

BOOK REVIEW

***Sexual and Reproductive Health Research in Sri Lanka: Current Status, Challenges and Directions (2010-2019)* (Colombo: Family Planning Association, 2019, 80 pages)**

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Before reviewing the above book, I would like to start with a quotation of Nafis Sadik, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General with additional responsibilities as Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Asia.

"Where are we now, and what should we do?

....why are we here today with so many of the Cairo goals still far from completion? Why do so many girls start but not finish school? Why are so many adolescents so ignorant of the basic facts of sexuality and reproduction, including how to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS? Why are so many girls married before they are old enough to make their own decisions? Why are so many women, married and unmarried, vulnerable to gender-based violence – including FGM, fistula, and infection with HIV? Why do so many women still suffer and die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth? Why is unsafe abortion still a major cause of maternal mortality and disability?

Why, above all, are countries still so far from the central goal of universal access to affordable and appropriate sexual and reproductive health services? Most services are directed at married women with children, including sexually transmitted disease and AIDS prevention, gender-based violence and cervical cancer screening. They do not reach the unmarried, the childless,

adolescents – whether married or not – or most men. They do not reach people who may be outside mainstream society – young people out of school, injection drug users, sex workers or the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community" (Sadik, 2013).

I certainly believe that this book highlights some currently important issues of sexual and reproductive health relevant to Sri Lanka, which are also the main focus of the statement made by Nafis Sadik. The book titled "*Sexual and Reproductive Research in Sri Lanka, Current Status, Challenges and Direction*" includes selected research papers and abstracts presented and published by the Family Planning Association (FPA) of Sri Lanka, in national and international journals and conferences for the period 2010-2019. The launching of the book also recognises two significant matters. Firstly, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2019 and this publication may be considered as a retrospect to the important objectives of the ICPD. Secondly, the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka, an accredited member of International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), seeks to promote multiple aspects of reproductive health and improve the quality of life.

This compilation of research on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka has drawn our attention to key related areas. Being a dynamic and ever changing sphere of global health, Sexual and Reproductive

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Health and Rights (SRHR) situation in Sri Lanka needs periodical reviews and assessments to update available data. Due to the sensitive nature of topics involved and the legal situation in the country, findings of SRHR research should reach the people at the right time. The book, consequently, has compiled a fine collection of research articles of several prominent professionals in the arena of SRHR, who have conducted and published pertinent studies that are beneficial to all stakeholders.

The FPA Sri Lanka should also be commended for providing all the support to disseminate the findings among stakeholders and interested parties and thereby improving SRHR in the country. This publication can be recognised as a reflective analysis of the current status of SRHR in Sri Lanka by revealing its challenges and future directions.

The researchers who contributed to this publication are from many disciplines such as Demography, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Community Medicine, Psychiatry, Venereology and Program Monitoring and Sociology. Emeritus Professor (Demography) W. Indralal De Silva, University of Colombo; Emeritus Professor (Sociology) Kalinga Tudor Silva, University of Peradeniya; Dr. Sanjeeva S. P. Godakandage, Consultant Community Physician, Family Health Bureau; Dr. Ajith Karawita, Consultant Venereologist, STI, Ministry of Health Sri Lanka; Dr. Lakshman Senanayake, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynecologist; Dr. Kapila Ranasinghe, Consultant Psychiatrist; Dr. Gayani Siriwardena, Senior Registrar in Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health Sri Lanka, and Mr. Suchira Suranga, Head, Monitoring and Evaluation, Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka, are among the contributors.

The book comprises two sections: Section 1 includes a collection of country-specific research studies carried out by experts in their fields of specialisation. The topics covered in this section are on abortion practice, family planning, sexual and gender-based violence, youth sexual and reproductive health, sexual health services and research needs, sex ratio and its impact on sexual and reproductive health and sexually transmitted infections and HIV. Section 2 covers several abstracts that were published in national and international journals from 2010-2019 by FPA, Sri Lanka. These abstracts cover a wide range of thematic areas of Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) and related issues.

The objective of Indralal De Silva's study is to obtain an understanding of the changes in the abortion practice in Sri Lanka. Despite rigid statutory provisions, the incidence of abortion is considerably higher than is

commonly acknowledged. The author argues that the heavy use of Emergency Contraception has significantly dropped the case load of induced abortion. Women with unwanted/unexpected pregnancies could easily use medical abortion facilities. The practice of septic abortions is at a minimum level, and therefore, maternal deaths and post-abortion complications are at a minimum. Family planning in Sri Lanka is the topic of discussion presented by Sanjeeva S. P. Godakandage. The data suggest that nearly 2/3 of eligible couples are using any family planning method. According to the study, the unmet need for family planning is at a low level. An important aspect of family planning in Sri Lanka was the healthy spacing between pregnancies. Although grand multiparity is becoming less common in Sri Lanka, it is still seen in certain subcultures. As the high, induced abortion rate indicates the unmet need for family planning, the author proposes that this is an area that should be improved through strong family planning practices. The other dimension of family planning is sub-fertility management and a considerable number of couples in Sri Lanka suffer from sub-fertility. It is obvious that family planning services are of extreme importance. He further suggests that the accessibility to family planning can be further improved by strengthening the private sector, ensuring the benefits to groups such as working women, females in extremes of reproductive age span, widows and single women who are sexually active.

