

A Women's Issue on its Own

The decision to focus this first issue of *Women in Action* for 1999 on women's sexuality was based on several observations made by our editorial team. Firstly, we find that women's sexuality is often described in conjunction with other issues such as reproductive health or violence against women rather than on its own. While the issues are undoubtedly related and need to be analysed and viewed within the context of each other, we also recognize that much of the discussion on women's sexuality is circumscribed and even defined by the reproductive health or violence against women frameworks.

Secondly, we find that in our attempts to understand sexuality as one of the key sites of women's oppression and a critical element of patriarchy, we sometimes leave out women's sexual pleasure as being of equal relevance. Women's pleasure is almost exclusively the discussion of mainstream women's (and men's) magazines, talk shows and advice column, and feminist magazines deal with the more "substantive" aspects of women's sexuality questions. As far as the women's movement in Asia has come, most of us still keep discussions of sexuality internal and in some settings within our movement, it could be said that discussing women's sexuality from the pleasure principle is regarded a frivolous, even bourgeois exercise.

Thirdly, we felt that discussion of women's sexuality is valuable at a time when growing religious fundamentalism is forcing a more strategic positioning of feminist activists in relation to women's sexual rights. In other words, many of us, particularly in countries run by authoritarian states, or where religious fundamentalists bandy women's issues as the fundamental site of their struggle for purer social norms and ethics, choose to distance ourselves from clear positioning on issues such as abortion, lesbian rights, and media censorship. On issues such as pornography, prostitution, beauty contests and media censorship, some feminists experience the dilemma of sharing their side of the picket line with religious fundamentalists, and the "moral majority." Pornog-

raphy, prostitution and lesbianism are issues where there is more divisiveness than unity and are issues that continue to be hard to broach in broader based consultations.

In this issue, we have tried to include articles that reach into the socio-cultural dimensions of sexuality and address some of these areas mentioned. We have included an article which examines sexuality within the context of Asian society and the women's movement in Asia, another that weighs some of the varying viewpoints that exist on the issue of pornography, an analysis of the responses to the film *Fire* which raised heated controversy in India, an analysis of the apathy of Malaysian NGOs in addressing the underlying attack on homosexuality in the Anwar Ibrahim case, a street interview with lesbians, a young feminist's views on the question of virginity and a personal statement on the value of celibacy. These by no means cover the entire gamut of issues that could be addressed under the heading of sexuality. We hope, however, that it provides our readers with materials that can be used in your own discussions and analyses at various levels.

We have tried to identify more contributors from the region to share different views on the theme this time. We invite you to suggest names of contributors that we might be able to tap into in the future, and also themes that you would like to see covered in the coming issues of *Women in Action*. Please do also send us your critical feedback. This is an issue that needs further critical thinking and analyses. In fact, this is probably one of the issues where much more theorizing and dialogues would be valuable in the context of the women's movement in Asia and the Pacific. A dialogue on the theme of women's sexuality we believe will not only broaden the base of our work for women's advancement, but can also strengthen the platform of feminist advocacy in this region.