



# Walk *with* Confidence

## Assertiveness Training For Rural Adolescent Girls

Trainers' Training Programme  
for Dalit Women Leaders of  
WIND Network

8-12 May, 2000

A Report

DEST – NESAI  
South India

RUWSEC  
Tamil Nadu

**LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION FOR RURAL ADOLESCENT GIRLS:  
REPORT OF A TRAINERS' TRAINING PROGRAMME**

*8 – 12 May 2000*

*Rural women' social education centre, Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu, India*

**A REPORT**

This report is the outcome of a training workshop conducted by RUWSEC for DSST-NESA. The programme was conceived, designed and implemented by RUWSEC.

**The Context**

The New Entity for Social Action (NESA) dawned on the horizon of the Social Development Sector of South India right on the heels of the phasing out from its south India programme of Oxfam comprising of its 40 or so erstwhile partners, with a view to both consolidate and take forward the numerous and valuable gains till then realised with the help of Oxfam in the service of the poor and the down trodden.

Right from its inception NESA began to function upholding the values of transparency, good governance, collective action, decentralisation and accountability. Accordingly it focused its work on seven sectors, namely Dalit/Adhivasi Empowerment, Gender, Micro credit, HIV/Aids prevention, Child Rights and Natural Resource Rights Restoration and Management spanning over the three states of Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Kerala. For effective and efficient functioning of these sectors, Sector Support Teams were set up with full independence in programme planning and financial management.

The Dalit Sector Support Team (DSST), thus set up, with Social Awareness Society for Youths (SASY) based at Tindivanam in Villupuram District in Tamilnadu as the Convenor organisation, was the first to take off in its work of facilitating and co-ordinating Dalit networks and organisations at the state co-ordinating Dalit networks and organisations at the state level. DSST became the catalyst for promoting the Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation (HRFDL) both in Tamilnadu and in Karnataka. While HRFDL-TN is network and organisation based, HRFDL-K is totally movement based. HRFDL-TN is comprised of 12 Dalit Networks with 175 Dalit NGOs spread over in 25 Districts in Tamilnadu covering population of 2 million in 4229 villages.

DSST from its inception has been paying very special attention to the development of Dalit women leadership. With this aim it has promoted an all women leadership. With this aim it has promoted an all women network by name Women's Integrated Network for Dalit Empowerment (WIND), which comprises of 16 women headed NGOs. It is to strengthen the women and adolescent girls of WIND network that the DSST-NESA organised a Trainers' Training Programme on Assertiveness and Life Skills Education

along with Rural Women' Social Education Centre (RUWSEC, Chengalpattu, Dr. Sundari Ravindaran, its Secretary-Director, who has done a yeomen's work in the relatively new area of reproductive health was the resource person for this training.

## **Background**

Rural Women's Social Education Centre (RUWSEC) is located in and works among villages of Kanchipuram (erstwhile Chengalpattu) district in Tamil Nadu, India. Tamil Nadu is generally considered as among the more 'developed' states in India. In reality, the state presents a mixed picture in terms of development and women's status.

Tamil Nadu has the second highest female literacy rate in India - 52.3%. Female work participation rate, at 30.88 % in 1991, ranked fourth highest in the country. The state has near-replacement level fertility, with a total fertility rate (TFR) of 2.1 in 1997. Health and family welfare services in Tamil Nadu are better spread than in most of the other major states of India. On the other hand, Tamil Nadu is not among the economically developed states of India. About a third of the state's population lived below 'poverty line' (32.8%), the fifth-highest among 17 major Indian states in 1987-88.

Rural Women's Social Education Centre (RUWSEC) is a grassroots women's organisation. It was founded in 1981 by a team of thirteen women, twelve of whom were *dalit*<sup>1</sup> women from the villages in this area. The organisation operates from Chengalpattu, near Madras (Chennai) in Tamil Nadu. In 1999, our community-based activities covered 98 hamlets with a total population of about 30,000, 90% of whom were *dalit*. Our outreach through other activities extends to a population of about fifty thousand.

The formation of the organisation was an evolutionary process, a consequence of the growing awareness that developed among the women who founded it, that to be effective change agents capable of making changes in their communities, women needed to gain greater control over decisions related to their bodies and concerning their sexual and reproductive lives. Consequently, achieving women's well-being through women's empowerment has been the main focus of the organisation's work since its inception.

In pursuit of this goal, the organisation carries out a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from community-based work with women and men on gender and reproductive and sexual health and rights, to research and advocacy, and running a clinic and hospital and providing technical support to other grassroots organisations in the state of Tamil Nadu. Each of these activities has evolved over time, in response to needs expressed by the community, or suggestions made by community workers.

The adolescents' programme of RUWSEC started in 1982 as a programme for training adolescent girls to be aware of and stand up against gender-based discrimination. We soon realised the special needs of boys and young men as well, and evolved into a comprehensive adolescents programme carrying out life skills and livelihood skills

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<sup>1</sup> 'Dalit' is the name that members of the harijan (ex-untouchable) caste have chosen to refer themselves by. It means 'the oppressed'.

training, provision of health services and counselling and support in all matters related to their growth and development – from deciding on further training, finding employment or deciding on marriage. Our programmes cover in-school and out-of-school, and married and single adolescent boys and girls.

In designing our adolescents programme, RUWSEC has been guided by the ‘life skills’ education approach, which takes into account these multi-dimensional needs of the adolescent. ‘Life skills’ have been defined as *‘abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable us to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.’* (WHO, 1993) Life skills can be grouped into five major areas:

- self awareness and empathy
- communication and interpersonal relationships
- decision-making and problem solving
- creative thinking/ critical thinking
- copng with emotions and stressors

We have integrated into this approach an explicit gender analysis and training component, which we believe constitutes an essential life skill in the current times where gender power equations are undergoing major changes. Education on sexuality and reproduction is a part of the ‘life-skills’ training. Programmes focusing exclusively on sex, reproduction, family planning and HIV/AIDS without addressing the adolescent in his/her totality may not succeed in achieving what a ‘sex education’ programme aims to do - to promote healthy and responsible sexuality and reproduction. For after all, adolescents’ sexual and reproductive behaviour is but an extension of their behaviour in other facets of their lives.

RUWSEC is acknowledged in Tamil Nadu as a grassroots NGO with considerable experience in working with rural adolescents. We have brought out a life-skills training manual in Tamil, and used it for training trainers from other community based groups over the last 2-3 years (1998-2000). This report describes in detail a trainers’ training programme conducted in May 2000 for a network of grassroots *dalit* women’s organisations. We believe that the approach we have used, of integrating gender as a central theme in the training, and the interactive training methods we have used may be of value to others working in this field.

### **The trainers’ training programme**

This trainers’ training was conducted for WIND, a network of *dalit* women’s organisations in Tamil Nadu, by Rural Women’s Social Education Centre, Chengalpattu. The organizations that constitute WIND work in various districts of Tamil Nadu with the objective of mobilising *dalit* women to demand their rights as people and as women. The network is part of a larger movement for *dalit* rights which has been gaining momentum in the state during the last decade.

The need for life skills training for adolescents was felt by dalit women's organisations for a number of reasons. Teenage pregnancies in unmarried adolescents, more often than not the result of non-consensual sex, were becoming increasingly common in their communities. These usually ended in backstreet abortions with concomitant health risks. Sexual violence was also a growing problem.

While these issues are important in and of themselves, they also constituted an important barrier to mobilising *dalit* women. This was because communities typically responded to the problems of sexual violence and unwanted teenage pregnancies with restricting the physical mobility of unmarried adolescent girls and clamping down on their social interaction.

Life skills training for adolescents was to have the following major objectives:

- to help adolescent girls be better informed on matters related to sexuality, reproduction and contraception before their sexual debut
- to develop skills to be assertive in relationships with the opposite sex, and
- to develop skills to be able to prevent or protect oneself from sexual abuse

A five-day trainers' training workshop was organised during 8-12 May, 2000 for senior members of the WIND network. The purpose of this trainers' training workshop was to train facilitators who could carry out life skills education workshops for adolescent girls in the communities in which WIND's member organisations (all were grassroots *dalit* women's organisations working in about 5-15 hamlets each).

