support to the providers to ensure they continue to provide abortion services b) Ensuring continued availability of Medical Abortion drugs in the markets and support to women using MA out of facility c) Understanding and engaging with the legal landscape, particularly the jurisprudence in abortion related cases d) Building strong alliances with organisations and individuals to sharpen the collective voice of the Campaign. Visit: www.pratigyacampaign.org for more information.