









OUR STORIES OUR SELVES

RELIGION & RIGHTS









arrow
asian-pacific resource & research centre for women

OUR STORIES OURSELVES: RELIGION AND RIGHTS



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WOMEN SPEAK OUT ABOUT RELIGION AND RIGHTS

كنا أعيش في كوخ أسرة
خوفها أخيا الأكبر الذي يعو
ويميل إلى التشدد في الدعارة
رافضة الهيمنة المسيطرة
تبع حريتها وتركتني لي مجال
الخروج إلا مع أمي
كنت أتألم بسبب هذه الحياة
ملوءة في جسدي الصغير
المدرسة وحاولت أن أضيف
حياتي الزواج وتربية الأبناء

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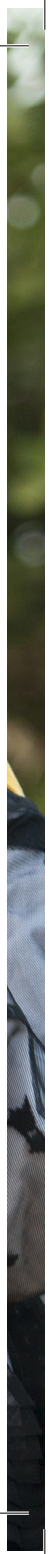
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The Journey



Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are crucial for young girls and women to be able to control their bodies, access health services and realise their full potential. SRHR is not just the right to health but is fundamentally interlinked with several human rights like the rights to education, work and equality, as well as the rights to life, privacy and freedom from torture, bodily integrity and autonomy.

However, women's SRHR are affected not only by poverty, systemic inequalities and inequities, lack of access to opportunities and resources, poor governance, education but also by religion, especially when the State and other groups misuse religion for political power and to exert control over people.

Strict patriarchal interpretations of religious texts limit human rights, especially women's SRHR, perpetuate patriarchy and result in discrimination. Most often, interpretations of religion put forth an underlying assumption that women and men are not equal. Religion is interpreted to form views on women, their role in society, on how women should act and behave and to regulate women's conduct or bodies in order to 'guard their honour' and that of the family.

Religious rights ideologies use discourses of religion and culture to maintain and extend power over the public and private domains. Religious fundamentalists impose their worldviews and apply religious law to all aspects of life.[1]

"Religious fundamentalisms and extremisms" have regressive connotations and is often used in relation to Islamic militancy activities, Protestant ideology, anti-Americanism and fanaticism. Our use of the term does not signify one religion, but illustrates how the political (mis)use of religion may limit rights, including SRHR, of young girls, women and marginalised groups.

This edition of 'Our Stories Ourselves: Women Speak Out About Religion and Rights' is an effort by the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) in collaboration with seven of its partners from Asia, Latin America and Middle East and North Africa to share a collection of heart-rendering, brave and inspiring personal stories written by women from different communities

Religion, traditional practices, cultural values and beliefs have been historically cited time and again by religious leaders, politicians and society to limit rights and oppose equality for women. For instance, the presence of deep-rooted religious and cultural beliefs and patriarchal power structures is evident in Nepal, where antiquated Hindu customs like the recently criminalised *Chaupadhi* – a practice

of isolating menstruating girls and women to sheds – or excluding women from inheritance, continue to prevail.

Whilst strong Catholic and conservative beliefs dictate the legal framework in several Latin American countries and restrict access to abortion, religion and family beliefs are used to justify female genital mutilation (FGM) and infringement of bodily integrity in the Middle East and North African region. In 2010, Human Rights Watch found that due to the restrictions on legal abortions in Argentina a staggering half a million abortions were taking place clandestinely every year, meaning that women were forced to turn to unsafe methods.

The impact of rising religious fundamentalism on women's rights across the globe has been a worrying trend. Extremist ideologies thrive on asserting control over women's bodies, autonomy, sexuality and their daily lives. This confluence, of conservative religious, cultural and customary practices is not confined to any one religion or region and is often interlinked with the pursuit of power. Political groups aspire for homogeneity based on ethnicity, race and religion to fuel a false sense of ethno-nationalism, patriotism and support for fundamentalist and right-wing policies.

Political support for such xenophobic rhetoric – be it the anti-immigrant wave in Europe or the saffron brigade in India or the onslaught on the Rohingyas in Myanmar – is rooted in poverty, unemployment, lack of basic rights and disillusion with consecutive political regimes that have failed to genuinely uplift people, fulfil their basic rights and ensure their upward mobility. Poverty has a devastating impact on communities, especially on young girls and women living in rural areas. In remote parts of Indonesia, girls are young as 10 years old are married to older men in exchange for money so the girl's family can escape poverty momentarily.

Everyday these women, and many others like them around the world, continue to be violently repressed but they still attempt to stand up to fight for their rights

It is not uncommon for girls and women from marginalised and rural societies or from deeply religious communities to become pawns to these archaic and undemocratic views and have little say in reproductive and sexuality-related issues.

This is despite the fact that women are contributing equally to the society by managing homes, leading communities to spearhead change or making ends meet by toiling in farms, running small businesses, working as domestic workers or even taking up commercial sex work so they can raise a child, feed a family or support the community. Instead of providing the necessary support and cheering on their endeavours, women remain ignored, unprotected, sidelined and rendered invisible by their families, society, politicians and lawmakers.

This journal follows the lives of ten resilient and courageous women from Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Morocco, Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Indonesia as they recount how they escaped FGM, fought for abortion rights for their minor daughters, how they underwent unsafe abortions despite laws criminalising them or decided to raise children in spite of being victims of rape.

They also narrate with fortitude how they were married off as children and had their dreams shattered but refused to bow down to overbearing male-dominated customs in a Hindu-majority country or how they bravely shunned polygamy as Muslim women and adopted children despite the fear of facing the wrath of their community and religious leaders. All these narrations have a common thread – how religion has been used by a partner or a parent or society to violate their rights.

Everyday these women, and many others like them around the world, continue to be violently repressed but they still attempt to stand up to fight for their rights. While these inspirational anecdotes are meant to motivate, they are also a grim reminder of the human cost of denying women their rights. They are a strong testimony to the fact that improved sexual and reproductive health is a key pillar of the overall health, empowerment, and human rights of individuals and of the sustainable and equitable development of societies.

To enable realisation of SRHR, let us continue to hold our governments, lawmakers, politicians, communities and other stakeholders accountable so they genuinely protect and uphold the rights of all girls and women around the world and ensure SRHR remains at the heart of the 2030 Development Agenda. Let us come together so our young girls and women are not married before their prime, do not have their genitals mutilated and are protected from sexual violence, have the choice to abort or raise a child and enjoy autonomy over their bodies.

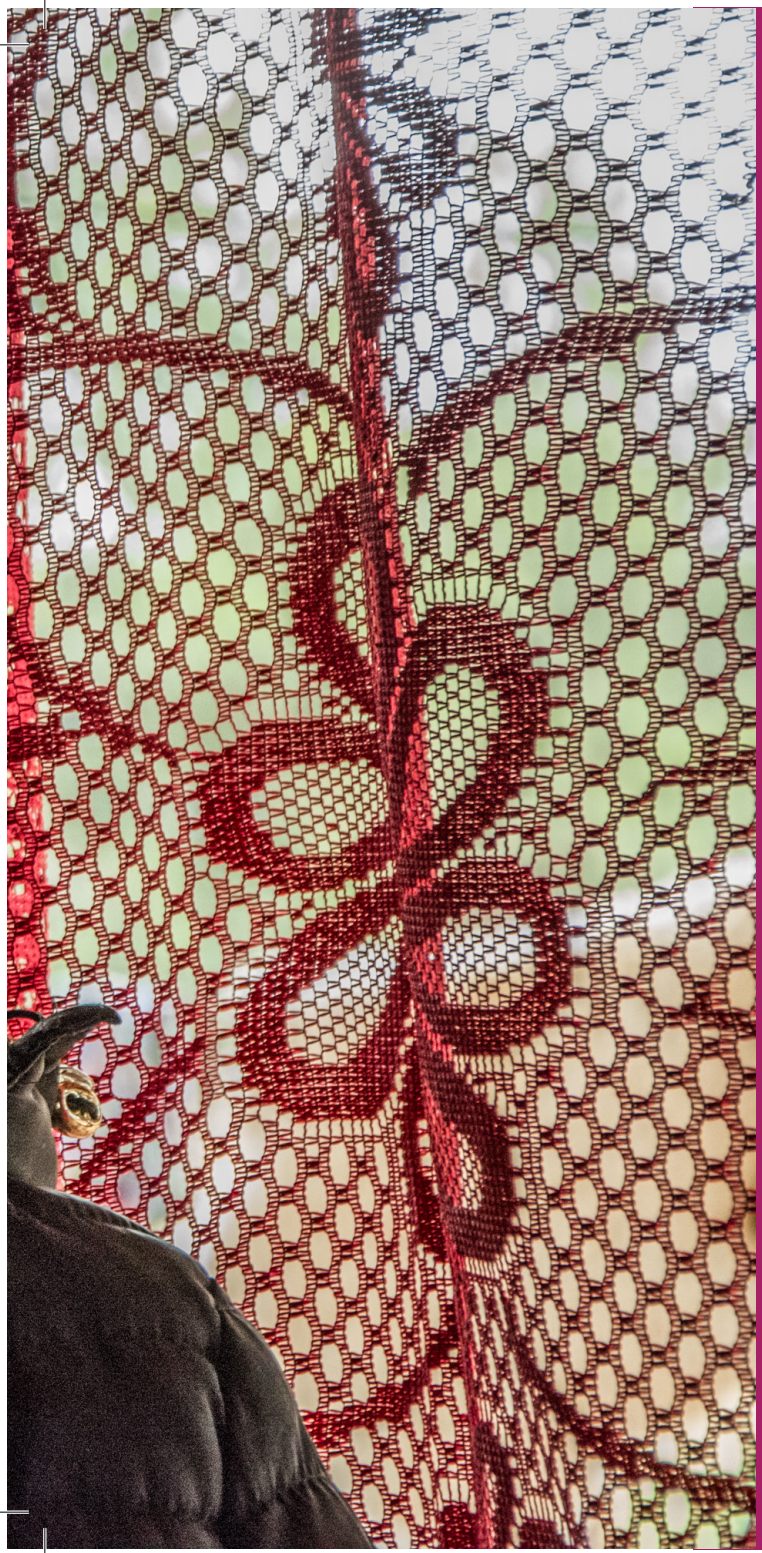
[1] An Advocacy Brief: Post 2015 Development Agenda. Influences of Religious Fundamentalism on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women. http://arrow.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Religious-Fundamentalism-and-Post-2015_Policy-Brief_2014.pdf





Our Stories





Argentina

Fighting for a daughter's right to abortion

When her 12-year-old daughter, Camila, was raped by her stepfather, little did Cristina Espinosa, 38, know that she and her family would have to deal with the double trauma of rape and pregnancy in a deeply conservative Catholic country. Their nightmare was far from over when the court initially denied the young Camila abortion. Camila's mental state also worsened with pro-life advocates constantly pressurising her to have the baby. After a poignant and protracted battle and several hurdles, the family saw light at the end of the tunnel when another court finally granted her abortion rights.

