



**Women's Health Literacy and Health Promotion:
our initiatives in West Bengal, India**

Ratna Bandyopadhyay
Sarbani Goswami
Sabahat Nausheen
University of Calcutta
School of Women's Studies
Calcutta, India

Meeting:

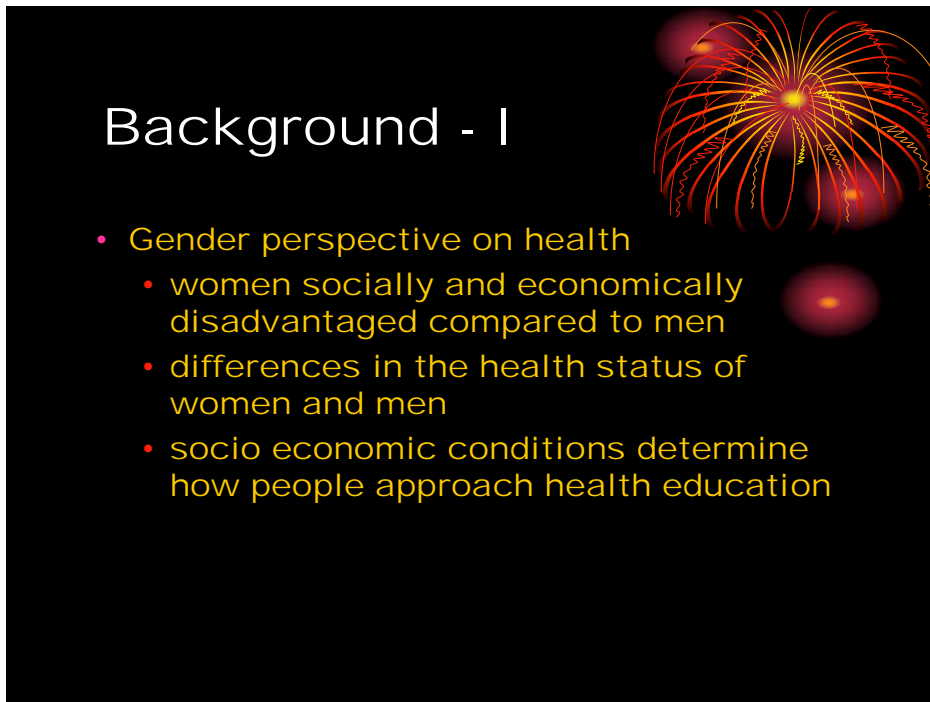
145. Health and Biosciences Libraries

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 75TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy
<http://www.ifla.org/annual-conference/ifla75/index.htm>

Abstract:

In this paper we focus on the initiatives taken to advance women's health literacy, to support women's health promotion and to organize health related information for its better access by health science libraries and libraries of centres for women studies in West Bengal, India. Libraries have an important role in advancing women's health literacy and health promotion. Specialised health science libraries and libraries of centres for women studies are helping governments in population policy making, women's health, health education, providing health information services and providing access to health information. Here we propose certain steps for them to become more effective in supporting women's health literacy, health promotion and health information access.

Background



Background - I

- Gender perspective on health
 - women socially and economically disadvantaged compared to men
 - differences in the health status of women and men
 - socio economic conditions determine how people approach health education

“Access to health information is a Human Right... It is particularly important to underscore the necessary protections of the mother and child as embodied in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights...” [9]. Women’s health literacy and health promotion needs to play a crucial role to ensure these. Women’s health literacy should bring about a change in women’s lives, to make women independent seekers of health related information.

In the context of India, as well as West Bengal, where women are known to be socially and economically disadvantaged compared to men, a gender perspective on health is of prime importance. A gender perspective on health recognizes differences in the health status of women and men, in the type of their diseases and ailments. The reasons arise from their different biological, social and economic conditions. Social and economic factors decide people’s health-seeking behavior. Socio economic conditions determine how people approach health education. [4]

Background - II

- 'Towards Equality : Report on the Status of Women in India', 1974
- National Policy for Women's Empowerment, 2001
- An information network on women and development was set up with all the women's studies centres in the country and government agencies

