


ARROWs for Change:

Challenging and changing the mainstream

by Malyn Ando



Abortion policies that have blanket age of consent requirements need to be modified to include the concept of the evolving capacity of the adolescent and the capabilities of young women to make their own decisions, as well as [frameworks] of reproductive and sexual rights...Family planning programmes...must have policies that not just provide comprehensive sexuality education and information but also make contraceptives accessible to young women.”

— **Bela Ganatra, “Young and Vulnerable: The Reality of Unsafe Abortion among Adolescent and Young Women,”** ARROWs for Change, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 1-2.

Once we acknowledge that people with disabilities have sexual feelings, we can include them in sexuality education programmes and reproductive and sexual health interventions. If we are able to discern the differences between sex work and trafficking for sexual exploitation, and believe that sex work is work and is not always ‘exploitation,’ we will not expend our energies in trying to ‘rescue’ sex workers and ‘rehabilitate’ them in meaningless and demeaning ways...If we make consent our benchmark for acceptability, it allows us to work with and for the rights of same-sex desiring people.

— **Radhika Chandiramani, “Why affirm sexuality,”** ARROWs for Change, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 1-2.

With clear and strong messages such as these, *ARROWs for Change* (AFC) aims to provide clear feminist and rights perspectives on cutting-edge issues on women’s health, sexuality and rights. In doing so, we challenge and intend to change the thinking, policies and practices of mainstream health, population, family planning, and sexual and reproductive health institutions, whether public or private.

AFC is the concise, action-oriented bulletin of the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre For Women (ARROW), a regional women’s organisation committed to advocating and protecting women’s health needs and rights, particularly in the areas of women’s sexuality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). AFC is published in English three times a year, with one to two translations in selected Asian and Pacific languages. Now on its 14th year, AFC strives to be a cutting-edge resource and advocacy tool. AFC

strengthens and supports women’s and SRHR movements with its evidence-based conceptual framework in examining an issue and an operational framework on ways to bring about change.

AFC’s regular sections include “Spotlight” which features articles focusing on inspiring experiences on current policies and programmes as well as innovative research; “Monitoring” which compiles information on strategic efforts on women and health;

“Resources” which contains annotations of recent and key resources on the theme; “Definitions” which highlights key concepts relating to the theme and puts forward alternative definitions which are more women-centred and gender-sensitive; and “Factfile” which provides a gender analysis of sexuality and health data and concepts

A spotlight on two recent issues of *ARROWs For Change*

Each AFC issue focuses on a specific theme that is relevant to the needs of the region. Two recent volumes deal with issues that are controversial, even among feminists and SRHR activists.

AFC Vol. 12 No. 3 centres on the thorny issue of **young women’s right to access safe abortion services**. While adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health and rights may have gained acceptance across the Asia-Pacific region, there is still a reluctance to understand and acknowledge the realities of adolescent sexuality, particularly of unmarried adolescents. In practice, programmes for unmarried youth are often limited to information provision, with safe abortion services (and to a lesser extent, contraceptive provision) not getting a seat—whether back or front.

In this AFC issue, Bela Ganatra from Ipas India, shares current and rare data on abortion and young women in Asia-Pacific, and outlines recommendations on increasing young women’s access to safe abortion services. Her proposals include research on young unmarried women’s pathways to abortion care.

The “Spotlight” articles highlight different strategies women’s



organisations take to extend access in countries where abortion laws are highly restrictive. Ge Olivares of Likhaan writes on safe spaces where abortion can be discussed in the Philippines. Insha

Hamdani makes an overview of clandestine abortion services in Pakistan.

“Factfile” examines increasing access to contraceptive services as an ancillary strategy in addressing young women’s needs and realising their reproductive rights. The controversial concepts of ‘parental rights’ and ‘evolving capacities of adolescents’ are scrutinised in the “Definitions” section.

AFC Vol. 13 No. 2 on “Affirming Sexuality” explores an emerging framework that looks at sexuality holistically and positively. In “Why Affirm Sexuality?”, Radhika Chandiramani boldly states that while both health and violence-prevention perspectives have their uses, “they are limited and cannot be expected to address all sexuality-related issues...A health-based approach runs the risk of reducing sexuality to only its biological aspects...[while] approach based on violence prevention focuses only on the negative aspects of sexuality and runs the risk of becoming protectionist.”

Chandiramani then offers an alternative and affirmative framework, which views sexuality positively even as it recognises that sexuality has a dark side. This framework reiterates sexual rights as human rights and operates on principles

of bodily integrity, personhood, equality, and respect for diversity.

Chandiramani also provides examples from across the region on how the framework is used in research, policy-making, service provision, and programme development. The other articles in this AFC volume are “A Glimpse into Young Women’s Sexuality in Suva (Roshni Sami, Pacific Network on Globalisation), “Perspective Matters: Moving Towards Affirmative Thinking on ‘Xing’ in Contemporary China” (Huang Yingying, Institute of Sexuality and Gender, Renmin University), and “Examining the Quality and Value of Sexuality Research” (Malyn Ando, ARROW).

Some successes

While the impact of information and communication tools is often difficult to fully assess, ARROW’s For Change bulletin has had some success in increasing ARROW’s capacity to influence policies and programmes and to strengthen the women’s, sexuality, and SRHR movements. For instance, it was one of the contributing factors for United Nations Population Fund-Cambodia’s requesting ARROW to submit a tender for a consultancy on gender assessment and gender sensitisation of the Cambodian health system, which ARROW subsequently won. ARROW was also invited to the Asia regional formation of the International Consortium on Medical Abortion.

We have also received requests for multiple copies of AFC Vol. 13 No. 2, from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex for distribution in their *Sexuality and Development Workshop*; the Southeast



Asian Consortium on Gender, Sexuality, and Health for their *Leadership Course on Gender, Sexuality and Health in Southeast Asia and China* and their advocacy activities; and from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for distribution to their various departments.

Ensuring continued relevance and other challenges

We will continue to focus on themes that are cutting-edge yet responsive to the needs of the Asia-Pacific region.

Upcoming bulletin issues include feminist responses to discourses on sex selection and abortion, SRHR and religious conservatism and fundamentalisms, and the impact of privatisation on health systems and services.

To increase our reach and impact, we are also working on having selected issues produced in various Asia-Pacific languages, as well as utilising ICT more. Ultimately, in doing so, we want to see changes in policies and programmes and see positive improvements in women's health outcomes and lives.

ARROWs For Change issues can be downloaded at no cost at www.arrow.org.my. The bulletin is free of charge for individuals and organisations from the Asia-Pacific and the global south; it is US\$ 10.00 annually for individuals and US\$15 for organisations based in North America and Western Europe. Publications exchange is also encouraged. To receive the hard copy of this bulletin, contact ARROW at afc@arrow.po.my or malyn@arrow.po.my

Malyn Ando is the Managing Editor of ARROWs For Change. An accredited teacher with a degree in English Studies, she had a couple of teaching stints before joining the feminist movement and going to development work. Formerly a Managing Editor of WIA, she remains a reliable contributor.