The specific objectives of the workshop were

- to help facilitators develop a non-judgemental attitude towards adolescents' issues
- to introduce participatory training methods through the way the trainers' training was conducted
- to provide basic information on physical changes during adolescence
- to introduce a sample of training methods for the three training objectives for adolescents' life skills training (listed above)

The first day of the workshop was to focus on sensitising participants to adolescents' concerns and issues, and from the second day on, participants were introduced to a range of topics and exercises which would be part of the life skills education curriculum for adolescent girls. Topics covered included, for example, examining the meaning of love and intimate relationships, learning to behave as equals and be assertive in intimate relationships, dealing with sexual harassment and be able to say no to non-consensual sex, a sampler of the range of topics to be covered by the life skills education curriculum. Participatory training methods were used throughout the workshop, so that participants learned from what we did and not only from what we said.

This was meant to be an introductory training, to be followed up with at least two workshops in six-monthly intervals, to further develop facilitation and training skills and to develop a better grounding on reproductive health and reproductive rights.

The training was conducted in the training centre of Rural Development Society, Chengalpattu, with whom Rural Women’s Social Education Centre (RUWSEC) shares a common campus. The chief trainer was TK Sundari Ravindran, founder member and erstwhile executive director of RUWSEC. There were in all 23 participants: all women , including two women in their late teens, and the remaining almost equally distributed between the twenties and thirties. There were also 3 men who attended as observers. The participants were all from rural *dalit* communities with 8 or more years of schooling. Few had been to university. Most were married and had children. In fact, there were three or four toddlers who had come along with their mothers and stayed through the five day workshop on their mothers’ laps.

The time –table of the workshop is presented in Annexure 1.

### **Day 1**

The workshop started with a brief introduction by Mr Ramesh Nathan, initiator of the WIND network on the need for the trainers’ training on life skills education for adolescents, followed by a presentation by TK Sundari Ravindran on RUWSEC’s activities, and especially its work related to lifeskills education for adolescents.

#### ***Participants’ introduction***

Participants were given a square card each and asked to write the name by which they would like to be called in the centre of the card. Those among them who had attended training workshops on health were to mark a cross ( + ) in the right hand side top corner; those who had undergone gender training previously were to mark the symbol of a woman ( ) in the left hand side top corner. Those who held supervisory positions in their organisations were to draw a pair of spectacles ( ) in the right hand side bottom corner, and participants who had travel outside the state (Tamil Nadu) to attend meetings or workshops were to draw a train ( ) on the left hand side bottom corner.



Participants pinned the cards on themselves like badges. Participants with each of the symbols were then asked to come forward, form a circle, and tell the others about the kind of training attended, position held, or places travelled to, as the case may be.

More participants had attended gender training workshops than workshops on health. Workshops on health that many participants had attended were almost all on HIV/AIDS and STIs. Three women had received training as paramedical workers from private health facilities. About half the participants had travelled outside Tamil Nadu to attend meetings or workshops, and with the exception of four who had travelled far from home to Delhi, most had gone to the neighbouring city of Bangalore. About a third each of the participants were community workers, supervisor and co-ordinators and/or founders of grassroots *dalit* women's organisations.

### ***Hopes and fears***

The next activity was to write down, individually at first, and then through a process of consensus building in groups, participants' hopes for the workshop and their fears. These were then put up on a chart that stayed on the wall throughout the five days' of the workshop.

Participants hoped :

To gain skills and information that would help guide adolescent girls on responsible sexual behaviour

To acquire information on the body and sexuality and reproduction

To learn about women's health problems

That the trainer should be caring, even if she is strict and enforces discipline

That topics covered should be explained in simple terminology

That the trainer would move on to the next topic only after ascertaining that participants have understood what was covered previously.

That co-participants would be attentive, punctual and allow for equal participation of all.

Fears included

Groupism and one-upmanship across the different organisations

Health problems that may affect participation

Training would prove difficult to comprehend

Some participants would take a 'know-all' attitude which would affect the dynamics of the training

The trainer and participants agreed to take joint responsibility to ensure that hopes were met and that negative behaviour was averted.

A steering group of four was selected to act as time keepers, to give feedback to the trainer on training content and methods, to be responsible for participants' welfare and get in touch with the administration in case of problems, to nominate two rapporteurs for each day, and to conduct games and stretchers between and during sessions to keep up attention levels.

This was followed by a summary of the training schedule and topics to be covered over the five days.

### ***Putting away baggage and getting ready for the workshop***

Participants were given a sheet of paper and an envelope each. They were asked to write down the thoughts, concerns and worries that were uppermost on their minds at that moment. They then had to fold up the paper, put it into the envelope and seal it. Some participants then shared what they had written. One participant, a panchayat (village government) President was worried that she would be missing an important meeting that week, another had forgotten to leave some instructions for her daughter about managing the household in her absence, a mother of three young children had left behind an ailing father and didn't know how the children the eldest of whom was only 11, would cope with taking care of their grandfather. There were many such stories, typical of rural women for whom taking time off from their household tasks, and that for five days, is an uphill battle.

### ***Cherished memories of adolescence***

This exercise aimed at sensitising participants to adolescents' needs, concerns, problems and desires, their relationship with adults and so on, by providing an opportunity to remember how they were themselves like as adolescents.

Each person was asked to think about, and share answers to the following questions:

Go back in time. You are 13 years old now. Try to remember how you looked and felt yourself.

1. What kind of clothes do you wear ?
2. What do you like doing ? How do you like to spend your free time ?
3. What is your favourite haunt?
4. Who is (are) your close friends ?
5. Which is your favourite song ? Your favourite movie?
6. Who are the most important people in your life ?
7. Narrate one memorable incident that took place in your 13<sup>th</sup> year (or around that age)

For some, early adolescence was marked by loss of a parent, for others, it was a time full of pranks played and reprimands received; many remembered how they loved to hang out with friends, watch movies and got sentimental over love songs from popular movies. Unforgettable incidents included those that left them feeling misunderstood or unappreciated, embarrassed or elated. It was a beautiful trip down memory lane.

In the debrief session, participants reflected on what they learnt about adolescent years from their own memories of adolescence:

Adolescents

love playing, watching television or movies, spending a lot of time with friends

are particular about how they look and what they wear

do not feel involved in family problems

hate receiving advise



believe they are mature and capable of making decisions concerning their lives  
feel competitive  
sensitive and easily upset  
want to be treated with respect and taken seriously by adults

In order to work with adolescents, one needs to understand how they think and feel, and also have an appreciation of the pressures they faced in the rural communities to which participants belonged. Although both boys and girls were affected, there were specific problems that girls faced because of prevalent gender norms and values.

Girls learn to be ashamed of their bodies as 'unclean', because menstruation is considered 'polluting' ritually. During their menstrual periods, girls are not allowed to go to temples or worship within the house, they cannot work in the farm because 'the plants would dry up' if they came in contact with a menstruating girl, and they could not enter the kitchen, or handle the stored grain.

Their physical mobility begins to be restricted because they are considered 'vulnerable' to sexual assault, to being led 'astray' in terms of falling in love (considered immoral in the community) and having sexual relation before they are married.

This often means being withdrawn from school, not being allowed to go out even to one's neighbours' homes after sunset, not being allowed to go anywhere outside the village without a suitable male escort, and so on.

Girls have no right over their bodies, no right to decide who they will marry, and are taught that the husband has the ultimate say when it comes to sexual relations. The age old stereotypes of 'good' women not being interested in sex continues to be upheld, although television and movies project a completely different picture of romance, love and sex.

Much of these restrictions are related more to gender power dynamics within the community and the community's interest in upholding women's 'morality' through control over their sexuality, as an indicator of the community's honour. We needed to unpack our own beliefs and values in terms of gender roles and norms, and think through what it meant to foster egalitarian gender relations among young people.