One Saturday morning, Cristina Espinosa got up early as usual to prepare *empanadas*[1] to sell. She noticed her partner had been drinking. Later, while working in the kitchen, she heard her daughter Camila scream from the bathroom. Her partner, who was looking angry, was with Camila. When Cristina asked what he was doing to her, he wouldn't let Camila answer. He said that he was talking to her about the way she answered to a complaint the day before.

Camila replied that it was a lie. Cristina's partner then grabbed Camila by the neck and also hit Cristina. "I went out asking for help and managed to make him let go of my daughter. I thought he would kill us both," Cristina wrote in her journal.

This incident in 2013 marked the beginning of the struggle of Cristina for the right of her underage daughter—a rape survivor—to have a legal abortion.

Camila was raped by her stepfather from the age of 12. The crime was committed at home while Cristina was away; sometimes, it was even done in front of Camila's younger sister. "Camila tells me that he would hold on to her hair and pull it when she tried to resist. He threatened to kill her little brothers and me," her mother painfully recalled.

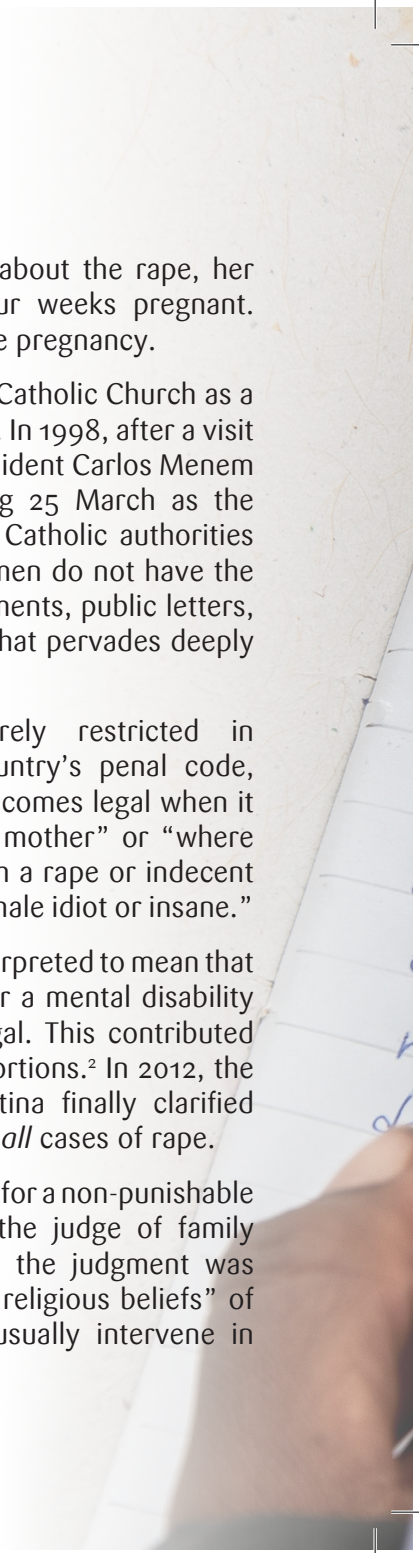
When Cristina found out about the rape, her daughter was already four weeks pregnant. Camila wanted to abort the pregnancy.

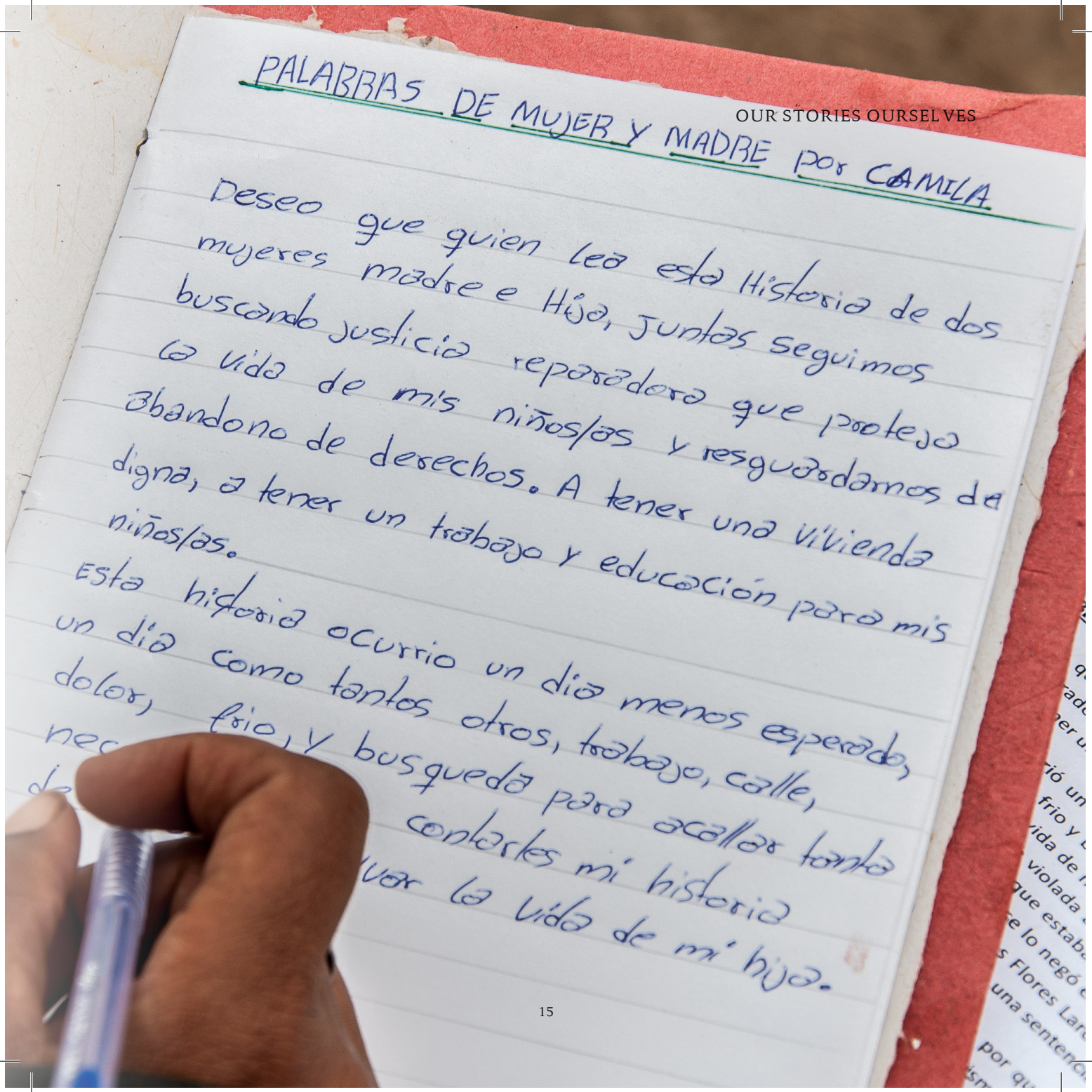
Abortion is viewed by the Catholic Church as a violation of the right to life. In 1998, after a visit to the Vatican, former President Carlos Menem passed a decree declaring 25 March as the Day of the Unborn Child. Catholic authorities regularly express that women do not have the right to abortion—in statements, public letters, and homilies. It is a view that pervades deeply in Argentine society.

Abortion is also severely restricted in Argentina. Under the country's penal code, access to abortion only becomes legal when it is to "save the life of the mother" or "where the pregnancy results from a rape or indecent assault committed on a female idiot or insane."

The law was previously interpreted to mean that rape victims have to suffer a mental disability for the abortion to be legal. This contributed to a high rate of illegal abortions.[2] In 2012, the Supreme Court of Argentina finally clarified that abortion is allowed in *all* cases of rape.