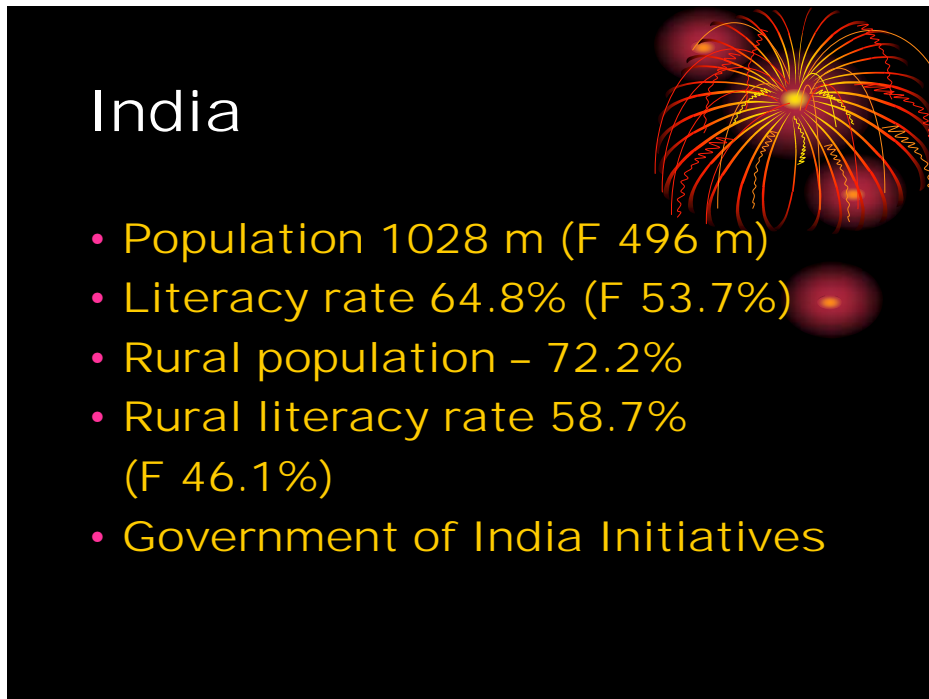
In India, women's health literacy and promotion was given a firm footing by the following major events:

The publication of the Government of India (GOI) report on the status of women entitled "Towards Equality: Report on the status of women in India" in 1974 pointed out the declining female sex ratio. The report was far reaching in many respects but it viewed women's health largely as a maternity and contraceptive issue focusing only on Mother and Child Health, Family Planning and medical termination of pregnancy. [26] It is most important to realize that gender and social equality are critical to achieving national health and population goals. Experience till now with family planning has shown that acting without considering the broader social relations in which women live stunts the achievement of family planning goals and improvement of their health. Thus, the health and family welfare sector must have plans to improve gender awareness in society.[26]

National Population Policy enacted in 2000 mentioned 'one stop integrated and coordinated service delivery package for basic health care, family planning, maternal and child health related services...' [2,16]

The National Policy for Women's Empowerment, 2001, has mentioned 'equal access of women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security.' [19, 2]

India



India

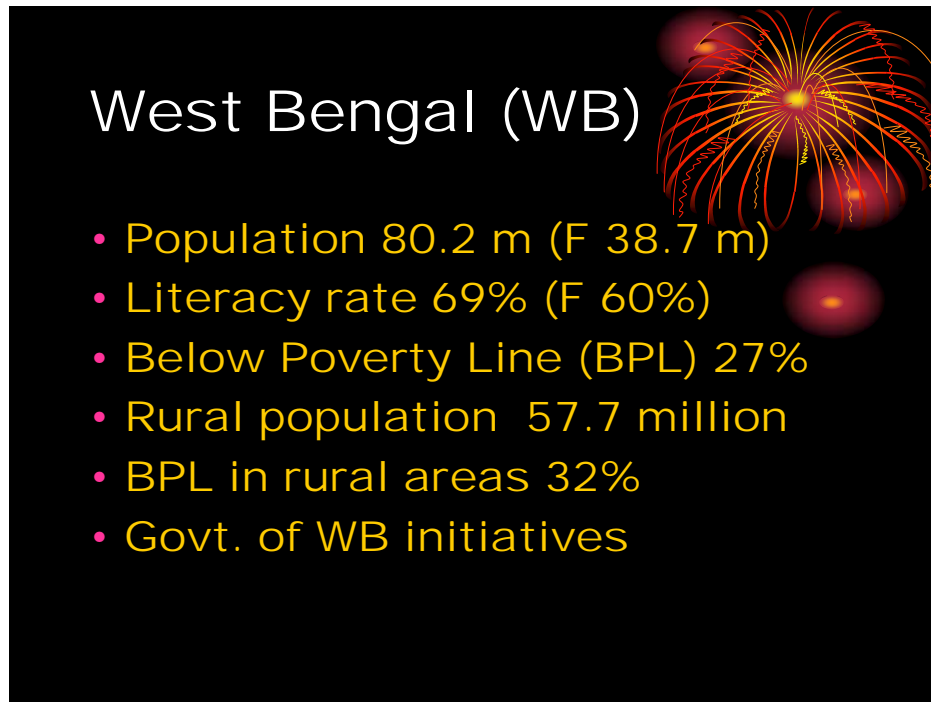
- Population 1028 m (F 496 m)
- Literacy rate 64.8% (F 53.7%)
- Rural population – 72.2%
- Rural literacy rate 58.7% (F 46.1%)
- Government of India Initiatives

