**Report of International Safe abortion Campaign in Tamil Nadu**

**Supported By CommonHealth and SAHAJ**

**Venue**: Nerumbur, Thirukazhukundrum Block **Date and Time**: 30/09/2019: Time 2.00- 5.30 Pm

**PROCESSION:**

The meeting stated around 2.00 PM with a small procession of 150 participants including 12 public health care providers. The procession started at Nerumbur four/cross road Junction and ended in VP Mahal (meeting venue). Women carried placards with messages on safe abortion as a woman’s right, importance of safe abortion, legal abortion up to 20 weeks of gestation, availability of medical abortion, consequences of unsafe abortion etc. There were 37 slogans in the cards. One person in the front read the slogans loudly and others repeated. Many people in the market and bus stop watched the procession. A few sample slogans messages are given below,

*“Pathukappillatha Karukkalaippai Naadi Unuyirnadia yiIllakkathey”- Don’t lose your valuable life in accessing unsafe abortion*.

*Arokiyamana Karukkalaippu aduthakulanthaikku pathukappu- Safe abortion is good for next child.*

*“Illegal abortion, illaravaikkaikku kedu”- Illegal abortion is harmful to your marital life*

*Maruthuvar Alosanai yindri karukkalaippu mathiraikalai eduthukkollathey- Don’t take abortion pills on your own without consulting a doctor.*

*Baalina thervai thaduu pathukappana karuakkalaippai ukkuvippome- Prevent sex section and promote safe abortion*

**EVENTS IN THE MEETING HALL:**

The meeting held in VP Mahal; a marriage hall in Nerumbur village. The events were conducted as per the agenda (Copy of the agenda is attached in the annexure- 1).

Total participants – 141 women including four men, PHC medical officer, Private Doctor and 11 VHNs from local PHC limit attended. Seven media and press reporters also attended and covered the procession and event. But they did not sign the participants’ registration sheet.

Meeting began with a popular song- Tamil Thai Vazhthu - Invocation to Goddess Tamil, followed by welcome addressby Ms. Kalavathy, co-ordinator of RUWSEC. She also shared the meeting objectives. She expressed her concern that even though there is a day for safe abortion but still the services are not available and accessible to many sections of women in our society, as there are so many barriers in accessing the safe abortion services for marginalised women, consequently poor and unmarried girls force to seek the services from an unsafe provider, which is more dangerous to their health and life.

Then Ms.Susila from Mullikolatthur village, sang a social awareness song, which she originally developed. This talks about safe abortion as women’s right and nothing wrong in accessing it from a qualified provider……… women are not machine to produce children. If you don’t want it be bold to terminate… it also narrated about self-medication is not good ( Copy of the song in Tamil Is attached in the annex -2)

**PUBLICATION RELEASE:**

The two new publications; RFSU Safe abortion study report (English), and two pages Tamil translated summary of the project were released formally. Dr. Gowtham PHC medical officer, SHN Kalaiselvi and Dr Chitra formally released the books. It was shared that towards the end of the meeting the key findings of the study would be shared by Dr. Balasubramanian. It was announced that copies of the publications are available and needy can get copies of the same and reproductive health education materials were displayed in the back side of the hall.

**QUIZ PROGRAMME:**

From the participants 15 youngwomen between 20- 35 years who were interested to participate the quiz programme were asked to enrol their names. Then they were divided into three groups – 5 persons in each group. Ms. Selvi Co-ordiantor of RUWSEC facilitated the session. First she explained the ground rules and passing of questions sequences etc.There were three rounds of questions; in each round two questions per team were asked; first round Yes/No type answers with 5 marks, second round one line answer type questions with 10 marks and third round 20 mark questions.

**The First Round questions** were: 1) Is it abortion legal in India 2)Is it legal to terminate the pregnancy of an unmarried girl 3) legally a nurse can perform abortion? 4)Legally MBBS doctor can perform abortion 5) Is it legal to terminate 22 weeks of gestation 6) Legally AYUSH doctor can perform abortion.

**Response**s:For the first round of questions, the team members answers all the questions correctly. So, the awareness about legal status and who are qualified and certified providers is good.

**The second round of questions** were –1) legally, up to how many weeks of gestation abortion can be done in India? 2) What is D& C? 3) Name any four spacing methods of contraception 4) For terminating the pregnancy of 17 year old girl whose consent is needed 5) Up to how many weeks of gestation medical abortion pills can be taken ?

**Responses**; None of them were aware about abortion is legal and abortion services are provided up to 20 weeks of gestation. They all mentioned 7-12 weeks;the members reported D&C is cleaning the uterus, secondly for the questions related to consent majority of them reported husband’s consent is needed, also no one knew about up to which weeks of gestation medical abortion pills can be taken.

**Third round of Questions**: What is safe and legal abortion? 2)What are all the different methods of abortion? 3) What are the conditions in which abortion is allowed;4)under which conditions abortion is illegal? 5) Is it good to take self-medication for abortion why? 6) What are all the health consequences of unsafe abortion?

None of them said women can avail abortion services for contraceptive failure or to terminate unwanted pregnancy, they believed that it is to protect the health of mother and foetus abortion is permitted for other conditions it is illegal. But all are aware about the side effects of unsafe abortion.

This session was planned to assess the level of awareness and knowledge about safe abortion and women’s rights among the participants.

Followed by a cultural performance - dance programme by the young women from Suradimangalam village, they performed well for a social awareness song and received good appreciation from the participants.