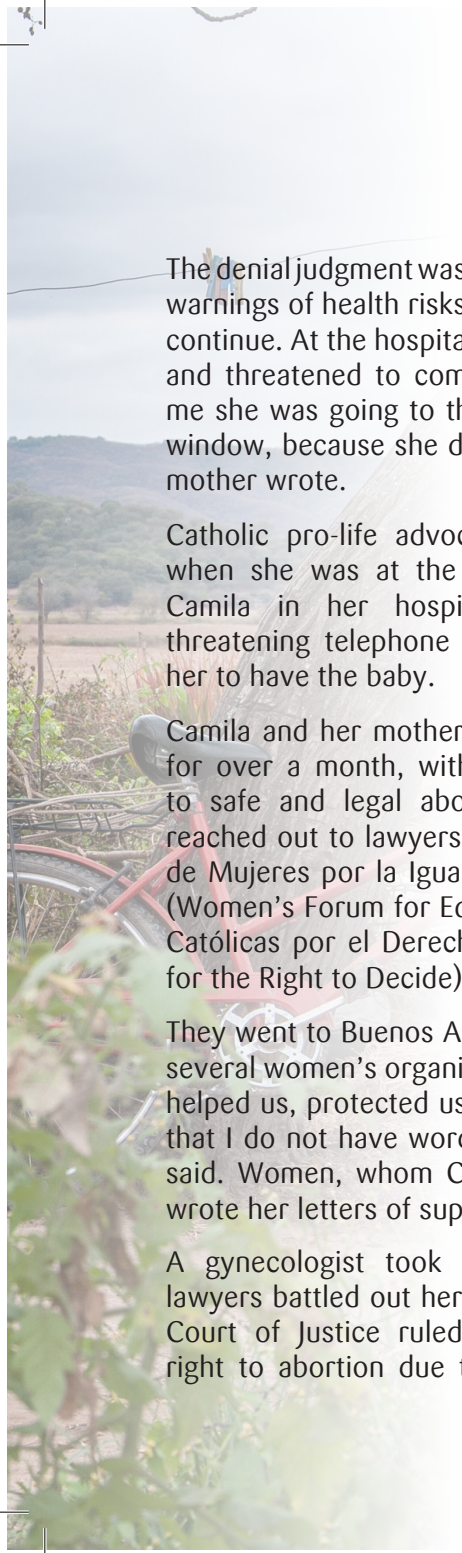
However, Camila's request for a non-punishable abortion was denied by the judge of family affairs. Cristina rued that the judgment was based on "prejudices and religious beliefs" of pro-life advocates, who usually intervene in abortion cases.




PALABRAS DE MUJER Y MADRE por CAMILA
Deseo que quien lea esta Historia de dos
mujeres madre e Hija, juntas seguimos
buscando justicia reparadora que proteja
la vida de mis niños/as y resguardarnos de
abandono de derechos. A tener una vivienda
digna, a tener un trabajo y educación para mis
niños/as.
Esta historia ocurrio un dia menos esperado,
un dia como tantos otros, trabajo, calle,
dolor, frio, y busqueda para acallar tanto
contarles mi historia
ver la vida de mi hija.



They say that it is their God that they have to defend with their sentence. I tell them that he is also my God and it is not true that he wants poor women to suffer so much



The denial judgment was issued despite doctors' warnings of health risks, should the pregnancy continue. At the hospital, Camila refused to eat and threatened to commit suicide. "She told me she was going to throw herself out of the window, because she didn't want to live," her mother wrote.

Catholic pro-life advocates harassed Camila when she was at the hospital. They visited Camila in her hospital room and made threatening telephone calls, trying to coerce her to have the baby.

Camila and her mother stayed at the hospital for over a month, with little hope of access to safe and legal abortion. Finally, Cristina reached out to lawyers working with the Foro de Mujeres por la Igualdad de Oportunidades (Women's Forum for Equal Opportunities) and Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide) network.

They went to Buenos Aires and there, she met several women's organisations. "Many women helped us, protected us and gave us so much, that I do not have words to thank them," she said. Women, whom Cristina had never met, wrote her letters of support and sympathy.

A gynecologist took care of Camila while lawyers battled out her case. Finally, the Salta Court of Justice ruled that Camila had the right to abortion due to rape. The case was considered jurisprudence in the Province of Salta.

Now, Camila is 17 years of age. She is about to finish high school. "This year she is going on her graduation trip. I think she is happy," her mother proudly said.

Cristina has publicly told her daughter's story several times already. Although their dilemma is now over, she vowed to continue speaking up for victims of violence who are "re-victimised," like her daughter, by restrictive laws and religious norms.

Cristina reflected on how religion should not be used to deprive women of their rights. She wrote: "They say that it is their God that they have to defend with their sentence. I tell them that he is also my God and it is not true that he wants poor women to suffer so much. It is very hard to talk about it, to exercise it, and first of all to know it. But...our rights can free us."

[1] Pastry turnover filled with a variety of savory ingredients and baked or fried.
[2] Around 500,000 abortions occur in Argentina every year, or an estimated 40 percent of all pregnancies. An estimated 80,000 women per year are hospitalised due to post-abortion complications, as a result of not having access to safe and legal abortion. Researchers also say that for every woman who seeks medical help due to complications of abortion, seven others do not, due to fear of legal punishment.

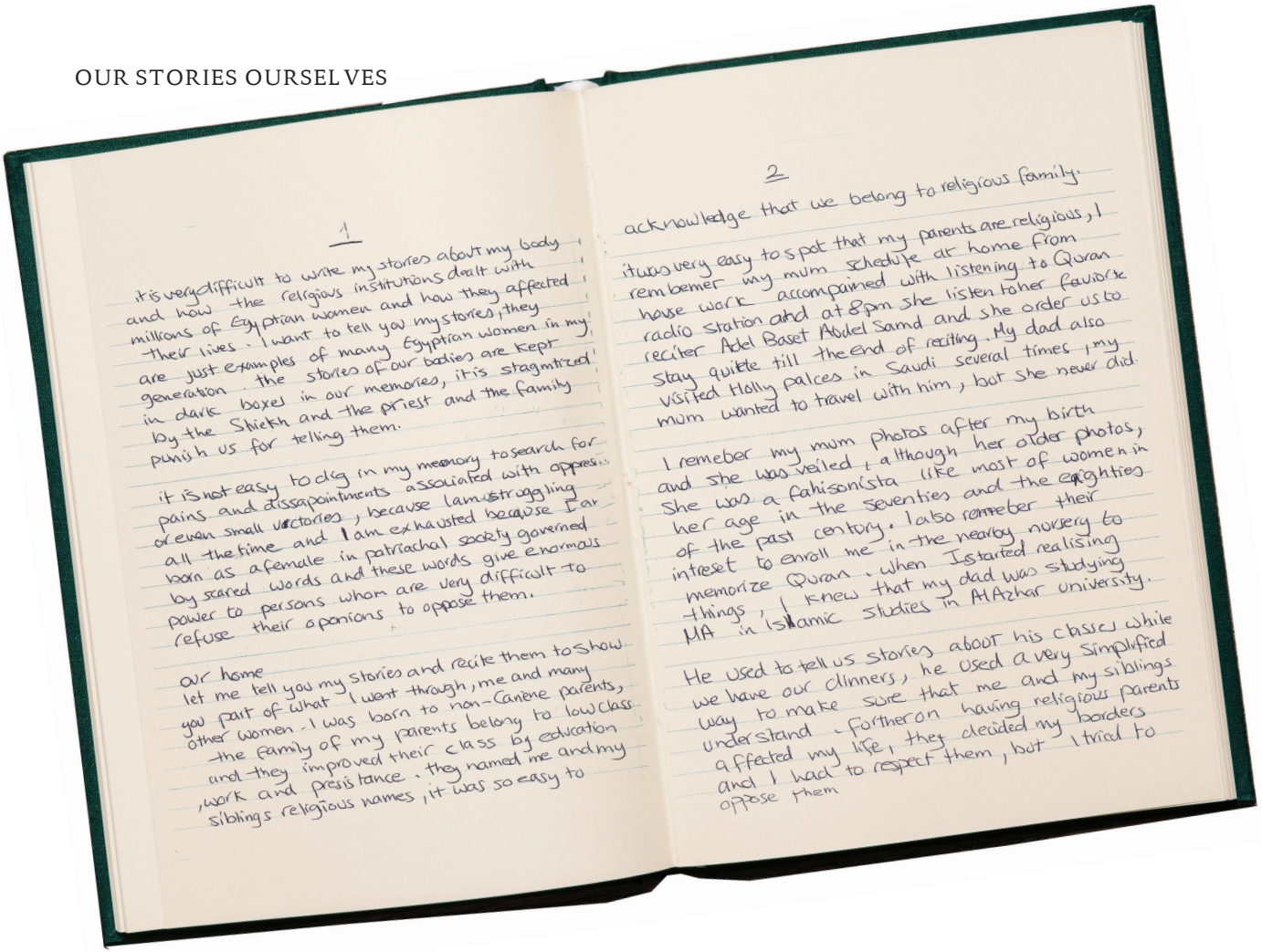




Egypt

Asserting bodily rights is a "living hell"

Growing up in Egypt, Lama Mohamed (name changed) was one of the few women who was lucky not to have her genitals cut as a child. In her thirties now, she recounts how her cousins and countless Egyptian girls' genitals are mutilated before puberty because of oppressive religious and traditional cultural beliefs. The writer, like many girls, was rarely encouraged to talk or learn about her body. Instead, her zealously religious family and institutions use the teachings of Islam as an excuse to deny women's rights



1

it is very difficult to write my stories about my body and how the religious institutions dealt with millions of Egyptian women and how they affected their lives. I want to tell you my stories, they are just examples of many Egyptian women in my generation. the stories of our bodies are kept in dark boxes in our memories, it is stagmtized by the Shiekh and the priest and the family punish us for telling them.

it is not easy to dig in my meomory to search for pains and dissapointments associated with oppres... or even small victories, because I am struggling all the time and I am exhausted because I ar born as a female in patriachal society governed by scared words and these words give enormous power to persons whom are very difficult to refuse their oponions to oppose them.

our home
let me tell you my stories and recite them to show you part of what I went through, me and many other women. I was born to non-Caniene parents, the family of my parents belong to low class and they improved their class by education ,work and pressistance. they named me and my siblings religious names, it was so easy to

2

acknowledge that we belong to religious family.

it was very easy to spot that my parents are religious, I remember my mum schedule at home from house work accompanied with listening to Quran radio station and at 8pm she listen to her favorite reciter Adel Baset Abdel Samd and she order us to stay quitte till the end of reciting. My dad also visited Holly palces in Saudi several times, my mum wanted to travel with him, but she never did.

I remeber my mum photos after my birth and she was veiled, although her older photos, She was a fahisonista (like most of women in her age in the seventies and the eightties of the past century. I also remeber their intreset to enroll me in the nearby nursery to memorize Quran. when I started realising things, I knew that my dad was studying MA in Islamic studies in Al Azhar university.