India has a population of 1028 million. Out of this the female population is 496 million. The overall literacy rate is 64.8% whereas the female literacy rate in India is 53.7%. [10]

The main problem associated with women's health in India is their low levels of education and health literacy. Women's low level of literacy rate is definitely an important cause of their ill health and nutrition deficiency. Moreover women are responsible for taking proper health care of other members of the family. As a result, we need to provide them the information related to health issues like how to maintain their health, how to plan for healthy and nutritious diet, how to take care of minor illnesses, to know about the treatments of major illnesses and to understand the relative risks and benefits of any treatment offered.

The Govt. of India has several programmes for women's health promotion including health literacy. These programmes fall under various policies of the Govt. of India including National Health Policy, National Population Policy, National Rural Health Mission, National Nutrition Policy and Universal Health Insurance Scheme and others. To achieve the vision of 'health for all' the government is trying to increase the infrastructural facilities, coordinate various health related services like safe drinking water, sanitation, etc. and develop partnership with various non government organizations (NGOs) and voluntary organizations in health and family planning and welfare programmes. [18, 20]

West Bengal



West Bengal (WB)

- Population 80.2 m (F 38.7 m)
- Literacy rate 69% (F 60%)
- Below Poverty Line (BPL) 27%
- Rural population 57.7 million
- BPL in rural areas 32%
- Govt. of WB initiatives

West Bengal, a state of India, has a total population of 80.2 million. Out of this the female population is 38.7 million. The total rural population is 72% and population below poverty line (BPL) is 27%. The total literacy rate is 69% and female literacy rate is 60%. [3,2,10]

The Health and Family Welfare Department of Government of West Bengal has mentioned as its mission “to improve the health status of all the people of West Bengal, especially the poorest and those in greatest need”. [13]

Number of policies have been taken up by Government of West Bengal also to provide health awareness and support programmes like Mothers’ meeting, Dai (mid-wife’s) training, awareness campaign for health, nutrition and other social aspects, integrated child development scheme, nutrition support system, gender/sex education (school education programme), awareness programme on marriageable age, health check up, opening of adolescent clinics, “Ayusmati” scheme (below poverty level mothers get financial support from government) and “Janani Suraksha Yojana” (support services for child delivery for BPL women to promote institutional delivery to reduce maternal and neo natal mortality). There are reproductive and child health programmes for tribal people also in their respective languages. Even at the rural level a female Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), selected by the Panchayat (i.e. the basic administrative unit at local level), provides awareness programmes as well as services.

Health related information needs of women



Health related information needs of women

- Basic understanding of women's body
- Preventive and curative measures for diseases
- Puberty and reproductive health
- Child health
- Nutrition
- Hygiene and sanitation

To make people aware of health related information, to help them in taking informed decision it is necessary to make the fast growing corpus of information on health related issues accessible to all. A good number of resources are available online also. Many people lack the competence to access the resources online. Information professionals have to train them to handle the technology to access internet resources, to find out accurate, up-to-date quality information. Because of low literacy rate, especially among women, information professionals should do the documentation work to make the information accessible to local community in local languages, information should be repackaged in multi-media also. In general the main categories of information the health consumers need are identification and functions of their body, bodily changes during puberty, reproductive and child health, nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, preventive and curative measures of various types of diseases. Moreover the consumers should also be aware of the patients' rights. Some of these health information literacy training should start at a very early stage. For example sex education and awareness programmes are started at school level, nutritional support is given at Integrated Child Development Service centres by providing food to primary school level students.

Women's health literacy and health promotion



Women's health literacy and health promotion

- Health Science Libraries, libraries of Centres for Women's Studies & NGOs
 - Awareness programmes
 - Research projects and survey work on women's health
 - Workshops
 - Training programmes
 - Organizing women's information

In West Bengal, University of Health Sciences was established in 2003 for ensuring systematic training and research in modern system of medicines and also Homeopathic, Unani and Ayurvedic systems of medicines as well as other related subjects like nursing, pharmacy, physiotherapy, laboratory technology and others. There are a number of colleges/ institutions imparting education in the field of medical sciences under this university. Previously these medical colleges were under different universities like University of Calcutta, University of Burdwan, and University of North Bengal. All these courses are now brought under one university for better management. There are 9 medical colleges under it who are imparting teaching and training in the field of modern medicine. All these colleges/ institutes have libraries with very rich collection. These colleges are taking up a number of projects, organizing women's health awareness programmes/ seminars; training programmes in collaboration with other organizations. The libraries of these colleges are also taking active parts in supporting these activities. Each of these colleges has a rural centre in various districts of West Bengal.