### ***Gender roles***

The next session was on gender roles. Participants were divided into groups and had to respond to the following questions:

1. Who would I call a 'good' man ?
2. What kinds of male behaviour would I disapprove of ?
3. Some moments in my life when I was proud of being female ?
4. Some incidents in my childhood when I felt discriminated against as a girl.
5. Some incidents from my adult life when I regretted being female

The groups' responses were as follows:

#### Attributes of a 'good' man

Caring  
Courageous  
Capable of earning a livelihood  
Responsible  
Educated  
Not stubborn but willing to give in to a woman  
Respecting women's opinions and feelings  
Sharing in household tasks and in childcare  
Taking responsibility for contraception  
Patient  
Able to face hardships and steer the family ahead  
Able to take on family responsibilities

Male behaviour that we would disapprove of

Jealousy (especially in relation to their partner's potential for feeling attracted by another man)  
Anger  
Controlling women  
Aggressive  
Having several sexual partners  
Perpetrating physical or psychological violence against women  
Demanding dowry  
Lazy  
Irresponsible  
Selfishness  
Alcoholism  
Dominating  
Disrespectful to women

Some moments in our lives when we were proud of being female

When I had a baby  
When I married the man I loved  
When I feel competent in managing the household  
When I am able to understand and come to the aid of other women  
When I see my children grown up and well-off in life  
When I attained puberty  
When I earn an income to support my family, and meet my children's small needs  
When I give in and make compromises so that someone else may benefit

Some incidents in my childhood when I felt sorry/ashamed that I was a girl

When my body was undergoing physical changes during puberty  
When my parents were harsh on me because I didn't do housework  
At menarche, when there was a ceremony to announce my 'coming of age' to everyone  
When I was not given the same kind of food as my brothers

When my movement outside the house was restricted because it was not 'safe'  
When some men behaved in a (sexually) cheap manner, making me cringe and feel guilty  
When everyone laughed at me for riding a cycle

Some incidents from my adult life when I regretted being female

When abused sexually by my husband  
When I was in labour  
When I was widowed and began to be considered a 'bad' omen to be avoided  
When faced with cruelty in the hands of mothers-in-law and husbands (several women said this)  
Whenever I am treated as less than human  
When I don't have a voice anywhere, and my opinions and feelings don't matter even in decisions about myself  
When forced into sexual relationship without my consent  
Almost everyday – because of having to shoulder all household tasks and responsibilities single-handedly  
When subjected to sexual harassment in public places, while travelling etc.  
When prevented from performing the funeral rites for my father because I was female

A long discussion ensued after the groups had made their presentations. These centred around our socialisation into male and female roles which governs what we expect men and women to do and how we expect them to behave. We sought to distinguish between roles and attributes that are the result of biological differences between males and females, and those that arose from socialisation. Participants found it difficult to come to terms with just how large a part of all the things women are prevented from being and doing is a consequence of social values and norms. Why do women have no right to choose their marriage partners? Why do women have to do all domestic work without male help? Why is it alright for men to have many sexual partners whereas a woman who loses her virginity before marriage could even be killed for this 'sin'? Why do men think it their right to control every aspect of women's lives, be it wife, mother, daughter or sister? Why does society permit such injustice, and why have we accepted this as a 'given' for so many years?

The role of caste divisions in consolidating control over women's lives and their sexuality came up as a part of this discussion. One of the features of the caste system which has helped perpetuate social control over women's sexuality is the stricture against marriage outside one's caste group.

Prevention of inter-caste marriages has been used as a reason for male control over women's physical mobility and their sexuality. As soon as girls reach menarche, their movements are restricted, they are not allowed to have any interactions with the opposite sex and their marriages are arranged by parents before they can 'do wrong' - usually meaning 'fall in love, lose their virginity, get pregnant or marry someone of another caste.' A movement of '*dalit*' women which opposed caste as well as gender based domination needed to think through organising strategies that would help address both these simultaneously.

The day came to an end with this session. Participants were given copies of RUWSEC's publications on our bodies and their functioning; on puberty and menstruation; contraception; pregnancy and childbirth; and gynaecological conditions and problems. They were required to read these in the evening in preparation for a quiz programme the next morning.

## **Day 2**

The next morning began with a consolidation of the main learning points of the previous day, and drawing out the implications for life skills education for adolescents :

Facilitators of programmes for adolescents need to understand and be sensitive to adolescents' needs, their feelings and actions.

Although socialisation into gender roles begins early in life, they become palpable in adolescence. It becomes imperative that interventions with adolescents address the issue of gender justice, and encourage adolescent girls and boys to question the basis of gender based discrimination.

Adolescence is the period when girls are taught to be ashamed of their bodies.

The physical development of adolescent girls' bodies and their ability to become pregnant becomes the basis for restricting their freedom and controlling almost all aspects of their lives 'for their own good'. Life skills education for adolescent girls should help them feel comfortable with their bodies, and be better informed about sexuality, reproduction and contraception so that they can make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives.

Assertiveness training would be an essential component of life skills education for adolescent girls. This would help them question and challenge the basis of their discrimination in education and employment; denial of their right to choose their marriage partner; the right to choose when and how many children to have; and whether or not to have sexual relations.

Learning about sexual and domestic violence and developing the skills to stand up to it is important for adolescent girls, because it is through the threat of violence that their behaviour is effectively controlled by society.

### ***How well do we know our bodies ?***

The first session of the day was a quiz competition. Participants were divided into two teams. An envelope containing questions was placed between the teams, and one person acted as the quiz mistress, picking out questions for each team. (See Box 2 for questions).

Overall, participants had limited knowledge about reproductive health except in matters related to puberty and menstruation. They had a number of questions and wanted more training on reproductive health in future workshops.

After the quiz was over, participants were given time to ask any questions that they had, and the trainer addressed these as best as she could, or referred them to publications where they could find more information.

The session concluded with an exercise on body mapping and labelling the internal organs. One participant lay down on the floor and an outline of her body was drawn with a chalk. Volunteers were invited to fill in this outline with internal organs. Since most participants did not feel able to proceed, they were permitted to look into the book on our bodies given to them the previous evening.

1. On which days of the menstrual cycle can a woman have sexual intercourse and be relatively safe from risk of pregnancy ?
2. How does vasectomy prevent pregnancy ?
3. What are some sexually transmitted infections that women get (give symptoms and names) ?
4. What are some physical changes associated with puberty in boys ?
5. What are some physical changes associated with puberty in girls ?
6. What is menstruation ?
7. What are some reasons why there is heavy bleeding after delivery ? How will you know when medical help is urgently needed in such a condition ?
8. What is the meaning of (male) impotence (In Tamil, the term is *absence of maleness*)?
9. If all the children a couple have are male or all female, what is this caused by ?
10. What are some causes of male infertility ?
11. What are some causes of female infertility ?
12. What is D & C ? (In India, this is a common procedure used for inducing abortions as well as in women who have difficulty conceiving)
13. How does conception take place ?
14. Can men who have undergone vasectomy have sexual relations ?
15. What are some danger signals that may be indicative of cervical cancer ?
16. How do oral contraceptive pills prevent pregnancy ?
17. Why do some women have severe abdominal pain or cramps during menstruation ?
18. If the last menstrual period of a pregnant woman ended on 15 June 1999, when is her expected date of delivery ?
19. What are various reasons why a woman may have vaginal discharges (other than menstrual) ?
20. What are some sexually transmitted diseases that men get (names and symptoms) ?

The quiz and body mapping were fun and felt by participants to be relatively non-threatening ways of learning new information. By the time these activities ended, it was lunch time.

### ***Adolescents' concerns and issues***

The post-lunch session started with a poster-drawing exercise in small groups on adolescents' concerns and issues. Two groups worked on issues for adolescent girls, while two worked on issues for adolescent boys.

The following were reported as issues and concerns for adolescent girls:

Sexual harassment

Forced marriage

Sexual abuse within marriage

Being made pregnant and jilted by a man you love

Excessive parental control

Depression and anxiety, leading even to suicides

Having no one to turn to for advice on matters related to sex and relationships with the opposite sex  
Rape and sexual violence

Issues and concerns for adolescent boys included:

Peer pressure

Substance abuse

Unemployment

'Love failure' (when they are attracted to a girl but cannot pursue the relationship because girls are not permitted to have anything to do with boys)

Anxiety about virility and manliness

Social norms that do not permit sexual exploration, leading to unsafe sex with commercial sex workers.