He used to tell us stories about his classes while we have our dinners, he used a very simplified way to make sure that me and my siblings understand. Fortheron having religious parents affected my life, they decided my borders and I had to respect them, but I tried to oppose them

"The stories of our bodies are kept in dark boxes in our memories. It is stigmatised by the Sheikh and the priest. The family punishes us for telling them."

Thus, began the unraveling of the story of Lama Mohamed, an Egyptian writer born into a conservative Muslim family. "My mother used to tune in to a Quran radio station every day at 8 p.m. and listen to her favorite reciter. She would order us to stay quiet till the end of the reciting," she wrote in her journal.

As a child, Lama loved playing games—games which "included innocent attempts to discover our little bodies." But she got yelled at by her mother every time she played with the boys. "My mum implanted fear inside me...For a long period of my life, I felt that my private part is disgusting. I did not have anybody who could answer my childish questions about this part, how does it work and why is it private," Lama wrote.

When Lama was around eight or nine years old, she learned to touch herself for self-pleasure. "My fingers discovered its first orgasm. I was afraid I would die when I touched that prohibited place. I did not understand the pleasure or what happened to me when I reached orgasm, why did I feel these feelings. Although I did not understand what this pleasure was, I touched myself again and again. My secret habit or my personal pleasure did not stop even when my younger sister told my mum about it and I was harshly punished," she recalled.

When both Lama and her sister were approaching puberty, her mother and uncle decided that she and her cousins should undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). It was around the same time the International conference on Population and Development was taking place in Cairo and sexual and reproductive health was one if its top agendas. Meanwhile, CNN news channel aired an FGM operation of a small girl, causing huge embarrassment to the government.

This angered the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Gad el Haq, considered the highest authority in Sunni Islamic thought in Egypt. He issued an Islamic ruling or fatwa stating that FGM was a ruling of Islam, and whoever stops or prevents it, was not a Muslim. "He destroyed all sincere attempts to end FGM and caused miseries to many girls," Lama wrote.

"My mum promised me new clothes and delicious food after the operation. She said this operation is important and it will make me a beautiful woman. I refused, and said that I do not want to undergo this operation. She was so angry," She recalled.

Lama would have had her genitals mutilated, had it not been for her father, an Islamic scholar, who intervened at last. "He said that the prophet did not mutilate his daughters. He [said] FGM is not Islamic," she wrote.

Although Lama and her sister escaped mutilation, her cousins became victims of FGM like millions of Egyptian girls and women. Egypt has one of highest prevalence of female genital cutting in the world. According to a Unicef Health Issues survey in 2015, 87 percent of Egyptian women aged 15 to 49 have undergone FGM, with 61 percent cut between the age of 5 and 10.

In 2008, Egypt criminalised the practice. In 2016, Egypt's parliament approved even more stringent penalties for FGM.[1] Despite the criminalisation of FGM, religious interpretations that govern women's bodies remain deeply ingrained in Egyptian society, allowing the brutal practice to persist.

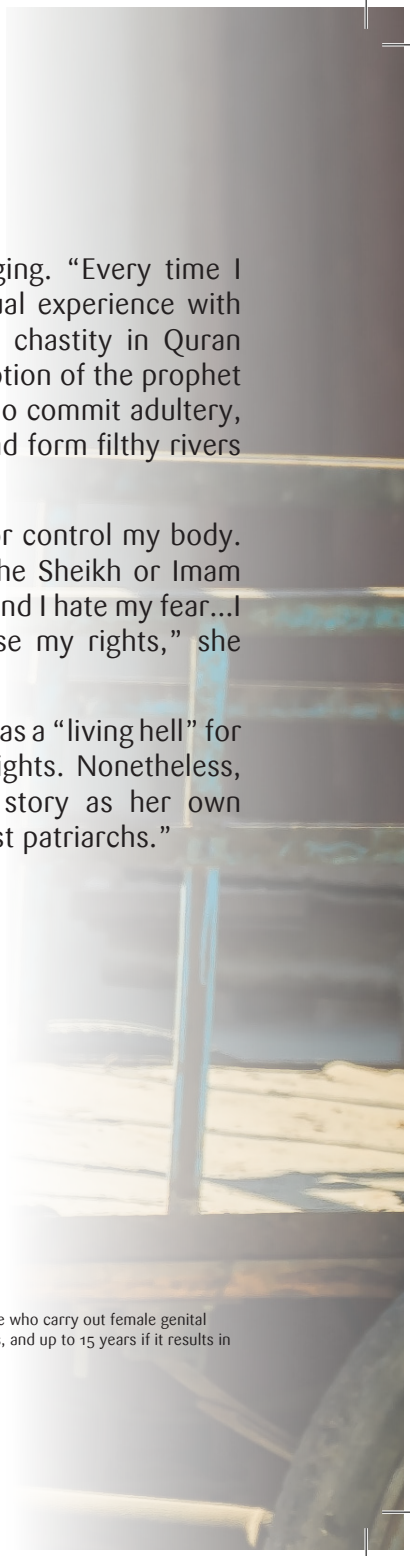
Speaking of her experience growing up without any sexual education, she recalled, "Most of the girls reached puberty without any guidance at school. There is a general lack of access to services and information regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights." She said they were given some sex education but only at the end of middle school; and that girls felt uncomfortable about asking questions because of "fear of the boys' jokes."

Many sheikhs, or Islamic scholars, and even doctors stigmatise women who assert their rights over their own bodies as not respecting the teachings of Islam. "They consider any sexual act outside the marriage institution as forbidden, leading to curses in the afterlife... Even within marriage, they prohibit oral sex and said it causes gum and mouth cancer," Lama wrote.

Lama, who uses her writing to raise awareness on SRHR, disclosed that she was still a virgin. She also admits to watching porn but says she cannot shake off the psychological impact of her strict religious upbringing. "Every time I imagine myself in full sexual experience with partners, the verse of the chastity in Quran comes to mind—the description of the prophet of the torture of people who commit adultery, whose genitals will burn and form filthy rivers in hell," she wrote.

"I hate that I do not own or control my body. I feel controlled by what the Sheikh or Imam says...I hate my hesitation and I hate my fear...I am waiting to fully exercise my rights," she added.

Lama describes her journey as a "living hell" for women who assert their rights. Nonetheless, she considers telling her story as her own personal "revolution against patriarchs."



[1] Under new amendments to the Penal Code, those who carry out female genital mutilation face prison terms of five to seven years, and up to 15 years if it results in permanent disability or death.



I hate that I do not own or control my body. I feel controlled by what the Sheikh or Imam says...I hate my hesitation and I hate my fear...I am waiting to fully exercise my rights





Nepal

What it means to defy Hindu patriarchy

31-year-old Sambida was born in Nepal's bustling capital of Kathmandu to a traditional Hindu family. An MA in English Literature, she works actively on feminist and LGBT issues. Her passion for feminism is rooted in her own personal experiences. Even as a child, Sambida never accepted the role that Hindu Nepal expects its women to fill. She fiercely debated, questioned and rejected many cultural practices and rituals early on, angering her family and community. The feminist continues her fight against her religion's typecasting of women and gendered roles.

It is said that every girl born into a Hindu family is a Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. As a young child, however, this religious belief caused considerable anxiety to Sambida Rajbhandari. Born in Kathmandu, Nepal, Sambida remembers feeling insecure. "What if I am not goddess Laxmi and I will not be able to cause riches to my family. Would they still love me?" she thought miserably.

Sambida notes the irony of how girls are being likened to the wealth goddess, when in reality, women are "not given any property rights." It is assumed that women will bring wealth to the family through marriage, and not through their achievements.

Today, 31-year-old Sambida is indeed very rich—a woman rich in knowledge, experience, and courage. She holds a masters degree in literature and was previously an officer with LOOM Nepal, a feminist platform that helps young women address discrimination. Currently, she is an independent consultant actively working with feminist and LGBT organisations.

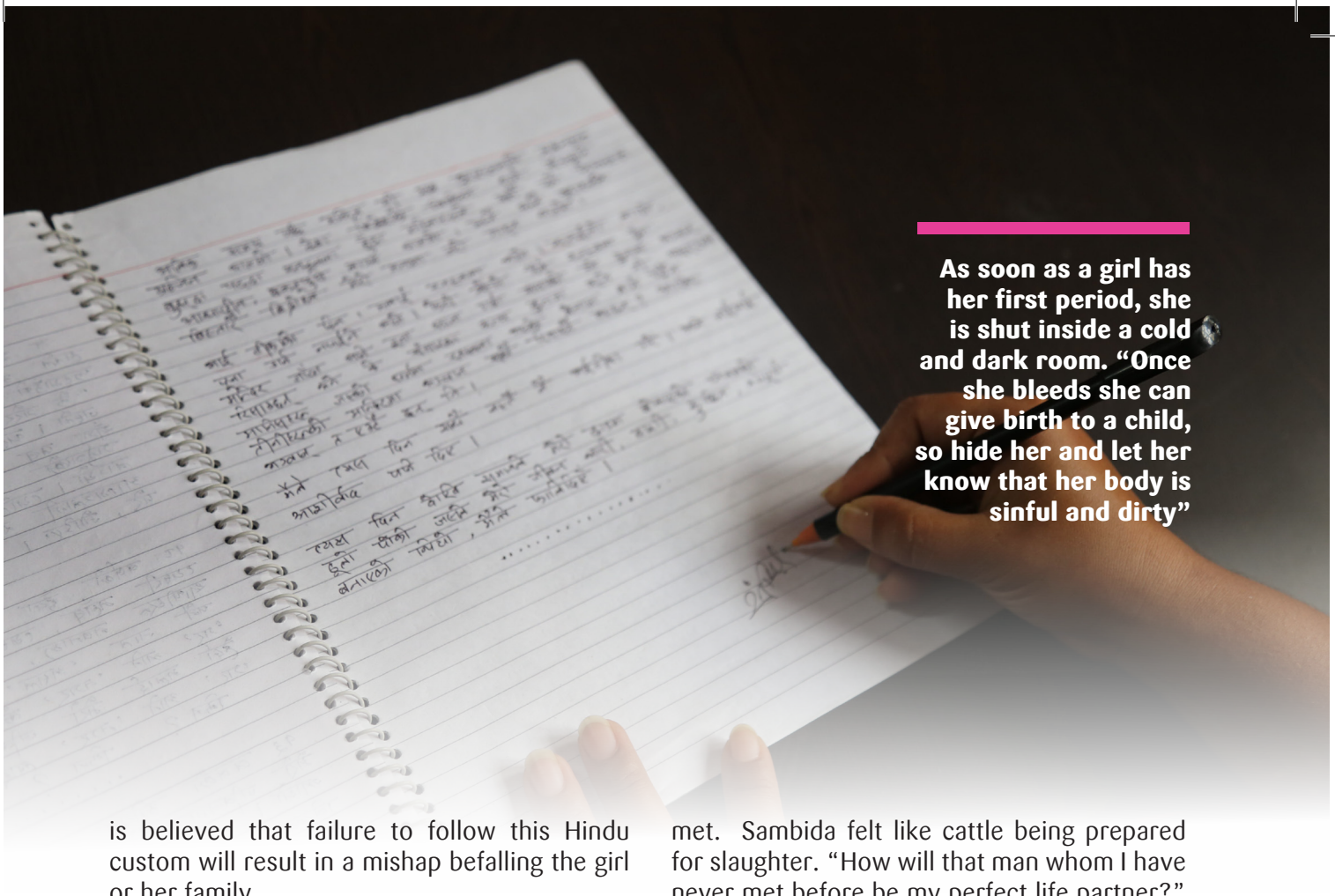
When Sambida was only 12, she underwent a ritual wherein she was decorated as a bride and married to a 'wood apple tree.' This ritual, undertaken by girls before their first period, is meant to determine their future husbands. She recalls wearing a red sari, gold jewelry and a red veil and her mother gushing over her. "I was so proud that I got married to a well-shaped, smooth and beautiful wood apple tree," Sambida wrote in her journal.

