Book Review

Listening to Women Talk About their Health: Issues and Evidence from India


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ICPD 1994 has been a landmark movement which resulted in fundamental changes across the globe in the way developmental programmes were planned and implemented. In India, it brought a significant change at the policy and programme level. This journey of change was influenced by many factors and one of the earliest influences was the book ‘Listening to women talk about their health: Issues and evidence from India’ (published in 1994).

This book was an important milestone on many fronts. It pioneered and documented qualitative methodology for research. Paul Brodeur in 1985 had very eloquently said that ‘Statistics are human beings with the tears wiped off’. This book changed that in India by taking cognizance of women’s voices and translating those voices in a language that could be understood by policy makers and developmental partners working in India and Indian context. Prior to this work, there was hardly any qualitative research capacity in India and one hardly saw well researched evidence from the grassroots.

The first edition has a total 11 Chapters or papers including Introduction and Summary. Out of these, five are related to perception related to RTIs and white discharge among women from varied settings. In fact, some of these papers have been very widely read and have launched many additional pieces of research. For example, the paper on ‘Women’s perception of white vaginal discharge: Ethnographic data from rural Maharashtra’ by Dr. Rani Bang & Dr. Abhay Bang became iconic in proportions for measuring the evidence of reproductive tract infections in women in rural Maharashtra.

The first edition of this book was printed immediately following the ICPD in 1994. It took over 16 years for the second edition to be printed. The second edition of the book “Listening to women talk about their health: Issues and evidence from India” is essentially same as the first book. All the articles have been reprinted without updating. There is a new ‘Preface’ and a ‘Prologue’ to the second edition. Apart from these, the book essentially retains all the papers contained in the first edition.

The ‘Preface’ to the second edition by Margaret Hempel and Vanita Nayak Mukherjee from The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Unit of The Ford Foundation, mentions that in the reissue of the book ‘the empirical research studies remains relevant on several counts, but most significantly on women’s sexual and reproductive health matters and research methods’. There is significant truth in this statement, but some readers may feel a little disappointed with almost no new information or updates in subsequent papers.

The ‘Prologue’ by Dr. Saroj Pachauri is a delight to read and covers the entire gamut of sexual and reproductive health issues and challenges. It analyses the current scenario

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1 Paul Brodeur, Outrageous Misconduct: the Asbestos Industry on Trial; Pantheon Books, 1985.
and charts the journey from 1994 to the present day. It is very topical and considers all the evidence there is. It covers the essential major changes from 1994 to 2010. The Prologue comments upon relatively recent issues which might not have been covered in the first book. Gender based violence, involvement of men in improving SRH and emerging reproductive health technologies are newer components within the broader SRHR discourse and including these have made this very value-added. However, it would be interesting to get more in-depth analyses of the evidence of RTI and gynecological morbidities in 1994 that the first book has documented with the current and more recent evidence and see what has emerged in last 16 years.

The Prologue, surprisingly, does not mention ‘sex selection’ as a part of ‘Examining the Consequences of Gender Disparity’. There is new evidence to around sex selection and it would be very valuable to chart that evidence.

In summary, the second edition of the book ‘Listening to women talk about their health: Issues and evidence from India’ remains an important volume for a wide group of people. For someone who did not have the opportunity to read the first edition, this would be able to give a very valuable insight in women’s perception regarding their health and what they consider as ill-health; their perception about intimate examination and about gynecological morbidities. For budding researchers it provides an important resource. However, for those who have read and utilized the first volume, the second edition might be a refreshing read.