Identity crisis – wanting to be like the 'macho' men in televisions and movies but not having the means or opportunities to do so

### ***Dealing with conflicts in adolescents' relationships with adults***

This session aimed at giving participants an opportunity to think through how they would, as counsellors or guides deal with conflicts that adolescents have in their relationships, either with others of the same age group or with parents and other significant adults in their lives.

Two skits were enacted by participant-volunteers based on outlines provided by the trainer. The first skit involved a father-son conflict. The role given to the father was as follows: He had high expectations of his son, and worked very hard to pay for the son's schooling. The son had been distracted and inattentive to school work for some months, and had failed in his final examinations. The son was aware of his father's expectations and found himself constantly failing to live up to it, making him feel anxious and distressed. At some time during the previous school year, faced with an unsympathetic class teacher who constantly berated him, he had decided that studying was not 'his thing'. He had joined up with a group of like-minded boys who couldn't care less about studies, and believed that this was 'cool' (trendy). Now that the results had come and he had failed, he was terrified of his father's reactions.

The skit had to portray how the father and son deal with this conflict situation. The father told the son that he was very disappointed, but would like to know why the son did badly. Did he have problems understanding what was taught? Did he need extra tuitions? Would a change of school help? The son responded saying he was sorry that he had given up, and yes, extra tuitions from a private tutor would help. The father agreed to pay for extra tuitions, but wanted an assurance from the son that he would put in the very best effort and make this worthwhile. They were not rich, and the money for extra tutoring had to come from cutting down on something else.

The discussion following this was about whether this was the way adults usually dealt with adolescents' problems. Often parents react to their children's failure in school as if it

was a personal failure. They are more worried about loss of face with relatives and neighbours than about finding out why their children failed. Also, they are focused on their own pain and disappointment, and rarely think about how their child would himself or herself be feeling. This results in a breakdown of communication between the adolescent and the parent.

The second skit portrayed two young men teasing teenage girls walking through the village's market area. The boys were interested in attracting the attention of these girls, and wanted to be able to talk and interact with them. However, the only way in which they have seen any communication between young men and women – learnt from movies and television- is through making vulgar gestures, and commenting on the girls' physical features and the way they were dressed. The girls would not have minded simple human interaction, and were quite curious about getting to know young men in general. But this was not socially acceptable. 'Good' girls were supposed to ignore all male advances and walk away with their heads down.

The skit had to portray what the participants thought was a sensible response in a situation where the boys teased the girls in ways that could be called sexual harassment. This had to be based on the understanding that the boys are probably misguided and desire no more than getting to know the girls.

In the skit, the girls walked up to the boys who were harassing them and told them that they did not appreciate such behaviour. They also said that because of the threat of sexual harassment by boys, girls feared going out without adult company. The boys responded saying they did not mean to be insulting, all they wanted was to talk to the girls. The girls replied saying that if the boys behaved 'like brothers' then they had no problems interacting with them 'like sisters'. They would not like to see their brothers behave in such a cheap manner.

In the discussion that followed, many participants pointed out that such a natural interaction between adolescent boys and girls would never be permitted 'by society'. A heated debate ensued about who 'society' was, and why each of us as adults could not decide to encourage a more healthy and open interaction between our adolescent children of both sexes. Most participants felt that it was the men in the community who would vehemently come down against such a change in norms of 'acceptable behaviour'. Would the participants, as facilitators and counsellors of adolescents dare to advocate for such a change ? They agreed to try taking the first bold steps in this direction, rather repeat the refrain 'society will not permit'. They were challenging many accepted social norms related to caste, demanding that *dalits* be treated as equal and with respect – so why not challenge other norms as well ?

***Understanding how adolescent girls and boys make decisions about love and sex:***

The second day's programme extended to a post-dinner role playing session. Participants were divided into two groups. Each group was given the following two 'boy-meets girl' situations involving decision-making on the part of adolescent girls on matters related to love and sex. While only some would enact the situation, the decisions about how the

story should proceed was made by the entire group. The purpose of the exercise was to explore participants' perceptions about how such scenarios are likely to develop, and to discuss what they feel about these and how best they could intervene or help the adolescents make informed decisions. The two stories and the various decision points in each story are presented in Box 3 (see opposite page)

### *The first skit*

In the first skit, Shiela the 15 year old rural girl who comes to work in an urban factory every day, agrees to meet Ramesh. She continues to meet him on subsequent evenings, and their romance grows through these 1 or 2 hour evening meetings. Since they meet only in public places, their physical intimacy is limited to holding hands and occasional stealthy touching, with Ramesh initiating these moves. Shiela is excited when Ramesh invites her to dinner. She has never eaten out in a classy restaurant before. She also believes that his invitation signifies his 'true love' for her.

When Shiela misses her last bus, she fears that Ramesh has manipulated the situation. However, she does not want to confront him with such a suggestion, for fear that this would hurt him and then he would walk away from the relationship. So she goes home with him, hoping and praying that this will not end as is usual in movies – with forced sexual intercourse and then being left high and dry. Unfortunately, it happens exactly as she fears. Ramesh has thought out how the evening should proceed. He wants to make love to her, and tries at first to convince her that this is what she also wants deep down in her heart. He tells her that she will not get pregnant the first time, and has no reason to worry. Shiela begins to cry and make a scene because she doesn't know what is the right thing to do. Ramesh then uses force and rapes her. He then tells her that no one would believe her or offer her any help, should she try to complain.

In the following weeks, Ramesh blackmails Shiela to have sex with him whenever he decides. Shiela is devastated, and does not know how to end this relationship without damaging her entire future.

### *Skit two*

In the second skit, Sumathy who is a school girl tells her mother that she is going to Geeta's place, and goes to the temple. Raju, her friend Geeta's cousin and Sumathy's school friend, is waiting there for her. Sumathy tells him that she received his letter, but does not think she is in 'love' with him. She is still very young and would like to complete her schooling before she begins to think about love and marriage. Raju is distressed and feels he has made a fool of himself. Seeing him upset, Sumathy tells him that they could still be friends if he will stop pursuing this as a 'romance'. Raju seems relieved, and they walk back together.

By the time Sumathy reaches home, word has already reached her mother that Sumathy was seen romancing with Raju in the temple. Sumathy's mother does not like having been lied to. But she does not encourage her friends' gossip, and tells them she knows Sumathy was meeting Raju, that they were good friends and nothing more. The women who brought her news are disappointed at not having the opportunity to rake up a scandal.



### Story 1

Shiela is 15 years old. She lives in a village, but has recently started working in an urban factory. She commutes everyday to work. Shiela notices a young, good-looking man who appears to be waiting for her almost every day at the bus-stop where she alights. He then follows her to the gate of her factory. One day Sunita, a co-worker and close friend, brings her a letter from this young man, Ramesh. Ramesh would like her to meet him that evening outside the factory.

*Decision point 1:* Will Shiela meet Ramesh that evening ? On subsequent evenings ?

If Shiela does not meet Ramesh, does she send a response through her friend ? Does she decide to tell Ramesh not to follow her or wait for her at the bus stop ?

If she does meet Ramesh and continues to do so over the next few days or weeks, we go to the next decision point.

Ramesh invites Shiela to stay back late one evening. He would like to take her out to dinner to celebrate his birthday. He suggests that Shiela tells her parents that she has to work over-time and will be late getting home.

*Decision point 2:* Will Shiela agree to have dinner with Ramesh ?

If she does not agree, how does Ramesh react ? What is the next step in the relationship ?

If Shiela does go out for dinner with Ramesh, we go on to the next decision point.

It gets very late by the time dinner is over. Shiela has missed her last bus. She is terrified. Ramesh offers to take her to his room for the night, and to put her on the first bus the next morning. He reassures her that her parents need never know where she stayed the night, she could tell them that she missed the bus and stayed over in Sunita's house which was close to the factory. Seeing no better option, Shiela agrees to go back with Ramesh to his room.

*Decision point 3:* Will Ramesh make sexual advances to Shiela ?

Will he expect her to sleep with him, assuming that her agreement to come home with him implies her tacit willingness ?

Will Shiela agree, or will Ramesh force himself on her ?

Where do you think the relationship will go from here ?