As she underwent puberty, she slowly realised the restrictions imposed by customs were formed by patriarchal and religious beliefs. Sambida considers herself lucky that unlike other Hindu girls, she was not forced to undergo the ritual exile called 'Bara' among the Newars or the historical inhabitants of Kathmandu. The ritual is also known as 'Chaupadhi' (five days exile) and 'GunyoCholi' (seven days exile).

According to the ritual, as soon as a girl has her first period, she is shut inside a cold and dark room.[1] "Once she bleeds she can give birth to a child, so hide her and let her know that her body is sinful and dirty," Sambida said.

Girls are prohibited from any sunlight and looking at any male person for the prescribed days. "The sun is the symbol of power, light and life associated with manly power in Hindu community. On the last day, young girls are taken out from the room and after a certain ritual of worshipping the Sun, she is allowed to live her life normally," Sambida said.

Menstruating girls and women are not allowed to enter temples or participate in rituals. It



As soon as a girl has her first period, she is shut inside a cold and dark room. "Once she bleeds she can give birth to a child, so hide her and let her know that her body is sinful and dirty"

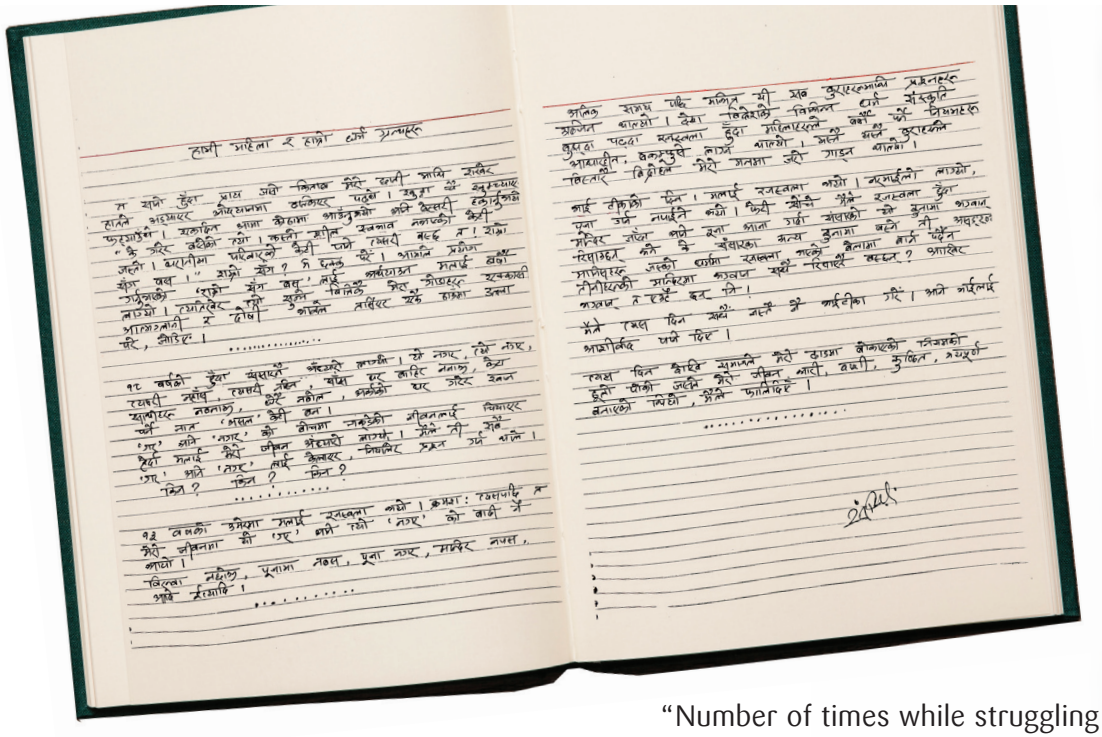
is believed that failure to follow this Hindu custom will result in a mishap befalling the girl or her family.

One day, Sambida secretly performed a prayer ritual while menstruating. For many days, she waited to see if something bad would happen as a result of her transgression. But nothing happened.

When she was of age, Sambida was asked to pose for photographs that would be sent to the man chosen by her parents to be her husband—a Norwegian whom she had never met. Sambida felt like cattle being prepared for slaughter. "How will that man whom I have never met before be my perfect life partner?" she asked herself.

The next day, Sambida packed her bags and left her parents' house to escape the arranged marriage. At the age of 25, she married a man she chose, much to the dismay and anger of her parents.

Sambida only made peace with her parents when her father passed away in 2016. Upon reflection, she realised that "change is not



an overnight process," and that everyone is influenced by social norms since birth. "In my silent prayers, I asked my father for forgiveness for everything I caused him knowingly or unknowingly. And I forgave him too," she wrote.

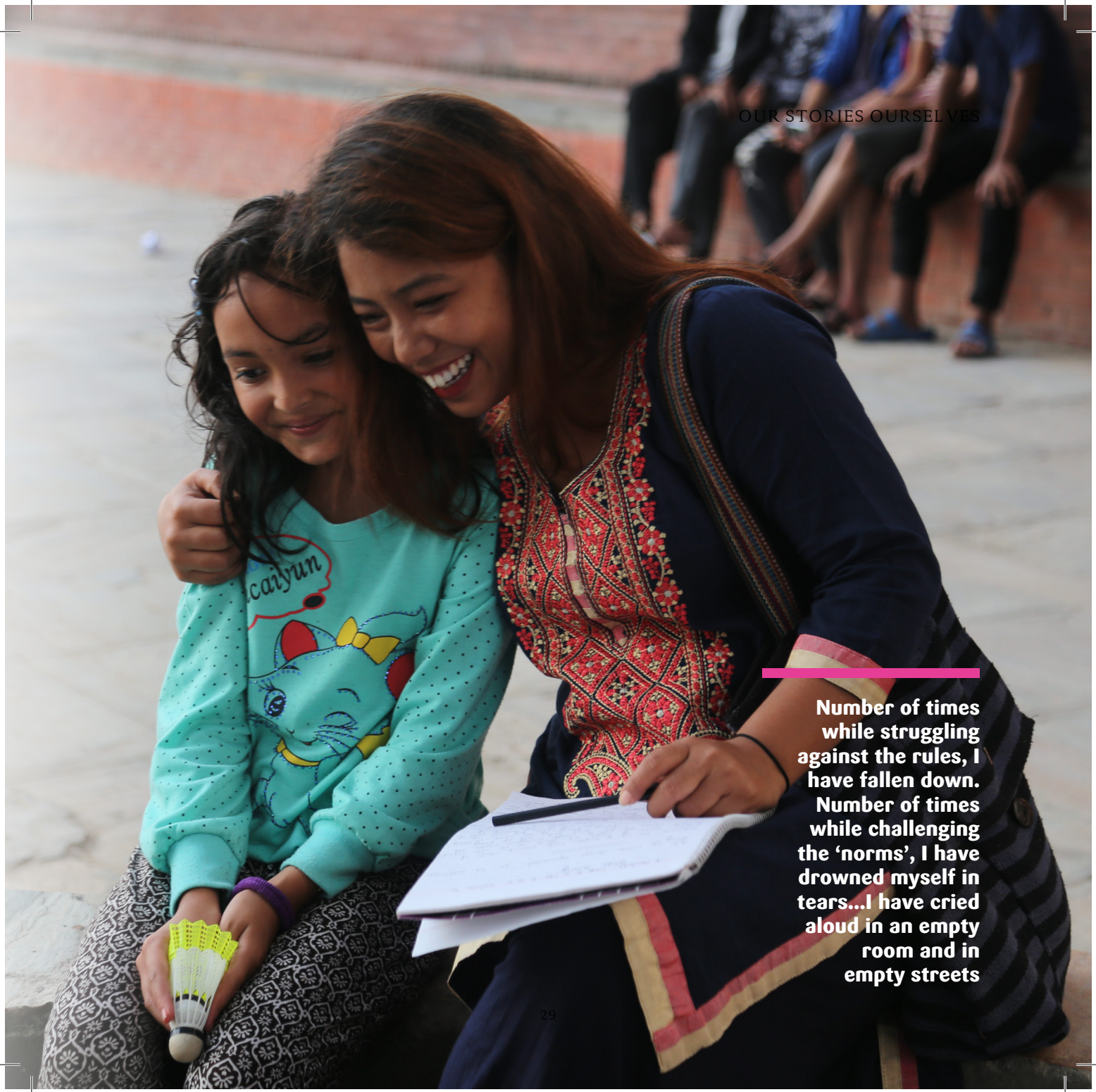
The struggle is not over. As a married woman, she feels the pressure of being expected to conceive. "I have decided to live my life for myself and I choose not to be pregnant, for which I am judged, criticised and often questioned in many ways," she wrote.