The paper on Sexual and Gender-based Violence (GBV) presented by Lakshman Senanayake has provided a comprehensive account on its current status in Sri Lanka. He suggests that GBV is a subject where research is much needed to understand the contexts of a complex problem, to provide evidence to facilitate "unlearning" of many myths and misconceptions related to GBV and its causes. The research will help the policy makers and planners to be convinced of the magnitude and significance of GBV as a national tragedy and develop strategies to prevent GBV and assist the survivors.

The paper on Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health Research in Sri Lanka written by M. Suchira Suranga has focused on several important issues related to youth population: prevalence of teenage pregnancy, practice of contraception among unmarried youth, practice of contraception among married youth, practice of emergency contraception among Sri Lankan youth, youth as a vulnerable population for HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, SRH service for adolescents and youth and challenges and future directions. The paper shows the significant risky behavior among Sri Lankan youth and, the knowledge gap as a challenge for policy and programme planning.

The two authors, Kapila Ranasinghe and Gayani Siriwardena have addressed the issue of Sexual Health Services and Research Needs in Sri Lanka. This paper practically links with the previous paper. The paper has made an assessment on the Sexual Health Services offered by the governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as voluntary organisations in Sri Lanka. The authors conclude that the Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is an appropriate approach to study sexual health, involving specific study groups such as transgender individuals, men having sex with men and female sex workers etc. CBPR helps to capture a live experience expression of the sexual behaviors and values. Such insights may be beneficial during the process of developing research questions on the most sensitive issues. The purpose of the study is consistent with the concerns and needs of the community of interest.

The impact of unbalanced sex ratio on Sexual and Reproductive Health Issues written by Kalinga Tudor Silva is an attempt to understand it as a demographic outcome of the war. The study has identified, as a result of imbalanced sex ratio, gender inequality and cultural barriers to remarriage of female widows in Tamil society, an upsurge in extra marital relationships, and a range of consensual and coercive sexual activities in Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. The study further elaborates unprotected extramarital sex should receive more attention than at present in prevention of unwanted pregnancies and prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and HIV/ AIDS.

The next paper is on Sexually Transmitted Infections and HIV in Sri Lanka, written by Ajith Karawita. This paper has acknowledged the fact that there are gaps in maintaining quality and standards of research because of the difficulty in working with hidden and ostracized population groups for surveys on which programmatic planning is implemented. The study suggests that future directions in research and development should be planned and implemented based on the overall objectives and national strategic directions of prevention and management of HIV and other STIs. It also endorses the sex education which should be mainstreamed in the school curriculum to reduce stigma and discrimination

related to these taboo subjects in order to promote the access and acceptance of protective behaviour.

In section 2 of the book, 25 research abstracts were compiled on various issues in SRH. The authors in this section represent a wide range of national and international institutions and non-governmental organisations involved in SRHR, including, FPA Sri Lanka, WHO, Mahidol University, University of Colombo, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists, UNAIDS Sri Lanka, Ministry of Health Sri Lanka, Medistat Research Fundation, Lanka Jathika Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya and Community Strengths Development Foundation.

These abstracts were based on the studies of various important issues in SRH: the application of ICT for SRH, unsafe abortion, abortion law and attitudes, use of Emergency Contraception Pill (ECP), HIV risk and testing of men having sex with men (MSM), HIV risk among female sex workers, condom use among MSM, gender-based violence, Peer Education Programmes for MSM, Cervical Cytology Smears, Sustainable Development Goals, Oral-fluid rapid HIV 1 & 2 and, efficiencies of service delivery interventions.

I definitely agree with the connotation that for a better and improved SRH situation in the country, the research and development should take the initiative. My appreciation goes to both the FPA of Sri Lanka and to the authors who have shown their keen interest and commitment on timely important and sensitive themes, for the compilation of a valuable book on sexual and reproductive health research.

Furthermore, I am hopeful that the compilation of SRHR by FPA Sri Lanka would continue in the future with new research and the participation of more contributors on pressing issues of SRH.

REFERENCES

Sadik, N. (2013) *Sexual and reproductive health and rights: the next 20 years*, Keynote address, ICDP beyond 2014: International Conference on Human Rights, 7-10 July, Netherlands.