### Story 2

Raju, his cousin Geeta and her friend Sumathy live in the same neighbourhood and study in the same high school. They take the same bus everyone from their village to the school which is located in a nearby town. Raju feels attracted to Sumathy. One day, he sends a letter through Geeta to Sumathy expressing his 'love' for her and asking her to meet him at the village temple that evening.

*Decision point 1:* Will Sumathy go meet Raju ? If no, why ? What will she do next ? Will she ignore the letter, or send a reply ?

If Sumathy does decide to meet Raju – what will she tell her mother?

*Decision point 2:* If the second option is taken. Sumathy meets Raju. What happens next ? Will Sumathy tell Raju that she too, loves him ? If not, what else will she do ?

Sumathy and Raju are seen talking together in a private corner by friends of Sumathy's mother. They make it a point to go straight back and tell Sumathy's mother that they saw Sumathy with Raju, and that she had better be careful about her daughter before the latter brings shame on the family.

What will Sumathy's mother do when she hears this ? Will she confront Sumathy ? Will she give Sumathy a chance to explain herself, or will she punish her ?

Will she tell Sumathy's father ? What will Sumathy's father do ?

When Sumathy comes home, her mother confronts her and asks her why she lied. Sumathy explains that she wanted to meet Raju and knew she would never have been allowed to do so. She tells her mother everything that happened. She reassures her mother saying that she could be trusted, and would never let her parents down or act irresponsibly.

Sumathy's father comes home while this conversation is on, and wants to know what is up. However, knowing his conservative views about girls' upbringing, Suamthy's mother does not tell him anything. Sumathy is grateful to her mother for being a friend and trusting her.

### Discussion

The way the stories played out were discussed threadbare after the skits. In Shiela's story, the discussion centred around why Shiela decided to go back to Ramesh's place instead of staying with her friend Sunita. This was because she was afraid that Ramesh would take offence. Should she be afraid? Could she not have been more assertive? Participants felt that young girls do not have any guidelines on what is okay to do and what is not in their relationship with boys and men. What they hear is a blanket 'no' to any interaction with men before marriage. However, times have changed and girls find themselves with more opportunities to interact with boys and men and are also naturally curious to explore the possibility of friendships with them. They go ahead, and cannot seek advice from anyone except a few of their friends, who are equally clueless.

Many participants felt that Sumathy's story was unreal and depicted wishful thinking. However, some argued that the skit depicted alternative pathways that an adolescent girl could follow. Such skits would help adolescents see the various options before them. What would be a more typical reaction of a school girl who receives a 'love' letter from a boy? There were two usual tracks, according to the participants. The girl would either raise a hue and cry about it so that she is considered a 'good' girl, and the boy would be punished by the school and by the village elders; or she would go meet him and 'fall in love', and go on till someone finds them together and reports back to their parents. When this happens, both the boy and the girl are punished. For the girl, the usual punishment is to be taken out of school, followed by an arranged marriage.

What according to the participants would be their role as life skills educators, when adolescent girls and boys need counsel in such matters? While they could see a role for themselves as counsellors who were non-judgemental and helped adolescents think through their options before acting, this was not going to be very simple.

To begin with, many of them were themselves trapped in male-dominated family structures, and could carry out their public roles only with the approval of the significant male members of their families. If they were seen to encourage promiscuity – as any attempt to permit interaction between sexes before marriage would be seen – then they would themselves face serious consequences including violence. Even when the situation was not as bad as that, they risked losing public support for their primary task – of mobilising *dalit* women to stand up against caste discrimination. The discussion ended

inconclusively, but it was clear that the women had begun to face up to uncomfortable questions about their own realities.

### **Day 3**

The third day was to cover notions about love and romance, expectations from intimate relationships, and value clarification about what in their view was appropriate or inappropriate behaviour in intimate relationships. The day ended with a discussion on high risk situations for sexual abuse and how they as adolescent educators would deal with these.

#### ***What is love ?***

Ten statements on love (Box 4) was put up on a chart, and participants were asked to answer 'yes' or 'no' to these. They were to note down their responses on a piece of paper. The trainer then called out each statement and those with a yes put up their hands, followed by those with a no. This was followed by a debate between both sides, and a consensus, before moving on to the next statement.

Six of the participants felt that love at first sight was true love. The majority argued that what you feel at first sight is attraction, not love. This may eventually evolve into love. There were two who had married men who they fell in love with at first sight, and were unwilling to accept this majority view. The eventual consensus was that barring a few rare instances, love at first sight is usually a myth.

When you love a person, you need not love everything about him/her, you can disagree or have differences of opinion on some issues and have different likes and dislikes. There were no two opinions on this.

There was also consensus that love could happen more than once in a life time; that love is a decision, a responsibility. There were lively debates and divided opinions around whether love was irrational, dictated purely by the heart, and whether jealousy comes out of extreme love and passion. This was also the case with whether selfless love had the ability to change one's partner – there were some women whose bitter experiences to the contrary made them disagree vehemently with this notion.

The statement that friendship, respect and trust are the basis of love that endures met with everyone's agreement, but also led to some soul-searching among participants. There was one young woman who said,

<b>Box 4</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Love at first sight is what you call true love.</li><li>2. When you love a person, you love everything about him/her.</li><li>3. Love can happen only once in a life time.</li><li>4. Even if a person has many undesirable qualities, your selfless love and dedication can make a new person of him.</li><li>5. Jealousy comes out of extreme love and passion.</li><li>6. To love is to take leave of reason, and let your heart dictate your decisions, not your head.</li><li>7. Love is a decision, a responsibility.</li><li>8. True love means to die together if it is not possible to live together. (There is a popular saying in Tamil to this effect).</li><li>9. Falling in love is a process that results from knowing and understanding a person.</li><li>10. Friendship, respect and trust are the basis of love that endures.</li></ol>

*'It is not that my husband does not love me. He really cares about me, brings me gifts and takes care of all my needs. But I don't want to be loved like a child. I want to be a friend, a companion, a confidante. When I express my dissatisfaction at being treated like a child, my man is so hurt. He does not know why I am not happy with the way things are.'*

There could perhaps be no better articulation of where Tamil women are at now – freedom from atrocity and oppression is not enough. Equal opportunities and rights is what they want.

***What do we expect from an intimate relationship?***

This exercise built on earlier discussions on love, to clarify expectations on what we expect from our intimate partners. (Only heterosexual relationships were addressed in this session.) The session was meant to help participants reflect on what dealing as equals with their husbands or intimate partners would mean in practice, and think through whether we unconsciously reinforce traditional gender roles of male as the protector-supporter of the family and responsible for fulfilling the wife's needs.

Participants had to take turns to pick a card from a pile of cards in which various situations in a typical marital relationship in the rural Indian setting were written, and three different options (A, B and C) for preferred behaviour in that situation were also given to choose from. The person picking the card read out aloud the situation and the three solutions. Participants who chose the option 'A' moved to one corner of the room, those to chose option B grouped themselves in another corner, and so did those who chose option C. Box 5 gives the situations and the options given in the cards.

Each group then discussed its position with the other, arguing back and forth about which option represented a more egalitarian relationship.

**Box 5**

1. You and your husband have a rare day to be together without anyone else present. You would prefer to
  - A) Spend the day together at home, talking and being together
  - B) Go shopping, go to the movies and eat out
  - C) Visit your parents' home together
2. When he was leaving for work this morning, your husband had promised to take you out to the movies after he returned from work this evening. But he has returned late. You would
  - A) Not speak to him when he returns home, but express your anger by banging things around in the kitchen
  - B) Give him a piece of your mind as soon as he comes back
  - C) Find out from him why he is late, before reacting
3. The worst thing you can learn about your husband is that
  - A) He is sterile, and was so even before marriage to you but did not reveal this to you
  - B) He is having an affair with another woman
  - C) He has a sexually transmitted infection
4. Your husband sees a beautiful woman and remarks how attractive she looks. You will
  - A) Be hurt but not discuss it with your husband
  - B) Have a fight with him about how he would dare to have a roving eye when you were with him
  - C) Treat it like any other comment and agree or disagree according to what you really think

The responses were as follows. Most participants opted to spend the rare day alone with their husbands visiting their own parents' home. As for the second situation, opinion was divided between waiting to find out from the husband the reason why he failed to come home in time to go to the movies, and picking a silent or a more direct quarrel. For almost all participants, the worst thing they could learn about their husbands was that he was sterile, because it will be the woman who will be victimised by society, and also because it was not likely in the Indian context that the women could divorce the man and marry again if they were very keen on having a child. Again, almost all participants said that they would be upset and angry if their husbands commented that another woman was attractive. There was a lively discussion on the values underlying each of three positions.