Sambida bravely stands by her decision. In her work, she continues to raise awareness on patriarchal interpretations of religion that are used to control women's mobility, body, and right to property.

"Number of times while struggling against the rules, I have fallen down. Number of times while challenging the 'norms', I have drowned myself in tears...I have cried aloud in an empty room and in empty streets. Number of times I have leaned on my own shoulders and picked myself, stood up and fought back. I am in a constant attempt to understand me, to discover myself and to live life – that only happens once - in my own terms.

"I am trying to attain that level of 'good' that Hinduism or any other religion defines as being human. Hence, I shall continue to raise my voice for - life, justice and the pursuit of happiness with my body and soul and continue to celebrate my being," she concluded.

[1] In 2005, even though the Supreme Court of Nepal banned Chaupadhi and similar rituals, there was little impact. In August 2017, the parliament of Nepal passed a law, criminalising the isolation or exiling of menstruating women. Violators can face a three-month jail sentence and/or a fine of NPR 3,000 (approximately USD30). It will, however, come into effect only in August 2018.



Number of times while struggling against the rules, I have fallen down. Number of times while challenging the 'norms', I have drowned myself in tears...I have cried aloud in an empty room and in empty streets


داء السيدا
كلنا معنيون



Morocco

Recovering from child rape and a risky abortion

Fatima Ezahara Ouardi, 21, has not had an easy life. Five years ago, the young girl from the small market town of Taroudant in Morocco became pregnant after being raped by her uncle. The teenager found little support in her conservative family. Since abortion is still severely restricted in Morocco, she had to resort to risky methods that put her life in danger. After her abortion, Fatima continues to struggle with the social stigma as a single woman.

"I was the victim of a horrible rape at the age of 16 by a person who was supposed to protect and love me. This person was none other than my uncle," she narrated to a translator, who helped write her journal.

Opening up about her sexual assault did not come easy for 21-year-old Fatima Ezzahara, who hails from Morocco, a Muslim country. In her village, people work mostly in the farming and handicrafts industry and have extremely conservative views.

Five years ago, Fatima was raped in her home by her uncle. Initially, she kept the incident to herself. "Shocked and afraid, I could not talk about it to my family or anyone I knew," she narrated.

Finally, Fatima gathered the courage to tell her mother about the rape. "After a few weeks of suffering in silence, I decided to tell my mother, who began to suspect that I was pregnant. My mother was furious, asking me who the perpetrator of this heinous act was. When she heard the answer, she was in utter disbelief. She was horrified at the thought of what my family and neighbors would say if they found out," Fatima said.

In order to hide her pregnancy and avoid revealing her daughter's rapist, Fatima's mother sent her away to another town to stay with a friend. "There, I found shelter and a welcoming home," she narrated.

But, Fatima was keen to abort the foetus. "I was determined to get an abortion and be free of the burden, weighing me down socially and mentally. I decided to ask the woman for help."

Due to restrictive abortion laws, her mother's friend could only propose illegal and what Fatima described as "dangerous" means of terminating her pregnancy. Fatima was made to drink medicinal herbs and that resulted in hemorrhages. "During one of these (abortion) attempts, I experienced serious bleeding and pain, leading me to be urgently taken to the hospital," Fatima related.

Until 2015, abortion was permitted in Morocco only if the woman's life was in danger and if there was spousal consent. Upon the directive of King Mohammed VI, Article 453 of the penal code was revised to make abortion legal in cases of rape, incest, danger to the mother's health and birth defects. However, the amendments haven't come into force as the parliament is yet to vote on it unanimously.

Policies and programmes in Morocco are influenced by strict interpretations of Islam[1]. This has restricted women's access to safe abortion. The Moroccan Association for the Fight against Clandestine Abortions estimates



that 220,000 Moroccan women undergo illegal abortions each year.

Fatima was one of these women. Besides struggling with the trauma of rape, she had to turn to illegal and risky methods to abort. And when that failed, she faced administrative and judicial difficulties before being admitted by the hospital's gynecology department to complete the abortion. By then, her life was already in danger.

Thankfully, Fatima survived the ordeal. However, because of the stigma and fear of the law, she was unable to tell anyone about her experience. "Apart from my mother, no one knew about my horrible story," she said.

Fatima then went into depression. However, she was determined to recover. "I decided to stop suffering in silence and sought the help of AMPF (Association Marocaine de Planification Familiale). There I was taken care of, provided with counseling sessions and directed to helpful resources," Fatima said.

She eventually decided to move away from her family, in order to avoid seeing her uncle, the rapist, who still visited her parents. "I felt abandoned by my family and friends,"



Fatima confided.

Fatima found a small room to rent. She initially worked as a domestic worker and also took up commercial sex work to make ends meet. But, now she is working as a packer in a farm. She finds it challenging to live by herself due to prejudices in Moroccan society towards unmarried girls.

“A new adventure has began for me, living on my own. I am constantly exposed to risks, problems, and societal constraints related to gender. This makes life difficult for me,” Fatima related.

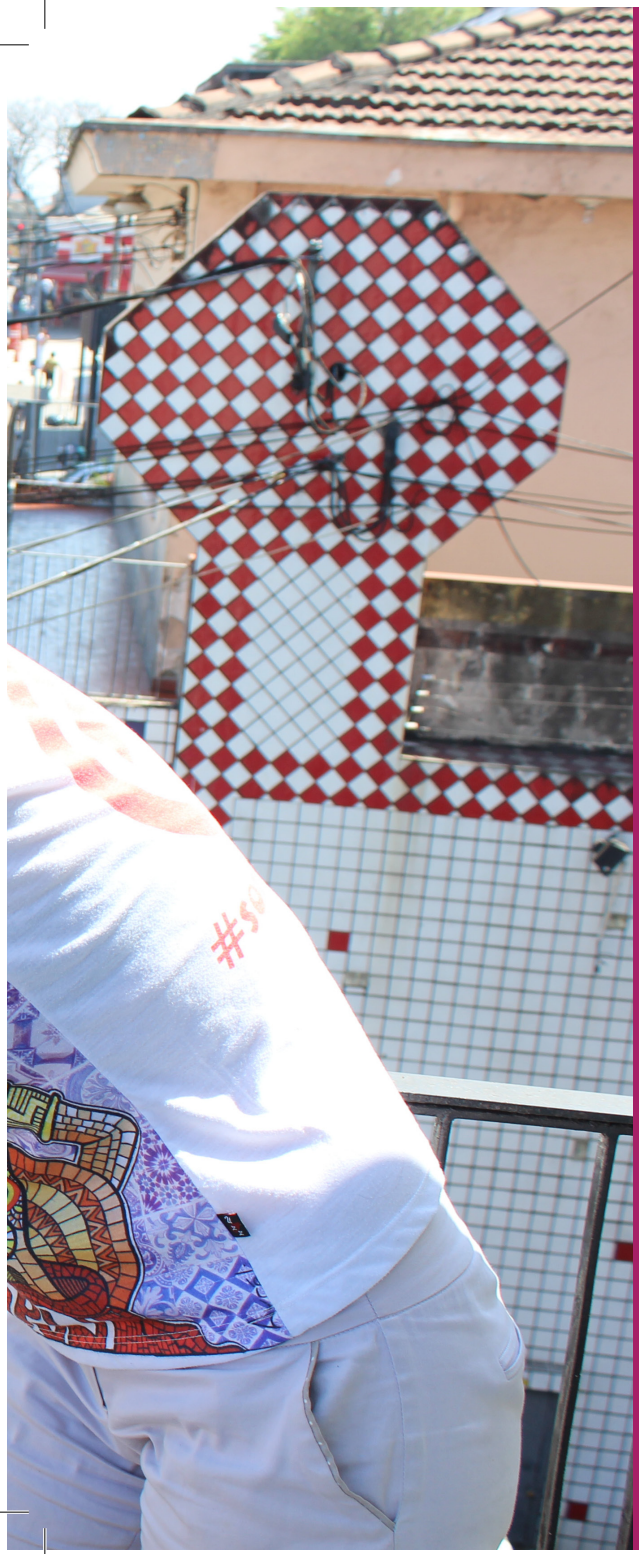
AMPF is still helping Fatima get over her harrowing experience so that she may one day find peace. They are also helping her get legal justice for the crime committed against her.

[1] According to strict interpretations of the Quran, abortion is forbidden as it considers all killing as condemned and Allah (God) has made all life sacred.



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Brazil

From an anti-abortionist to a women's rights advocate

Samira Alves Aun, 32, was born into a very conservative Catholic family in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Having been raised as a pious church goer with orthodox views, Samira had been conditioned to have a 'strong Christian guilt.' She was staunchly against contraception and abortion. She even hated herself when she had a sexual experience. However, when she joined the Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir or the Catholics for the Right to Decide movement, her opinions drastically changed. Her bachelor studies in Social Service and masters in Science and Religion further broadened her perspectives and she started looking at biblical, theological and historical issues through a women's rights prism. The Portuguese speaker now passionately advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights of women

Thirty-two-year-old Brazilian Samira Alves Aun traversed a long and winding road before becoming what she is now: a devout Catholic who is a strong advocate of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Born to a deeply religious family, Samira adopted the "conservative point-of-view" ever since she was a child. She remembers regularly attending a church near their house. "Since I was eight, I was exposed to very strong values and religious morals, molding my vision about myself, about others, the world, and God...I remember spending time in that church more than in any other place," she wrote.