The state of West Bengal has various women study centres attached to different universities. Libraries of these centres are also taking active part in organizing various research projects and do survey work on women and their health related aspects. For example, Women Studies Research Centre (WSRC), University of Calcutta has taken up and completed a number of research projects since its establishment in 1989. On a regular basis they are organizing workshops and training programmes.[27,28] These Women study centres are carrying out important projects, survey work on women and their health related issues sometimes with other government departments or with NGOs. A number of

non government organizations like Nistha, Sanlaap are working to make women aware about their own health and their child's health.

Awareness/Support Services

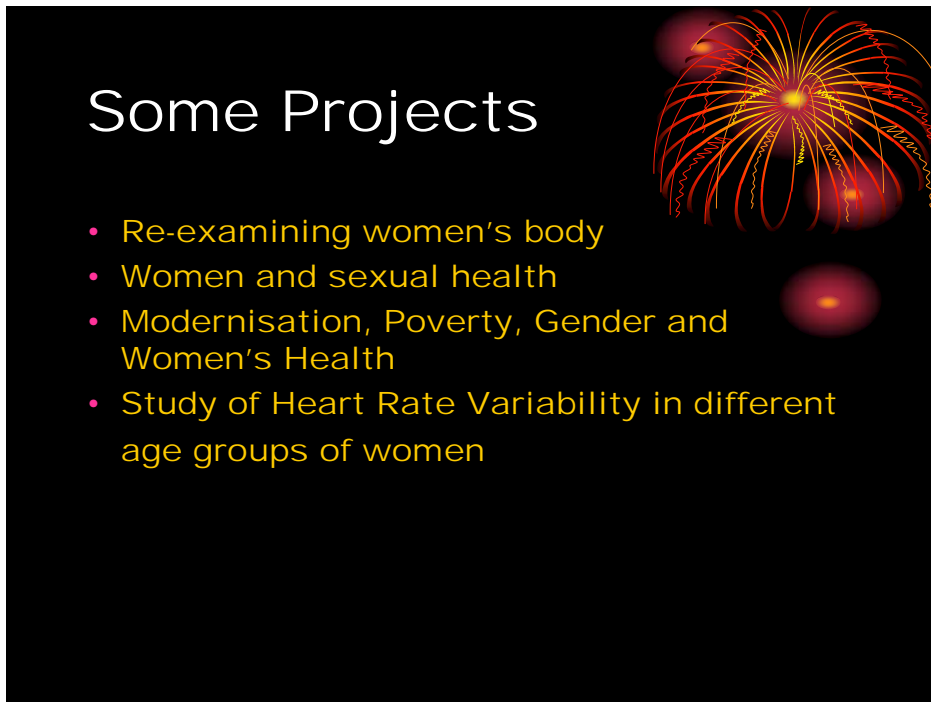


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- Current information on vital health issues
- Organizing lectures, discussions to support health services for women and child
- Door to door awareness programmes and services
- TV / radio programmes on women's health, child development, family welfare

At present these health science libraries are providing current information on primary health issues. NGOs, libraries of Women studies centres as well as health science libraries are organizing lectures, discussions to support health services for all especially for women and child development. NGOs along with the government officials are doing door to door awareness programmes and services. These organizations are also taking help of multimedia, TV and radio programmes to make the consumers aware of the health information. In this connection we should mention the attempt of IIT Kanpur. They have developed the 'Info-thela'. With this cyber café on wheels they are reaching health information to the doorstep of rural people.[7]

Some Projects



Some Projects

- Re-examining women's body
- Women and sexual health
- Modernisation, Poverty, Gender and Women's Health
- Study of Heart Rate Variability in different age groups of women

Some of the attempts of these Libraries and centres and by NGOs are worth mentioning here.

Medical College, Calcutta organized in collaboration with UNICEF, a seminar on Reproductive and Child Health. They also completed a project in 2005 on "Social and Cultural aspects of Women suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis".[21,22] NRS Medical College has organized Safe Motherhood Programme in collaboration with WHO.[24,25]

Women Studies Research Centre (WSRC), University of Calcutta has done a Project on "HIV/AIDS crisis in India: A proposed model for services and support to orphans and vulnerable children and families affected by HIV/AIDS in Kolkata". Their project on "Building database on health and education facilities for urban slum women" is going on.[27,28]

School of Women Studies, Jadavpur has also taken up projects and some of these are complete: "Re-examining women's body", "Women and sexual health"; "Modernisation, Poverty, Gender and Women's Health an action research in development among poor women in Khidderpore (wards 78&79) slum of Calcutta". The last mentioned project was conducted by the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University in collaboration with the CIDA-Shastri, an Indo-Canadian organization. The objective of this project focused on examining the social subjectivity of women living in the urban slum of Khidderpore. This examination was achieved primarily through the survey of women's health. Another main objective of