Participants agreed that the options chosen by most of them reflected their adherence to 'scripts' they had seen other women enact in their marital roles, scripts that they had not consciously thought through and reflected on the underlying values. However, egalitarian relationships were not within the realm of reality for many of them, they said, and they had responded within the parameters set by their real-life situations rather than by what would be possible in the ideal world. The exercise had served the purpose of presenting before them the fact that more than one 'script' could exist for how women and men related to each other in an intimate relationship.

***What is moral, and what is immoral in intimate relationships?***

The next exercise was a values-clarification exercise in which, again, participants had to take positions regarding the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of situations that many Indian women commonly encounter in their lives. Participants sat in a circle around the room. A straight line was drawn in the centre of this circle, and one end of it was marked 'totally acceptable', and the other end, 'totally unacceptable'. The centre was marked 'and could go either way' (meaning, depends on the specific situation). A set of cards with statements written on them were kept near the line. Participant volunteers came to the centre of the room, picked a card, read it aloud, and then placed it at a point along the straight line according to their position on that statement. Thus, if they found the statement totally unacceptable, they would keep it at that end of the line. If they found it not quite acceptable, but not totally, they would place it between the 'unacceptable' and the midpoint, and so on. Box 6 lists the statements on which participants had to take positions. These statements are typical of the moral debates and dilemmas commonly encountered in our milieu in rural Tamil Nadu, and discussed and debated by stories and movies in ways which often reinforce gender role stereotypes.

A majority of the participants had fairly traditional views on sexual behaviour – sexual relationships were considered ‘right’ only within marriage, and both premarital and extramarital relationships were ‘immoral’. Women were not to feel any attraction to other men after they were married – no ‘good’ woman would feel that way. Watching pornographic films was immoral, and was one of the reasons that contributed to sexual coercion and sexual violence by men. According to them, sexual relationship with someone you did not love was okay, if he was the person you were married to. On the contrary, ‘love marriages’ were not always ‘right’, and barring rare exceptions, often ended in failure.

- To fall in love with another person after you are married
- To do something that you do not believe in and consider unethical, because it makes the person you love happy
- To have a sexual relationship with someone you do not love
- To have a sexual relationship with someone you love, before you are married
- To watch pornographic films (as a man)
- To not tell the person you are married to about an affair you had before marriage
- (As a woman) To break off with your girl friend because your husband does not like you to be friends with her
- The person you love making fun of you in public in a way that is humiliating
- To keep some things secret from the person you love because you know s/he will not approve of it.
- To continue in an intimate relationship with a person who does not respect you
- (As a married woman) To admire the good looks of a man who you find physically attractive

The most controversial issues were whether it was acceptable that the person you love humiliates you; and whether it was alright to continue in an intimate relationship with someone who does not respect you. This appeared to be because these were issues that many of the participants were dealing with in their lives, married to men that were chosen for them by their families, and negotiating for their right to be treated with dignity in their daily lives as wives.

The most the session could achieve was to get the few who thought differently to challenge these positions, and to get participants to see beyond black and white to shades of grey, and to discuss what morality really meant. We also examined why even women leaders such as themselves who believed in gender equality in other aspects of life such as education and employment, were at pains to prove to the community and to their families that despite these progressive views, they were ‘good’ women, meaning, they toed the line as far as sexual morality was concerned. It seemed like this was the price they had to pay to be leaders, and to have any acceptance within the community to mobilise women and girls’ groups.

***Murugan and Vasanthi- arguments for and against premarital sex from young people’s perspective***

The day ended with group discussions based on a picture story of Murugan and Vasanthi, two young people in love and wanting to have sex (See Box xx below). Participants had to divide in four groups. Groups one and three had to think through reasons which may

lead Murugan and Vasanthi respectively to decide to start a sexual relationship. Groups two and four had to think through reasons why Murugan and Vasanthi may decide that it was not alright to have sex as yet.

This exercise forced participants to go beyond their own positions and convictions about what was acceptable sexual behaviour, and to put themselves in the shoes of young people and start thinking through the young person's reasons for moving from romance to sex in a relationship.

The groups came up with the following reasons for why it was okay to have sexual intercourse, from the perspective of the male:

The desire to know what it was like to have sexual intercourse

The belief that it must be okay to have sex and perhaps a little unnatural for a male to not do so, because this is what he has heard from all his friends.

Murugan is 17 years old. He works in his uncle's shop. He is from a landless household and his parents are both wage workers in agriculture. Vasanthi is 15 years old, but looks older. She is conscious that she is attractive to boys and men. Because her sister had a 'love' marriage against their parent wishes, Vasanthi is often warned by her parents not to 'stray' like her sister but restore her parents respect in the community by behaving like a 'decent' girl from a good family. Vasanthi and Murugan live in the same neighbourhood and are attracted to each other.

Murugan is shy by nature. Some of his friends have had sexual experience, and have often impressed upon him that he should 'try' it and not be a sissy.

One day Murugan and Vasanthi manage to find an opportunity to be alone, in the woods outside their village. Murugan tells Vasanthi that he loves her and makes physical advances. Vasanthi is in a fix. She feels inclined to go along, but is also afraid.

Reasons why Vasanthi may say yes to Murugan's advances were seen as follows:

Having learnt from movies and television that 'true' love meant trusting your lover to stand by you all through life, it would seem to Vasanthi that saying no to sex would imply that she doubted his love for her

Fear that the relationship will end if she said no

To prove that she really loved him, and was willing to give him her 'most cherished possession', her body, her virginity.

Just as the reasons for saying yes to sex were very different for the boy versus the girl, so were the reasons for avoiding sex, according to the two groups which came up with these reasons. Thus, for Murugan, the reasons why he would decide it was not okay to have sex, were:

he was afraid of Vasanthi's parents, who would subject him to a public reprimand if they 'found out'

he did not want to risk her getting pregnant, because then he would be forced to marry her, and he was not sure he wanted to.

Vasanthi would say no because:

if she said yes, Murugan may think that she was of ‘loose morals’ and may not marry her but just ‘use’ her as a sexual partner  
fear of getting pregnant  
fear of sexual intercourse itself, because she did not know anything about it; and  
fear of being found out and subjected to public reprimand.

Following the above presentations from the small groups, the discussion in the large group centred around the ways in which this exercise may be useful in helping young people think through their own positions with respect to when and with whom to have sexual relations, and to take considered decisions. Participants believed that the majority of young people they knew would not consider premarital sex worth the risk given the social milieu in which they lived. They were very positive about using methods such as the above story-discussion and felt that these were far more likely to help young people to ‘be careful’, than receiving a lot of advise on the morality or immorality of premarital sex.

### **Assertiveness in intimate relationships: saying ‘no’ to sexual persuasion and coercion**

One of the recurring themes in the discussion on Murugan and Vasanthi’s story was the possibility that Vasanthi would not have an opportunity to say no, because she may never be asked. Her refusals or resistance may be understood by Murugan as ‘the way girls behave’, because boys often believed that girls say ‘no’ even when they mean ‘yes’, and it was for boys to overcome their resistance. Vasanthi had put herself in a vulnerable position because she had gone to meet Murugan voluntarily, and no one would believe her or sympathise with her if she complained of rape or coercive sex.