While her religious upbringing brought her much comfort and strength, it also produced in her a "strong Christian guilt" in relation to her own sexuality. When she was 12 years old, Samira had intimate contact with a friend. "[During] that time, in addition to not having any idea about what we were doing, I felt that I was a horrible person, having abominable experiences. All of those feelings were reinforced by religious discourses, which I agreed with because I've learned to see and understand them that way," she wrote.

She developed a closer relationship with her local church and attended social pastorals with her parents. At the age of 14, Samira's family moved to a small and even more conservative town in the countryside of São Paulo.

The first thing she did upon moving was to join the youth group of the local church. There, she came into contact with Catholic nuns, and started to think about her vocational growth. At the age of 17, she entered a convent.

She carried what she described were strong conservative views. "I was against the use of condoms and abortion...I never paid attention to gender issues, even though I was connected with the Base Ecclesial Communities, a strong Christian movement that emerged in the 60s to fight oppression of the poor, and was linked to liberation theology. Inequality and social injustice were our main concerns. I felt uneasy about the hierarchical structure of the church, but I had not developed a clear criticism towards that," Samira wrote.

At the age of 23, her father passed away. Samira left the convent at this time, and faced a lot of uncertainty about what to do with her life. She reconnected with her youth pastoral group, and through it got to know about the Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir or Catholics for the Right to Decide.[1]

The movement gave her a women-oriented view on biblical, theological and historical issues—issues that Samira has grappled with her entire life. Progressive discourses with her



pastoral group about the movement introduced her to the importance of women's SRHR. "Many feelings started growing strong inside of me. Some concepts made immediate sense. But, the abortion issue was one of the toughest to let go...it was a painful deconstruction, but it was a necessary one," she said.

Samira got into trouble with their local priest, who branded her as "against life and pro-abortion." It also got her into fights with her mother, who held conservative views. "My mother would feel very embarrassed with this position, and we would fight constantly because I was getting closer to Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir. I was also in contact with the sisters of the congregation that I was part of originally. They didn't agree with my positions. They would say that it was not the best alternative."

Her life at the convent, formal education, and exposure to progressive Catholic groups[2] gave Samira "critical knowledge to understand the religious and moralistic biases that limits and



oppresses everyone, especially us women." She is now able to express her sexuality freely. "I felt the Christian guilt diluting—that guilt that would repress me even in very simple, affectionate exchanges," she wrote in her journal.

Samira patiently explained SRHR issues to her mother. She insisted that the right to a legal and safe abortion was based on the Bible and Catholic Church documents. After a while, her mother opened up. She told Samira a vital piece of information that she had kept to herself all these years. "She told me that she had an abortion when she was a minor," Samira said. This sudden revelation from her mother forged a strong bond between them. For Samira, it was a personal triumph.

"I will not give up this fight. Sexual and reproductive rights are legitimate rights. Women have the right to choose. Nobody should decide for us or condemn our choices based on hypocritical morals that only strengthens oppression and inequality in this sexist and patriarchal society," Samira concluded.

[1] Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir or Catholics for the Right to Decide is an international political movement formed by Catholic nuns, which questions certain ecclesiastical laws of the Catholic Church, especially those related to abortion, reproductive rights and the autonomy of women over their own bodies. In Brazil, the movement was founded in 1993 in the city of São Paulo and is actively working with other NGOs and feminist collectives.
[2] Samira went on to finish a BS Social Service degree at the Federal University of São Paulo, and a masters degree in Science and Religion at the Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas. She became a member of Instituto Paulista de Juventude and became more involved with Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir. She joined the organization's network of activists called Grupo de Multiplicadoras de São Paulo.



I felt the Christian guilt diluting—that guilt that would repress me even in very simple, affectionate exchanges

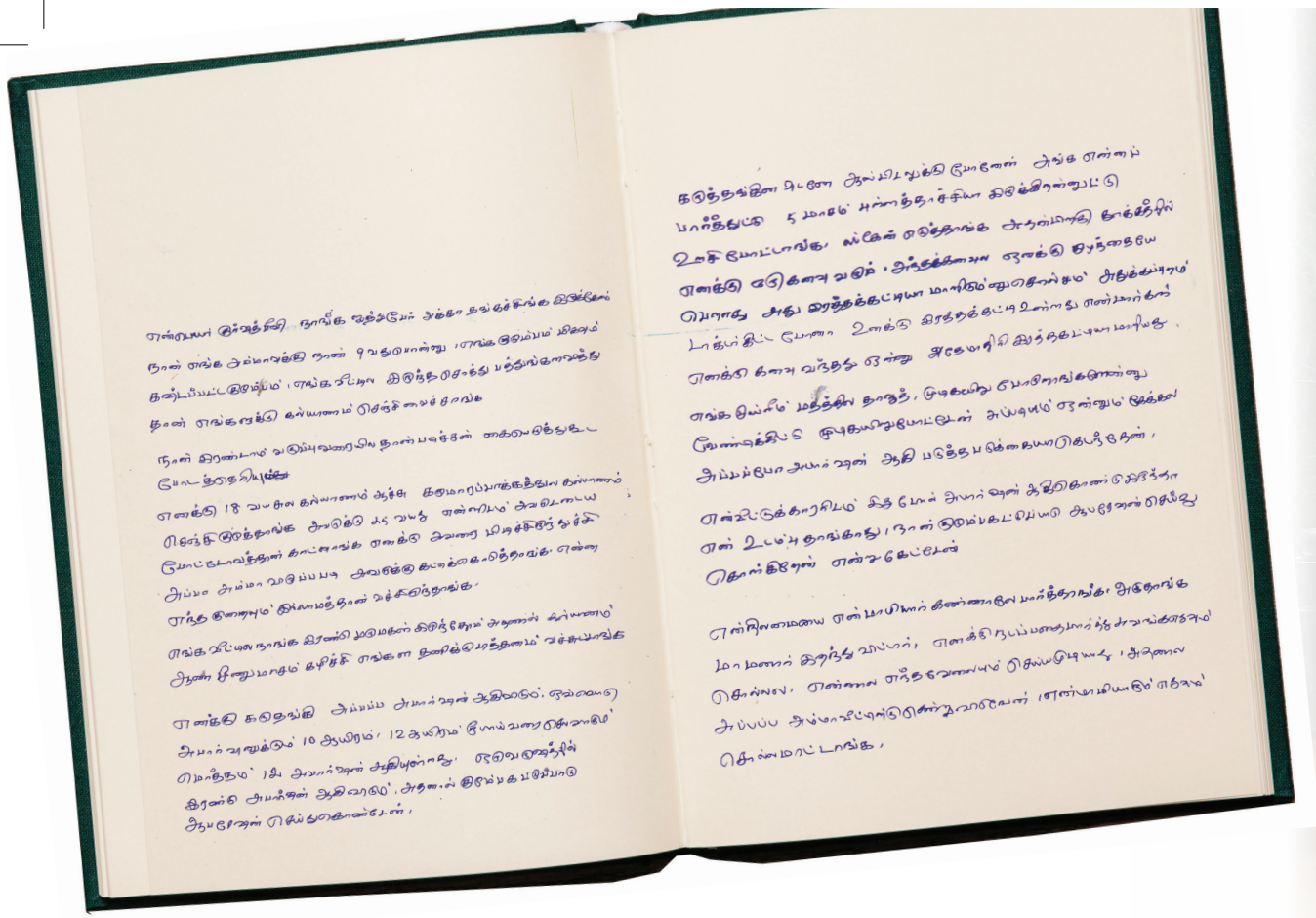




India

The long and arduous journey to become a mother

This is the story of a 35-year-old woman from a village in Tamil Nadu in India, who underwent several painful miscarriages to have a child. As a Muslim, Fatimabiwi (name changed), was not allowed to complete even primary schooling because of the gender bias in her community. After marriage, she endured isolation at religious and social gatherings because of her infertility issues. Instead of being sympathetic to her miscarriages, people said her 'womb was empty'. Desperate, she turned to deceptive spell healers. Finally, her quest for motherhood and happiness ended in adoption.



In Indian society, infertility is seen as a woman's burden. If, immediately after marriage she is not able to bear a child, she is usually stigmatised and blamed. They are derogatorily called *manhoos* and *vanjh* (meaning, barren) or are accused of possessing an evil eye.

The prevalence of infertility in India is estimated to be between 3.9 to 16.8 percent, according to the World Health Organization. Yet, couples who are struggling with infertility do not receive adequate health care. This has an often unseen and unmeasured impact on women, who remain trapped in religious beliefs and traditional practices that limit their control over their own bodies and their exercise of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Fatimabiwi is a 35-year-old Muslim woman from a village in Tamil Nadu, India. The youngest of nine children, Fatimabiwi only finished second standard. As a Muslim girl from a conservative family, she was not allowed to pursue her



I started visiting 'Darga' or the mosque regularly and involved myself in the practice of 'ghaspos' and 'mudikairu' (a practice done by spell healers and witch hunters to get rid of evil spirits)



education. “Double standards still prevail; there are different rules for boys and girls. People talk about development but women and girls are suppressed and their mobility is restricted,” she wrote in her journal.

She got married at the age of 18. It was a marriage arranged by her parents but the choice of groom was with her consent. “My parents showed me the photograph of the groom, I liked him and we got married,” she recalled. She described her marriage as a generally “smooth” one. However, her pregnancies always resulted in miscarriages, almost two a year.

“During the fifth month of each pregnancy, I would get a dream. In the dream there would be someone saying that there is a blood cyst in my womb and not a baby. After that, there would be no movement in the foetus and I would feel uncomfortable. In the hospital, the doctors would say the same reason, that I have a blood cyst or tumour, and ask me to go for an abortion,” Fatimabiwi wrote.

