

# **Southern Regional Dissemination and Capacity Building Meeting**

## **October 2023**

### **Concept Note**

#### **Background**

CommonHealth (CH), a coalition for reproductive health and safe abortion, is a multi-state coalition of organisations and individuals working to advocate for better access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and health care, specifically focusing on maternal health and safe abortion. The CH mission is to mobilise advocates from different constituencies to build a rights-based and gender-sensitive perspective among communities, healthcare providers, researchers, academicians, administrators, elected representatives and the media on SRH. Towards this, CH has been actively involved in evidence generation and advocacy for various components of SRH at the state and national levels.

During the last four-five years, CH, in collaboration with its partner organisations in different states, has done five research studies on 1) the availability of safe abortion services and perspectives of actors on the right to safe abortion. 2) reproductive health histories of marginalised women and girls 3) access to safe abortion services during the Covid-19 pandemic 4) women's contraceptive needs and consequences of unmet needs and 5) women's experiences of using maternal health care services. These studies have brought out strong evidence of the reproductive health issues of marginalised women and girls.

In Tamil Nadu, Rural Women's Social Education Centre- RUWSEC with the support of CH, has been involved in evidence-generation activities. In these studies, its' team has interviewed NGO leaders, front-line workers, healthcare providers, and rural community women. The results of the studies provide deep insights into the SRH issues of women, mainly from marginalised communities and emphasise the need to initiate discussions with multi-stakeholders so as to plan concrete advocacy strategies at various levels.

The findings of the abortion studies show that even after five decades of legalising abortion, access to safe abortion remains a major challenge for women, even in states like Tamil Nadu, which has good public health infrastructural facilities and better socio-economic and health indicators. The awareness about MTP, POCSO and PCPNDT Acts and entitlements under these is poor. Secondly, access to abortion appears to be highly stigmatised. The attitudes of the providers are also disconcerting. Most civil society groups in the region are widely advocating the restriction of second-trimester abortions to prevent gender-biased sex selection and protect the rights of the unborn child (Sundari Ravindran et al., 2019). Access to abortion during the pandemic period was also highly restricted especially in the public sector, and women faced a number of difficulties in accessing safe abortion services and incurred heavy out-of-pocket expenditure for availing of services in the private sector. There were instances of unwanted pregnancies and unwanted children due to the non-availabilities of services during the pandemic (CommonHealth and RUWSEC 2021a).

The study on the reproductive rights of Dalit women also brought out vulnerabilities and gender issues and their impact on SRHR of marginalised women (CommonHealth and RUWSC, 2021a) and the recent research on maternal health highlights key structural issues and gaps in programme implementation and quality of care all of which need to be discussed with different stakeholders to evolve suitable advocacy strategies.

Against this backdrop, the southern regional meeting is proposed to share the key findings of the studies, generate discussions at various levels, and plan advocacy strategies to promote the SRH rights of poor and marginalised women.

## **Objectives**

- To create awareness among civil society groups and activists about the recent developments on SRHR with a particular focus on access to maternal health and safe abortion services; the recent amendments to MTP act, PCPNDT and POSCO Acts and sexual and reproductive health rights of marginalized women and young people.
- To disseminate the salient findings of reproductive health history research and studies on access to maternal health, contraceptive and safe abortion services with different stakeholders.
- To build a common understanding about the need for multiple stakeholder engagement, to recognize the need for activism at different levels and alliance building at the state, regional and national levels to ensure systemic accountability for the provision of sexual and reproductive health care.
- To expand the CH membership base in the Southern states and strengthen sexual, reproductive health and rights activities in due collaborations with like-minded groups and individuals in the region.

## **Meeting Plan**

The regional meeting will be for two days: We will begin with an overview presentation of the current SRHR situation of the country and southern states including recent amendments to laws / Acts, followed by a technical session on right to maternal health and safe abortion services. The second half of first day will focus on sharing the major findings from the studies. Second day will be devoted to group discussion to plan concrete advocacy activities with key stakeholders. The presentation and discussion will be focussed on the following themes:

- 1) Abortion
- 2) Maternal Health
- 3) Reproductive Health

CH steering committee members and technical persons will be invited to facilitate the technical sessions on day one, and the CH theme leads / study teams will present the study findings and facilitate the sessions.

## **Participants**

CH members, Civil society groups, activists working on rights and women's issues, policymakers, academicians, and media representatives. A total of 50 persons. CH members from the five southern states (Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana) and one union territory (Pondicherry) will be invited to the southern regional meeting. In addition to CH members, eminent health advocates, policymakers and media people will be invited for the consultation. Like-minded groups, Networking NGOs like Makkal Nalavazhu Iyakkam (MNI), SOCHARA and other groups in each state will be approached and their support will be sought in identifying potential participants for the regional meeting in their respective states.

## **Time and place**

We propose to organise the meeting in October 2023. The meeting will be held in Chennai, Tamil Nadu (venue to be identified)

**References:**

1. Sundari Ravindran.TK., Balasubramanian.P., and Padma Bhate-Deosthali, 2019 Availability of Safe Abortion Services and the Perspectives of Actors on the Right to Safe Abortion in the States of Bihar and Tamil Nadu, India: A Rapid Assessment, CommonHealth, India
2. CommonHealth and RUWSEC, 2021a, a draft report on access to safe abortion during Covid 19 pandemic period in Tamil Nadu
3. CommonHealth and RUWSEC, 2021b, a draft report on sexual and reproductive rights of Dalit Women in Tamil Nadu
4. CommonHealth: [https://commonhealth.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Pathway-Report\\_Final\\_FEB2023.pdf](https://commonhealth.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Pathway-Report_Final_FEB2023.pdf)
5. CommonHealth : <https://commonhealth.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/9-6.pdf>