The next exercise presented participants with a series of vignettes of commonly used strategies by young men to persuade their sweethearts who refuse to have sex (these were based mainly on Tamil movies and television soap operas, and popular novels.) These vignettes were pictorially depicted and projected using an overhead projector (*See adjoining page*). Following each vignette, participants were asked to come up with ways in which they would respond to these words of persuasion

This turned out to be a very interesting session, because many participants started sharing their own experiences of having been in similar situations, usually with their betrothed before their marriage. (We did not get to hear of whether they were able to say ‘no’ or not). This helped them to think through a variety of ways of saying no without breaking off the relationship or placing the relationship in jeopardy. However,

- I am sorry that you do not trust me
- I know that you want this as much as I do. Don’t be afraid, I’ll make sure nothing goes wrong.
- I love you more than my life. I am willing to confront all obstacles in order to win your hand. It makes me sad that you are not willing to do even this for me.
- What is the point of living when you don’t really love me. You will understand the depth of my love when word reaches you of my suicide.
- You look lovely even when you are angry, it makes me crazier about you
- Don’t be a prick-tease. Do you really want to pretend that you did not have sex in mind when you came to meet me all alone in this lonely spot?
- Do you think you can say no to me and walk off? I’ll make sure your reputation is ruined and no one will ever marry you. What I cannot have, no one ever will



in the case of the more aggressive threats – the last two situations – participants felt that they would prefer to break-off with men who made such threats. The challenge was to remove oneself from the situation of immediate threat, which may mean using one’s wit and getting into a confrontation.

By the end of this day, participants had come a long way from taking moralistic positions and sitting on judgement to addressing issues and thinking through concerns and problems concerning relationships and sexual behaviour that young people often face.

The day ended with dividing participants into facilitating teams to run ‘practice’ life skills workshops the next day. Each team was to select one workshop session from RUWSEC’s training manual on life skills workshops for in-school adolescents, and prepare for the session as part of their home-work. The second half of day four and some part of day five was to be spent on these ‘practice-facilitation’ sessions.

#### **DAY FOUR**

There were two exercises on the fourth day, both building on problems addressed in earlier sessions. The first session dealt with assertiveness, while the second developed Murugan and Vasanthi’s story into a problem-solving exercise.

#### **Assertiveness in all relationships**

The previous day’s session had ended with an exercise on assertiveness in intimate relationships. It was evident from the discussions that it would be difficult to be assertive in sexual relationships if one was not assertive in all relationships. Assertiveness was a challenge for women and girls who were socialised to subordinate their own feelings and opinions to that of their husbands and significant elders in the household. Assertiveness was an issue also for young men and adolescent boys in a traditional society such as ours where older people – especially men - were vested with the power to decide on the lives of the young people in their extended family or kin group. Young men were also subjected to a great deal of peer pressure and sometimes engaged in behaviour they did not quite want to, in order to be accepted by their peer group. Assertiveness training would therefore be a key element in life-skills training for young people.

The session began with posing a situation demanding assertiveness in a collegial relationship for discussion by participants.

*You are Rani, you work in a community organisation. Your friend and co-worker Leela has been borrowing small amounts of money from you. She has not returned the amounts borrowed over the past month as yet. You have heard that she returned amounts owed to another colleague, and it made you feel like you were being taken for granted. Today, she has approached you for another loan. You would like to refuse. How would you do this assertively?*

The following steps were outlined for responding assertively to this and similar situations:

State your feelings about the issue, rather than blame the person. Do not start with 'you always...', but with 'when you ....., I feel ....'

State clearly your preferred solution to the situation

Wait patiently for the response

If s/he sidetracks, bring the issue back on track and state your issue and the solution once again

If the respondent turns recriminatory, don't back-track. State what you would do if the problem is not solved

If the respondent gives a positive response, thank him/her and bring closure to the issue

Two participants volunteered to role-play the above situation. The conversation ran as follows:

*Rani:* 'When you keep borrowing money from me, but do not return it promptly, while you return money borrowed from others, I feel I am being used like a door-mat, and it makes me angry with myself.'

*Leela:* 'Come on, Rani. Don't be that way. I returned the money to Gita because she is not a close friend like you. I thought you would understand.'

*Rani:* 'I would have preferred if you had returned the money when you said you would. If there was a problem, it would have been better if you had given me an explanation. I don't think it is a good idea for us to continue in these roles of lender and borrower, this will damage our friendship.'

*Leela:* 'Rani, I thought you were my friend. Now I know that you value money more than friendship. Alright then, thanks for opening my eyes. I don't need the loan from you.'

*Rani:* 'That still does not take care of the small problem of returning the money you still owe me. Could you please tell me a definite deadline by which I can expect to be repaid?'

..

and so on.

These were not thought up by the role players alone, the audience participated enthusiastically in supplying appropriate lines and in reminding the person playing Rani, who was supposed to be assertive, that Leela was avoiding the issue, and encouraging her not to be intimidated.

Following this, participants were asked to work with two of the four situations given to them in the exercise 'expectations from intimate relationships' on day two, and asked to think through how they would approach the situation assertively. (See Box 5, situations 2 and 4)

Responses by a wife who has been stood up by her husband who had promised to come home early to take you to a movie were discussed along the following lines: rather than cry and pick a quarrel, or go to the other extreme of being the ever-understanding sweet tempered wife, the wife could:

tell him that he should at least have called to say that he was held up, to be kept waiting without any information felt like she was of no consequence, she was not important enough to have to give an explanation

if he had made a habit of missing appointments with the wife, she could tell him that she did not care to be treated like that, and might turn down a future offer by him to take her out

What would be an assertive response by a wife/partner to a situation where the male partner (who knows that she is not very confident about her looks) is praising another woman's looks just to provoke her? (*Note: The nature of this situation was fleshed out by participants who said that this was a common occurrence in their lives*)

Rather than get provoked and give him the pleasure of having achieved his purpose in teasing her, she should think through why she was feeling provoked and try to put this into words. Why was the woman feeling upset? Is it because she believes that there is no one more beautiful than she? Or because she believes her partner has a roving eye? Or does she feel that he will leave her for another, more beautiful woman sooner or later?

The general opinion among participants was that the woman feels upset because she feels humiliated and even less confident in her relationship than before, each time her partner does this. So she should tell him exactly how it feels to be 'put down' – whether or not that was his intention in praising another woman's beauty. One could also ask him why he was praising another woman's beauty – whether this was an innocent and genuine remark, or whether it was with the intention of 'teasing'. The woman could tell him that she felt that he was teasing her, knowing she was not confident about her looks, and that this was hurting and humiliating. She would expect him to help her get over her complex, not intensify it.

Although the exercises did succeed in illustrating assertiveness in relationships, many participants were sceptical that such responses would work in intimate relationships. The kind of men they knew would not understand or appreciate what all this was about, they were not used to women 'talking back' or engaging in a reasoned discussion. They were more used to women crying and making a scene, and men being the level-headed-ones who reasoned with women. This issue – of trying to change gender relations among young people, even while living in a gender unequal situation themselves – had come up several times during this workshop, and was a formidable challenge for their effectiveness as facilitators of programmes for young people.

The discussion ended with reiterating the need to foster another kind of behaviour at least among young people, while trying to change the circumstances of our own lives to the extent possible.

### **Dealing with instances of sexual abuse within the community**

This exercise also built on an earlier session – the story of Murugan and Vasanthi. The session was addressed to community leaders and opinion makers - most participants would fit this description – who were often called upon to mediate in instances of sexual abuse or coercion reported by a young woman or her family. The aim of the session was to challenge participants to think through ways of tackling the issue in ways that respected the rights of the individuals affected and arriving at solutions in consultation with the young people concerned.

The story of Murugan and Vasanthi ended in the earlier session with Vasanthi having to make up her mind about whether or not to say yes to sexual intercourse under pressure from Murugan.

In this session, the facilitator started with giving the story an ending. Vasanthi says no, but Murugan believes that she is shy, and that it will be okay if he forces her into intercourse. This is what he has heard from friends, and seen on movies and in television. Murugan has sex with Vasanthi against her will. Vasanthi is not in a position to scream and call for help. Anyone from the village was bound to ask what she was doing there in the first place, how she came to be alone with Murugan.

After completing the story, the facilitator asked for participant-volunteers to play the roles of characters in the story. One person volunteered to be Vasanthi, and as the story moved forward in ways that Vasanthi thought it would, additional characters were called to join in from among the participants. A skit thus evolved, with each character developing her role as he/she went along. The skit was being enacted at the centre of the room in which we were seated, with all of us sitting in a circle around the room.