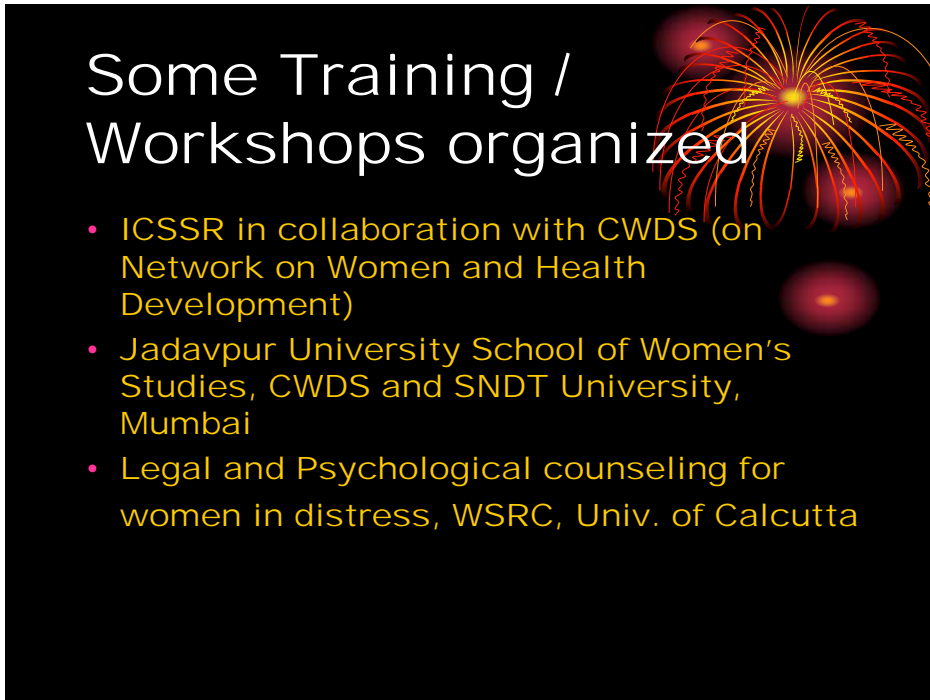
the project was to explore the area as a social and physical environment in terms of poverty and examine the day to day conditions in which the respondents live. It was necessary to understand the daily lives of women, the conditions in which they work, rest and eat, in order to understand the health and well being of these women. In this sense, the concept of health used in our research was broadened to include the social, political, physical, economic and spiritual aspects of the lives of women. Another objective of this research was to see if education makes significant differences in fertility choices.

“Study of Heart Rate Variability in different age groups of women”. This study has been conducted at the Biotechnology Department of Jadavpur University basically to find out to what extent heart rate variability changes in contexts of emotional stress, and psychological condition of a woman pertaining to pre-pubertal, reproductive and menopausal women.

“Women and Sexual Health” was also conducted at School of Women’s studies, Jadavpur University. The objective of the project was to find out how women take charge of their bodies during menopause.[8]

Cancer Foundation of India (CFI) is a Non Government Organization generating various important scientific information through some projects like “Preventive Cancer Research” and promotion of this information through Public Health Programmes. Since 2002 the Foundation is actively doing different programmes on women’s health promotion like screening of women for cervical cancer in the rural areas of West Bengal.

Some training/workshops organized



Some Training /
Workshops organized

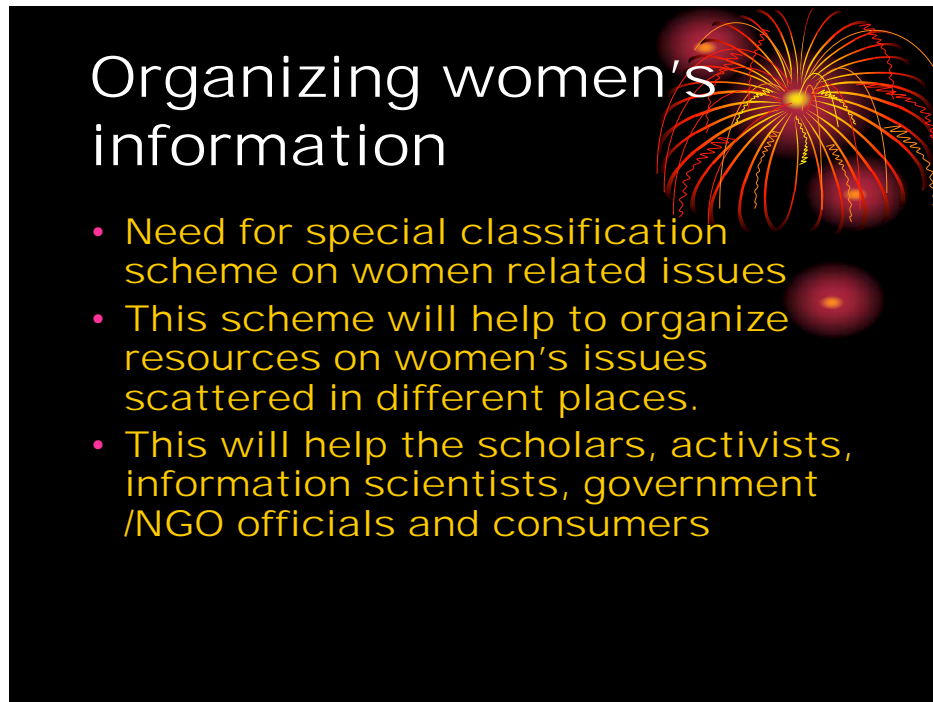
- ICSSR in collaboration with CWDS (on Network on Women and Health Development)
- Jadavpur University School of Women's Studies, CWDS and SNDT University, Mumbai
- Legal and Psychological counseling for women in distress, WSRC, Univ. of Calcutta