**SPECIAL ADDRESS BY CHIEF GUESTS:**

Dr. Gowtham, PHC, Medical officer, Nerumbur started his speech by welcoming the large number of women who had assembled for an important event, he linked quiz programme with safe abortion and provided clear information on what conditions and circumstances abortion services are provided and types of abortion, concluded his speech with the need for safe abortion. Even though abortion can be done up to 20 weeks, it is better done early months say 12 weeks. As for terminating the 12-20 weeks foetus, it is mandatory to get the opinion of two doctors. Unmarried and school girls accessing abortion services are increasing in recent years and he stressed the need to educate them how to protect from unwanted pregnancy. More importantly, parents should spend time with their children and educate them on good habits, share their life experiences, so that it helps the young people to come out of mobile and media influences. Above all prevention is better and the doctor shared about contraceptives as, there are various methods of contraception including recently introduced Antara and Chaaya. Cu- T which are very effective and it can be used for 10 years. So he asked the, couples to come forward to use them and prevent unplanned/unwanted pregnancies.

The second speaker Dr. Chitra, a AYUSH doctor spoke that abortion is still a major issue for women, 20-25 years back there were so many socio-cultural factors, which prevented women to access safe abortion services. Now a days women take self-medications (medicines from pharmacy) also take some natural herbs and don’t know about whether the product has come out completely or not. She expressed her concern about how it hinders the health of women and the importance of creating awareness about the side effects of unsafe and incomplete abortion. It is our collective responsibility to educate children above 5 years about good and bad touch, whom to inform if she faces any kind of violence, so that the child grooms up to be healthy youth. The doctor shared that all the people should work together to bring down number of abortions among unmarried girls. She shared her daughter’school experiences, “once I went to my daughter’s school for an annual day event, my daughter (3rd grade) read a poem in the stage, and I was very surprised, the poem was about my rights; it begins with I own my body and no one has the right to touch it …. The poem ended with it was my learnings from my mother. After the event I asked her when I taught such aspects she said I watched your speech and interactions with patients and learnt all these aspects. Then only I learnt how beautiful mother and child relation is!” As parents we should talk to our children without any shy and reservations, as it will help them to share their issues and concerns.

The third speaker SHN – Kalaichelvi spoke the importance of educating a girl child about good and bad touch with real life stories. She also stressed for abortion women should approach only qualified and trained doctor, otherwise woman’s health would get spoiled.

**Cultural Shows:**

Following to this a team of eight young women from Naduavakkarai village, made a role play on how crude methods of abortion end a woman’s life. It lasted 15 minutes.

Aruna is a rural poor agricultural worker. There are five persons in her family; mother in law, husband and her two daughters lived together, - she conceived third time. She was anaemic and didn’t have regular menses and so after three months of gestation only she knew that she was pregnant. Days went off, one day on knowing this, her mother in law visited an astrologist and he said the foetus also a girl. So, on returning the mother in law demanded to terminate the pregnancy. But the gestation had crossed five months and her family brought her to a TBA for the abortion. Initially she refused and latter for getting 10,000 rupees she accepted did the abortion using herbal sticks. The pain was very terrible and she had excessive bleeding for a week and her health deteriorated badly, finally her family brought her to a public health facility and she was declared as dead.

Women from Suradimangalam did the second play, which was very positive. In the story Kavitha, from a poor family had married four year back. Her husband a lorry driver. They had one girl baby and she is one and half year old. They didn’t use any contraceptives, and conceived. Immediately with in one and half months, she visited a taluk hospital and doctor gave medical abortion pills. She had successfully terminated her pregnancy and inserted CU –T next month. Now she is leading a happy and healthy life.

**Sharing of research findings**

Finally Dr. Balasubramanian shared the key finding from research study, he began with statistics and then shared that despite abortion is legal in India over 50 years, every day 50 women die in India due to the complications of unsafe abortion. He presented still there is a perception that abortion is sin and illegal among certain sections of the people. Abortion services are not available at PHC and CHC and taluk hospital levels in our district, there are also discrimination and stigma, poor quality of care in accessing the services in district hospital. As a result many prefer to seek private, which is very expensive, so many use unqualified provider or self-medication. The practice of self-medication is very common, women take the medicines without any information of when and how it should be taken and up to gestation weeks, finally end up with complications or incomplete abortion. So, he recommended that every woman should seek the advice health care providers for medical abortion. If the services are available in the local public health facilities women can easily avail the services, the study recommended that the government should take steps to provide the services at PHC level.

Followed by a 10 minutes session on clarifying doubts, question and answers. PHC medical officer and RUWSEC’s Executive Director clarified their doubts. Generally the questions were related to the side effects of Cu- T, oral contraceptive pills and medical abortion pill. One question was specifically related to unsafe abortion; what is the linkages between unsafe abortion among unmarried girls and infertility in future.

Prizes were distributed for those who participated in quiz programme, cultural events and dramas, all the participants gave applause for the event

Finally few participants shared their feedback about the event.

*A VHN told that the two dramas narrated the real life situations, so, women should be aware about various contraceptives and be bold enough to use contraceptives to protect their health.*

*Young women from Naduvakkarai mentioned that from the meeting we knew the importance of safe abortion and realised it is our right. Form the meting only I learnt abortion can be done up to 20 weeks.*

*Another woman from Nerumbur told I was told Cu- T is not good for working women; it could go further up and damage the stomach. But from the doctors speech it is clear it is safe and can be use for 10 years. This is very useful.*

*A man from PHC’s opined prevention is good so, women should use contraceptive methods; recently introduced Antara Injections Chaaya weekly oral pills are women friendly.*

*Another young woman from Pandur told we learnt from the meeting that there are different methods of abortion and how it is being done.*

As per our original plan we decided to screen two short films on safe abortion; 1) Medical abortion 2) abortion as women’s rights, but due to shortage of time and many women wanted to leave as the need to go home before it gets dark, we dropped the idea

Finally the meeting ended with vote of thanks for the participants and PHC team by Ms Jamuna Bai, special thanks were recorded for CommonHealth and Sahaj.