### ***The role-play***

*Vasanthi goes home, frightened and weeping, and blurts out to her mother that Murugan had sexually assaulted her. Her mother is devastated. She does not want to go public on this because that would affect Vasanthi's future. In fact, it could ruin Vasanthi's entire life.*

Participants were asked to suggest to Vasanthi's mother what she ought to do in this situation. Suggestions included:

    speak calmly to Vasanthi and ask her details: who was involved, where did it happen and under what circumstances

    find out what day of her menstrual cycle it was, so that one can be alert about a potential pregnancy

    ask Vasanthi what she thinks should be done under the circumstances

    speak to the young man concerned

    take her for a medical check-up immediately

All these options were debated, and all but the medical check-up was accepted by Vasanthi and her mother, who wanted to keep the matter quiet for the moment.

*Vasanthi's mother then consults Bhavani, a woman leader in the community who works as a volunteer in a community-based organisation. Bhavani speaks to Vasanthi. She asks Vasanthi whether she loves Murugan and was willing to marry him.*

This intervention caused an uproar among participants. They criticised the volunteer playing Bhavani for suggesting marriage to a 15 year old. 'Bhavani' defended her position saying that was the way such issues were usually dealt with in the community, and she wanted to be realistic.

The facilitator intervened to ask for suggestions from the floor about the kind of advise a community volunteer ought to be giving Vasanthi. There was some consensus that Vasanthi should be helped with getting away from this village, perhaps going to a boarding school in Madras city. This would mean helping her find financial support for further education, and most difficult of all, getting her father to agree to do so.

*Bhavani meets Vasanthi's father privately and informs him of the mishap. He is furious that his wife had not told him and that he had to hear about his own daughter from a third person. He refuses any further discussion with Bhavani.*

The group had to help Bhavani find a way out of this impasse. They suggested that she meet a close relative and friend of Vasanthi's family, a man whose opinion Vasanthi's father was likely to heed.

*Bhavani meets the family friend and explains the situation. She seeks his help in convincing Vasanthi's father to send her away to study in a boarding school. The family friend wants nothing to do with this kind of meddling and advises Bhavani to mind her own business and leave the family to deal with its problems in a way best suited to it.*

Should Bhavani continue in her endeavour? Was it right for her to 'interfere' in another family's private affairs? The group discussed the issue and decided that this was not the family's decision but only that of the 'head' of the family. Vasanthi and her mother had come to Bhavani for help and she should do all she can.

*In the meanwhile, the story spreads in the village and becomes a matter for adjudication by the local caste council. The caste council finds Vasanthi guilty of having provoked Murugan to have sex with her through her flirtatious behaviour and levies a fine to be paid by her father.*

The group did not want the story to end here. They wanted Bhavani to intervene and get Vasanthi away from the situation, even if she had to face opposition from Vasanthi's father.

The facilitator asked the large group why they had not suggested that Bhavani go to the police at this stage. The general opinion was that it would not be right to ruin the life of a misguided young man from a poor family. It would also not be possible to go on living in the community after taking such a step, because the entire community will be against

anyone who takes such action. Some of them had sons Murugan's age, and said that they would like Murugan to be treated in the same way that they would like their sons to be in a similar situation. Going to the police would also ruin Vasanthi's family, they said, because of the unwanted publicity it would bring. Vasanthi would be stigmatised for life.

Would they suggest Bhavani talked to Murugan? Yes, that would be a good thing to do, they felt. Bhavani should also help Murugan find help work through his feelings and not be left emotionally damaged.

The session ended at this point. It had helped participants think through the complexities of dealing with issues of sexual abuse and sexual coercion in the community context in which they lived.

### **Practicing facilitation of adolescent workshops**

The rest of the day was spent in participants taking turns to do 'practice-facilitation' of life-skills education sessions for adolescents based on RUWSEC's training manual. Participants did this in teams of three or four, and received feedback at the end of their sessions from other participants. They were also debriefed by the facilitator on their experience with facilitation, and their doubts and questions clarified or discussed.

The day's work ended half an hour early and the participants and the facilitator went out to the beach in Mahabalipuram for the evening.

### **DAY FIVE**

The practice-facilitation sessions continued for part of this fifth and last day of the workshop. Following this, the last two sessions dealt with characteristics of a facilitator/organiser of an adolescent programme (they called this 'youth worker') and discussed participants' future plans for work with adolescents.

### **Qualities of a youth worker**

Participants were asked to close their eyes and think about the person who they usually confide in or discuss their personal problems. They were then asked to share with the large group why they chose this particular person, and what were the qualities which made them choose him/her. From this a list of qualities of a 'trustworthy' confidante was developed: s/he was a person who

can help think through solutions to a problem  
respects others' feelings and emotions  
is not judgemental  
will not think ill of me no matter what I say  
wise and sharp  
will comfort the person in distress  
will not dismiss or make light of the issues

These were also qualities that young people are likely to look for in a ‘youth worker’. What was clear was that the youth worker needed to treat adolescents with respect and be a friend, and at the same time also be a guide and provide support. They could not be prescriptive, preaching to young people a set of dos and don’ts. If they did, young people will probably not seek them out for help and support.

There was a brief discussion about some tricky dilemmas – to what extent should they maintain confidentiality? What were some circumstances when it was important for them to break a confidence and report to parents or other adults about an adolescents’ problems? Not unless the person’s life and wellbeing was under threat. What about a young man with a drug use problem? A young woman who has been sexually abused? Clearly there were no correct answers to these questions that would be valid for all times and situations. They would have to make their own decisions based on the broad principles above.

### **Future plans**

Participants were divided into groups working in the same district, and worked on an outline of their plans for working with young women in their communities. They then reported back in the large group about their plans. These consisted broadly of

community surveys and consultations with young women for an assessment of needs  
organising health education and life skills education workshops within the community  
providing advise and support (including referral to services and ensuring services are obtained) to young women with special needs – disabled, affected by violence, sexual assault, those living in acute poverty, and so on

help young women stand up for their rights within the community – for example, against sexual harassment, marriage against their wishes, being withdrawn from school because it was not ‘right’ for girls to be educated after puberty, and so on

find ways of working with young men in the community – ideally, find a male co-worker who will carry out complementary programmes for boys, and plan for some combined workshops and interaction between boys and girls so that they understand each other better and learn to treat members of the opposite sex as friends and colleagues

Included in their plans for the future were follow-up to this workshop once in six months over the next couple of years, addressing specific topics such as reproductive health, prevention of violence against women, further gender training, and working with men and boys. RUWSEC agreed to provide such training.

### **About the workshop**

This extremely intensive workshop came to an end with a sharing by participants and the facilitator of their experiences in this workshop.

*'I have never been to any workshops before. I feel like a different person, it was such a new and unusual experience'.*

*'The session on assertiveness was especially useful'.*

*'I was worried about how to speak to adolescents about love and sex. It is much easier if we used methods like the ones in this workshop'.*

*'What impressed me most was to think about the men's perspectives as well as women's. Especially in adolescence, it is important to work with boys when their ideas are just getting formed'.*

*'I like the idea of being the independent and assertive woman in intimate relationships. I am sure my husband has a surprise in store.'*

*'I was reluctant to leave my home and farm for 5 days, there is too much to do at home. But this was a fun time. I enjoyed myself.'*



## **ANNEX**

### **Programme Schedule**

#### **Day 1**

Participants' introduction  
Hopes and fears, and making a group contract  
Objectives of the workshop  
Cherished memories of adolescence: Understanding the needs of adolescents  
Gender roles and norms: How gender influences adolescent lives

#### **Day 2**

How well do we know our bodies? Quiz and discussion  
Concerns and problems of adolescent girls and boys  
Dealing with conflicts in adolescents' relationships with adults  
Understanding how young people make decisions about love and sex

#### **Day 3**

What is love?  
What do we expect from intimate relationships?  
What is moral and what is immoral in intimate relationships?  
Arguments for and against premarital sex from young people's perspective  
Assertiveness in intimate relationships: saying no to sexual persuasion and coercion

#### **Day 4**

Assertiveness in all relationships  
Dealing with instances of sexual abuse within the community  
Practice in facilitating life skills education workshops for adolescents

*Excursion to Mahabalipuram beach*

#### **Day 5**

Practice in facilitating life skills education workshops for adolescents : continued  
Qualities of a 'youth worker'  
Future plans  
Feedback about the workshop