These medical colleges are also organizing integrated skill development training programmes for faculty members and medical officers.

Calcutta University's WSRC organized the Workshop on "Engendering Millenium Development Goals" held in December 2005, which stressed the importance of research on women's health.[27,28] These women studies centres are also offering M.Phil Programmes with a compulsory paper on women and health. School of Women Studies Jadavpur University organized two workshops in 1998 on gender issues.

"In 1987, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) in collaboration with Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) organized a training programme for identification of gender information, processing and development of network on women and health development." [2]. In 2002, School of Women Studies, Jadavpur University, Calcutta; CWDS, New Delhi and SNDT University, Mumbai together organized International Workshop to train librarians, NGO people and others to identify, analyse the information need of women especially to handle their health related issues. Women Studies Research Centre (WSRC), University of Calcutta is organizing on a regular basis workshops and training programmes on "Legal and Psychological counseling for women in distress."

Organising women's information

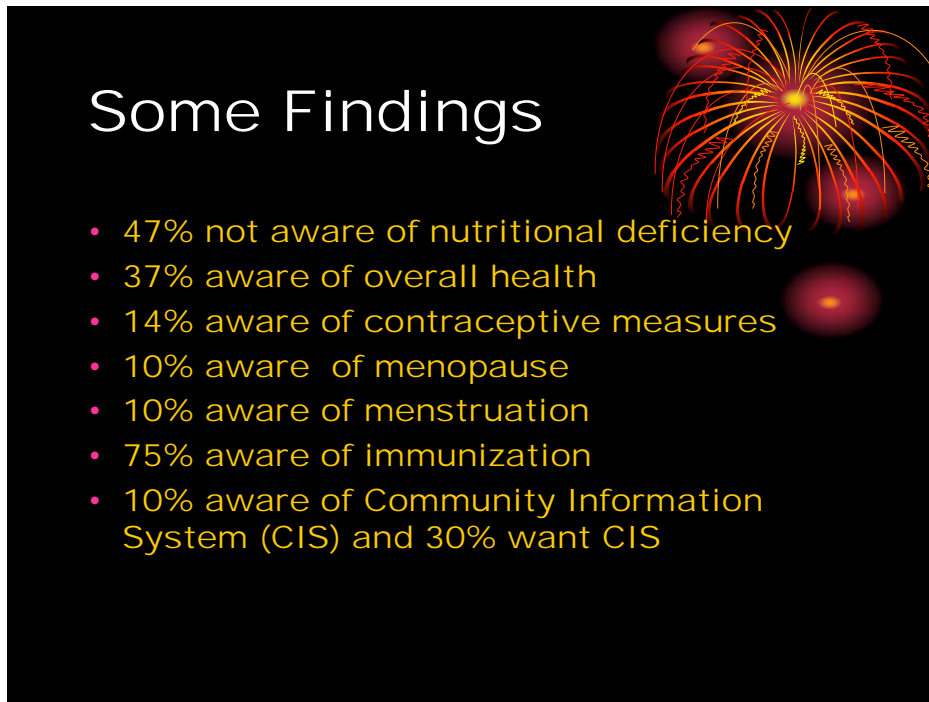


Organizing women's information

- Need for special classification scheme on women related issues
- This scheme will help to organize resources on women's issues scattered in different places.
- This will help the scholars, activists, information scientists, government /NGO officials and consumers

We are witnessing a marked increase in women-centric information and so it is necessary to develop a classification scheme on women related issues which will help to process, store and retrieve information on women. Department of Library and Information Science, University of Calcutta and School of Women Studies , Jadavpur University has taken up a project to develop a classification scheme on “Organizing Women’s Information: A Classification Scheme on Issues Relating to Women”. This scheme will help to organize resources on women’s issues scattered in different places. This scheme will help the scholars, activists, government officials and consumers to use information in a more efficient way.

Some Findings



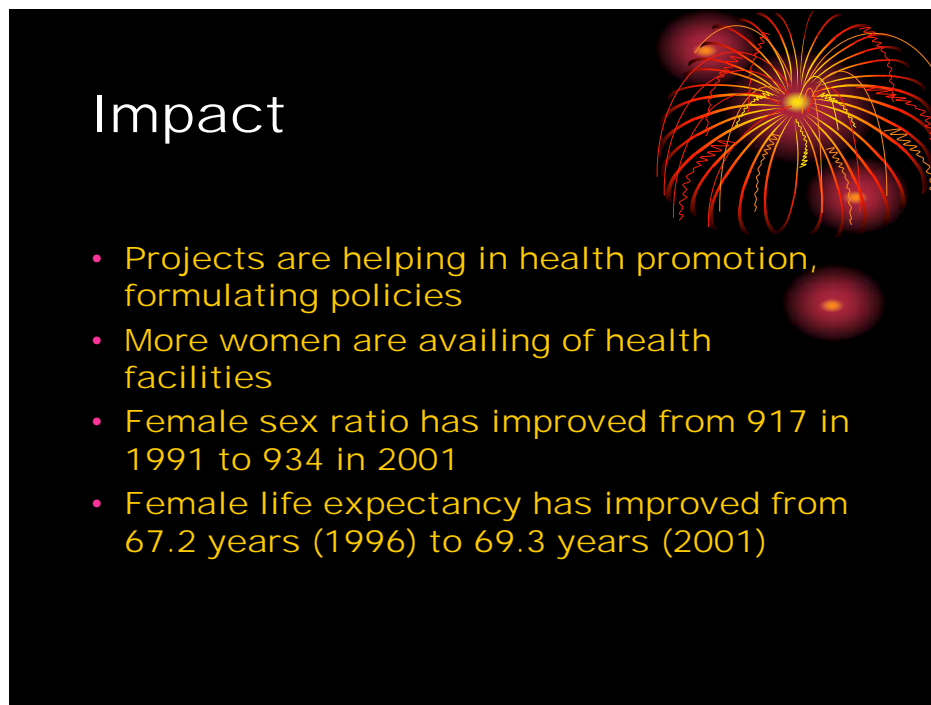
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- 47% not aware of nutritional deficiency
- 37% aware of overall health
- 14% aware of contraceptive measures
- 10% aware of menopause
- 10% aware of menstruation
- 75% aware of immunization
- 10% aware of Community Information System (CIS) and 30% want CIS

The research findings of the project on “Modernisation, Poverty, Gender and Women’s Health an action research in development among poor women in Khidderpore (wards 78&79) slum of Calcutta” point out that an existence of information systems is required so that women may become well informed about their health and well being. Now she has to satisfy her information needs through what she obtains from the media. One of the main recommendations of this research was to have a community information base where women can satisfy their information needs and use it for their well being. This survey found that 47% women are not aware of nutritional deficiency which affects women’s health; 75% are aware about immunization; 37% women are aware of their overall health; 33% of the women were suffering from infectious diseases; and 83% women breastfeed.

The research findings of the study on “Women and Sexual Health” conducted at School of Women’s studies, Jadavpur University among the domestic workers are: women are not conscious of their health; they are overburdened with household as well as their occupation; they face various occupational health hazards and lack of information leads to health hazards. The survey also found that women with knowledge of Menstruation were 10%; who adopted Protective measures were 2%; and with knowledge of contraceptive measures were 14%. [8]

Impact



Impact

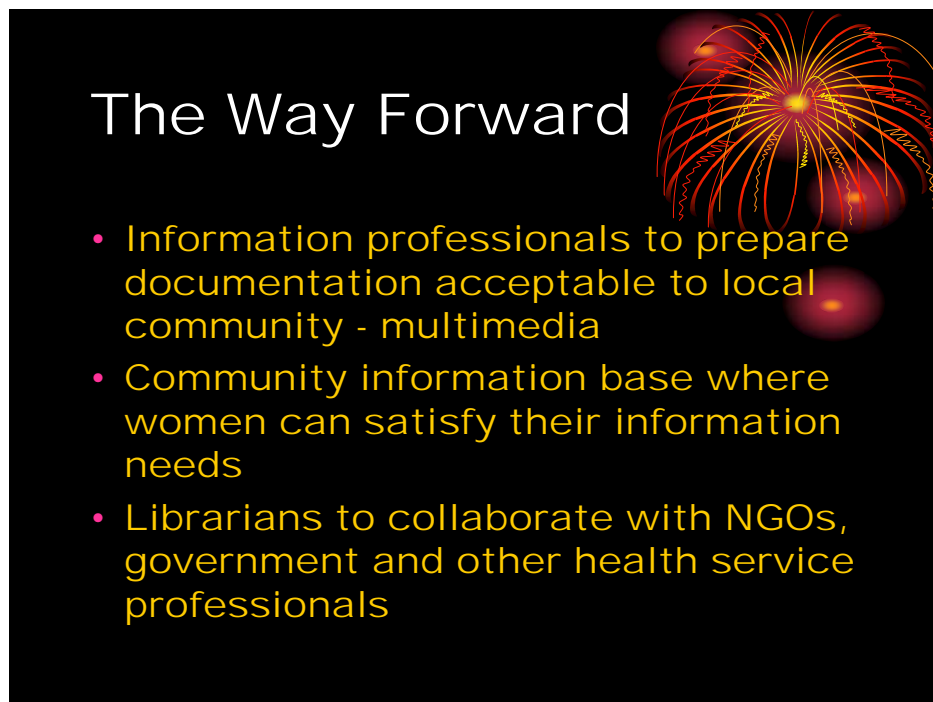
- Projects are helping in health promotion, formulating policies
- More women are availing of health facilities
- Female sex ratio has improved from 917 in 1991 to 934 in 2001
- Female life expectancy has improved from 67.2 years (1996) to 69.3 years (2001)

These awareness programmes have reached the consumers directly with their health literacy content. Training programmes and workshops have helped in disseminating information to service providers who in turn have reached a larger audience with health literacy information. Organizations at the government level and NGO level are using mass media to disseminate information on the health related issues. NGOs are doing door to door campaigning of the health related programmes. Projects like cervical cancer screening have directly contributed to women's health promotion and other survey based projects have helped decision makers in formulating appropriate policies. As a result TV, radio and other health related programmes organized by various government departments, NGOs and libraries of different institutes are being attended by an increasing number of users. More women are participating in the government and NGO health programmes. We know that in West Bengal the infant mortality rate has declined from 71 in 1991 to 51 in 2001[14]; the female sex ratio has improved from 917 in 1991 to 934 in 2001 [13] and female life expectancy has improved from 67.2 years in the period 1996 to 2001 to 69.3 years in the period 2001 to 2006[13]. This shows that our initiatives and efforts are in the right direction and contributing to the improvement but much more needs to be done.

Now the library and information professionals are facing a challenging task of reaching health literacy to all women. Although there is a proliferation of large amount of information and rapid development of ICT and its use in the field of information organization and dissemination of information is making it easy to access health related information on line, still a majority of women do not have access to these. So a

developing and multilingual country like India should provide training to find, identify, select and use information both online and off-line and in regional languages. Librarians of health science libraries and women study centres are getting technical as well as financial support from government and respective institutions to provide need-based, thematic health awareness programmes, training on health related issues and they are providing improved services based on the community information need. Large number of women is also taking part in Panchayats, local or rural units of governments. Librarians are determined in reaching the goal of providing health literacy to all.

The Way Forward



The Way Forward

- Information professionals to prepare documentation acceptable to local community - multimedia
- Community information base where women can satisfy their information needs
- Librarians to collaborate with NGOs, government and other health service professionals

Different health science institutes, government departments like Department of Health and Family Welfare, Department of Women and child Development and NGOs are active in bringing out different information resources. This information must be accurate, up-to-date, unbiased and easily understandable to the consumers and created by a trusted authority. Information professionals have a role to play in preparing this documentation in a way acceptable to the local community (including multimedia) and making this information accessible and consumable to the users and identifying their objectives. It is necessary to train them in the “why, what, where and how” of these resources so that they can easily find and use them. It is necessary that information sources can be of any form (oral, written, audio-visual, etc) and in any language. Feedback from the consumers is also important to see the effect. A number of organizations are involved in bringing out the resources and policies of the government have adopted the public private partnership model to achieve public health goals. So the information professionals are in an advantageous position to collaborate with NGOs, government and other health service providers and take active part in providing training to every member of the community to

handle the resources. They can also empower them by giving training to access resources using ICT. They should have a synergistic approach to reach the masses by combining the efforts of all the organizations and using the large physical network of public libraries in West Bengal to form community information bases.

Information literacy is a training to acquire certain problem-solving skills which will help the individual to overcome the complexities of the information society and help in life-long learning. Information professionals are playing the role of educators in promoting health literacy. They should play a challenging and constructive role in ensuring that the consumers know the relevant health information, the related rights, take part in informed decision making regarding the diseases and their treatments and thus take a leading role in developing health-aware and health-responsible active citizens of the information age.

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