The frequent miscarriages made her sick and bedridden. “Sometimes, I was so tired for months that I couldn’t even get up and cook or carry out my daily household chores,” she shared.

Her medical condition did not improve. Thus, she resorted to traditional religious practices that are based on the underlying belief that

infertile women are possessed with evil spirits.

"I started visiting 'Darga' or the mosque regularly and involved myself in the practice of 'ghaspos' and 'mudikairu' (a practice done by spell healers and witch hunters to get rid of evil spirits). I did all sort of things that spell healers or witch hunters say... Once I even went to a spell healer, he asked me to give INR 10,000 (approximately USD 167). My husband said it is just a false belief and that they will take the money and there will would be no remedy for me, but I did what the spell healer said. I gave a lot of importance to religious practices with the trust that 'Allah will answer my prayers.' But nothing happened," Fatimabiwi wrote.

Her husband and family were very supportive throughout these ordeals. But there was a lot of social pressure. "People strongly believe that a life of a woman is not complete until she begets her own child. The language people in society use for women who do not have their own child hurts the woman," she said.

Fatimabiwi relates not being able to attend ceremonies and other occasions. "I couldn't take part in cultural practices and even occupy the front seat in functions, because of fear that people may object my womb was empty. So I preferred to stand at the back...Even if people said something, I kept quiet and did not utter a single word or reply back. Sometimes I felt like crying, and I just distanced myself," she said.

One day, Fatimabiwi decided to take control of her own body. She informed her family that she would be undergoing a tubectomy to prevent miscarriages and protect her health—even if it meant not being able to conceive her own child. What happened next was fortuitous.

When Fatimabiwi had her tubectomy operation, an unmarried girl in the hospital bed next to her gave birth to a baby girl. She asked to adopt the baby, and the girl's relatives agreed. Thus, the couple went home with their much-awaited child.

"We are happy for her, with the grace of 'Allah' she is studying well and we strongly believe that she will be supportive to us during our old age. She takes great care of us and loves us very much," Fatimabiwi wrote.

She is aware that like her, her daughter will face many challenges in a patriarchal society as she grows up. But she is also confident that like her, she will surpass these challenges and be able to assert her rights. "I am sure that she will lead a comfortable life, take care of herself, and be independent and well educated," Fatimabiwi concluded.

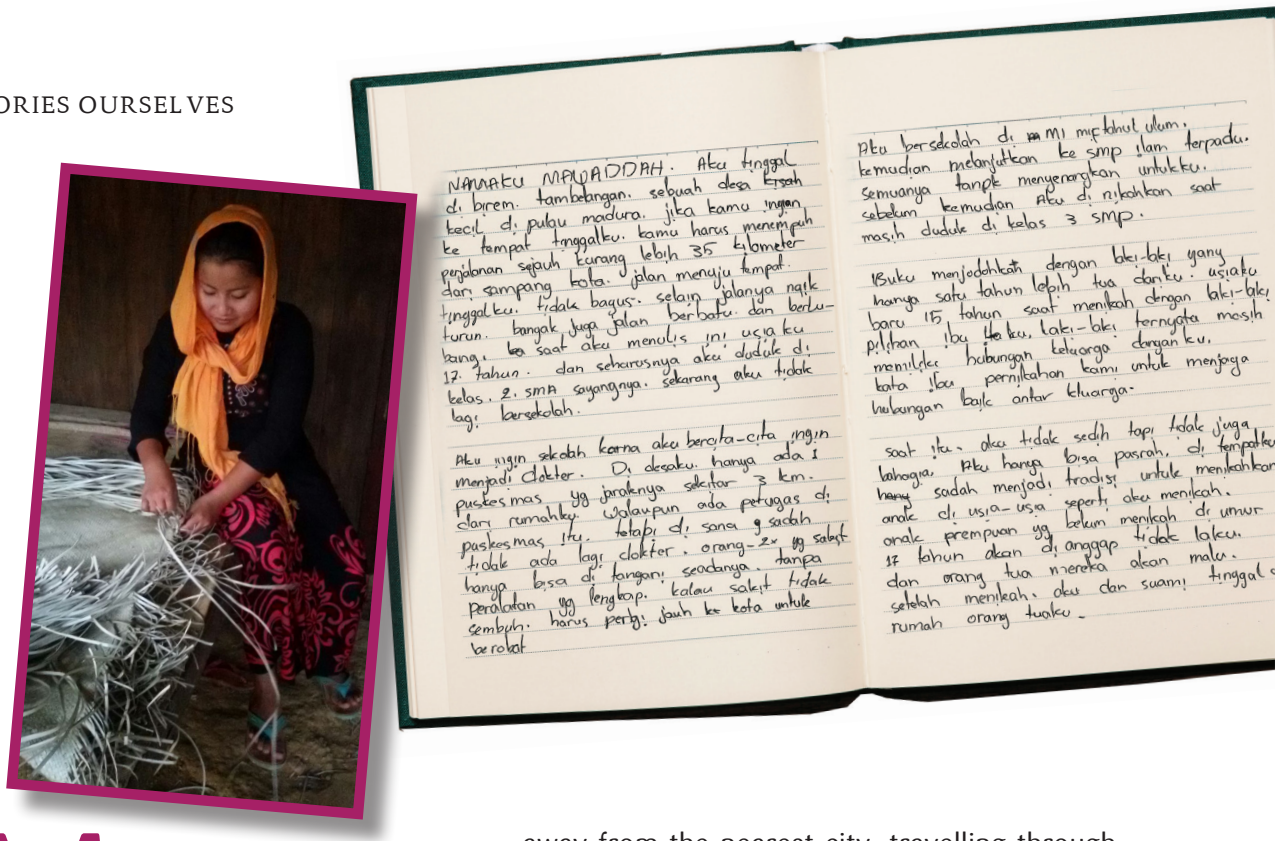




Indonesia

The price paid by a child bride

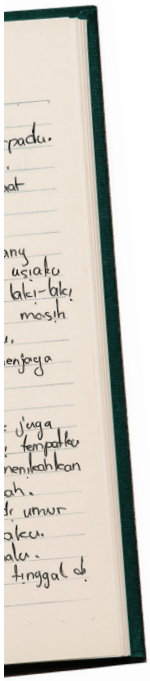
Seventeen-year-old Mawaddah grew up in a small village in Indonesia called Birem Tambelangan. She always dreamt of becoming a doctor but her family had other plans for her. She was married as a child – twice, due to the strong religious and cultural beliefs of her community. Families consider it shameful if their daughters aren't married before the tender age of 17. After her equally young first husband left, her family re-married her. The underaged bride now hopes for a better future for her offspring



"My age is 17 years old and I'm supposed to sit in Grade 2 in Junior High School. Unfortunately, I no longer attend school now." The sadness and regret at not being able to go to school is evident from the words of Mawaddah, a Muslim girl belonging to the Madura tribe in Indonesia. Even at a young age, Mawaddah knew that she wanted to study to become a doctor.

She grew up in a remote village on Madura Island, East Java province. It is 35 kilometers away from the nearest city, travelling through rough and rugged roads. The nearest public health facility (Puskesmas) is around three kilometers away. "Although there are staff in Puskesmas, there are no doctors. There is no proper equipment to treat people who are ill," she wrote.

The lack of medical facilities contributes to poor understanding of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Customary practices also undermine these rights. Young girls like Mawaddah receive no medical advice when they experience menstrual





pain. Women give birth only with the assistance of a shaman[1].

Mawaddah was still in Junior High School when her mother betrothed her to a 16-year-old boy. She got married at the age of 15. “My mother said that our marriage was to maintain good relations between our families. I was not sad but I was not too happy. I could only let go, because it has already become a tradition to marry off children. Girls who are still unmarried at the age of 17 will be deemed not ‘sold,’ and their parents will be ashamed,” she wrote.

The prevalence of child marriage in Indonesia is among the highest. According to a 2015 study by UNICEF, one out of four Indonesian girls married before they were 18 years old. Child marriage is found to be 1.5 times higher in rural areas than in urban areas and twice more prevalent in low-income families. Girls marrying before the age of 18 are also six times less likely to complete their secondary education.

After getting married, Mawaddah and her husband stayed in her parents’ house. But the marriage was full of household strife. One day, her husband left without any explanation. “If anyone wants to marry you, accept,” he said, before leaving their home. The marriage lasted only 30 days.

Mawaddah attributed it to fact that they were both still mentally immature. "At that time, I was not grieving and did not regret his departure. I'm just sad and sorry because I could not go to school. My aspiration [was] to become a doctor [that] I could not accomplish...I wanted to go to school again but I could not withstand the shame of what other people would say," she wrote.

Religious and indigenous customs encourage child marriage. It is seen as a way to "ensure" a future for girls and are usually arranged by parents based on their relationships with other families. "The Madurese have a belief that if a girl is wedded fast, she would be closer to God Almighty. Being married (at a young age) is also advisable for Muslims," Mawaddah explained.

Mawaddah's first marriage was not recorded legally since it was carried according to religious law. A year later, in 2016, she met a man whom she fell in love with. Again, due to societal pressure of being betrothed before the age of 17, she remarried. She was 16 years old while her husband was 24.

Because this time she was able to choose her husband, Mawaddah considers herself happy. "With him, I feel more blessed. I wish to have four children. Hopefully, my children will not get married before leaving school," she wrote.

In Birem, there is the Miftahul Ulum Boarding School, which accepts victims of child marriage. However, not many girls and women are able to attend the school because parents and husbands usually prohibit them.

Currently, Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan or Women's Health Foundation-YKP collaborates with health institutions in several districts and cities to provide SRHR education to parents, teachers and girls. They encourage communities to lobby their local governments to make policies protecting victims of child marriage.

YKP has submitted a draft to the Indonesian government for an Act for the Prevention of Child Marriages. While not yet passed into law, it has already been discussed by the office of the President and the staff of the Ministry of Religion.

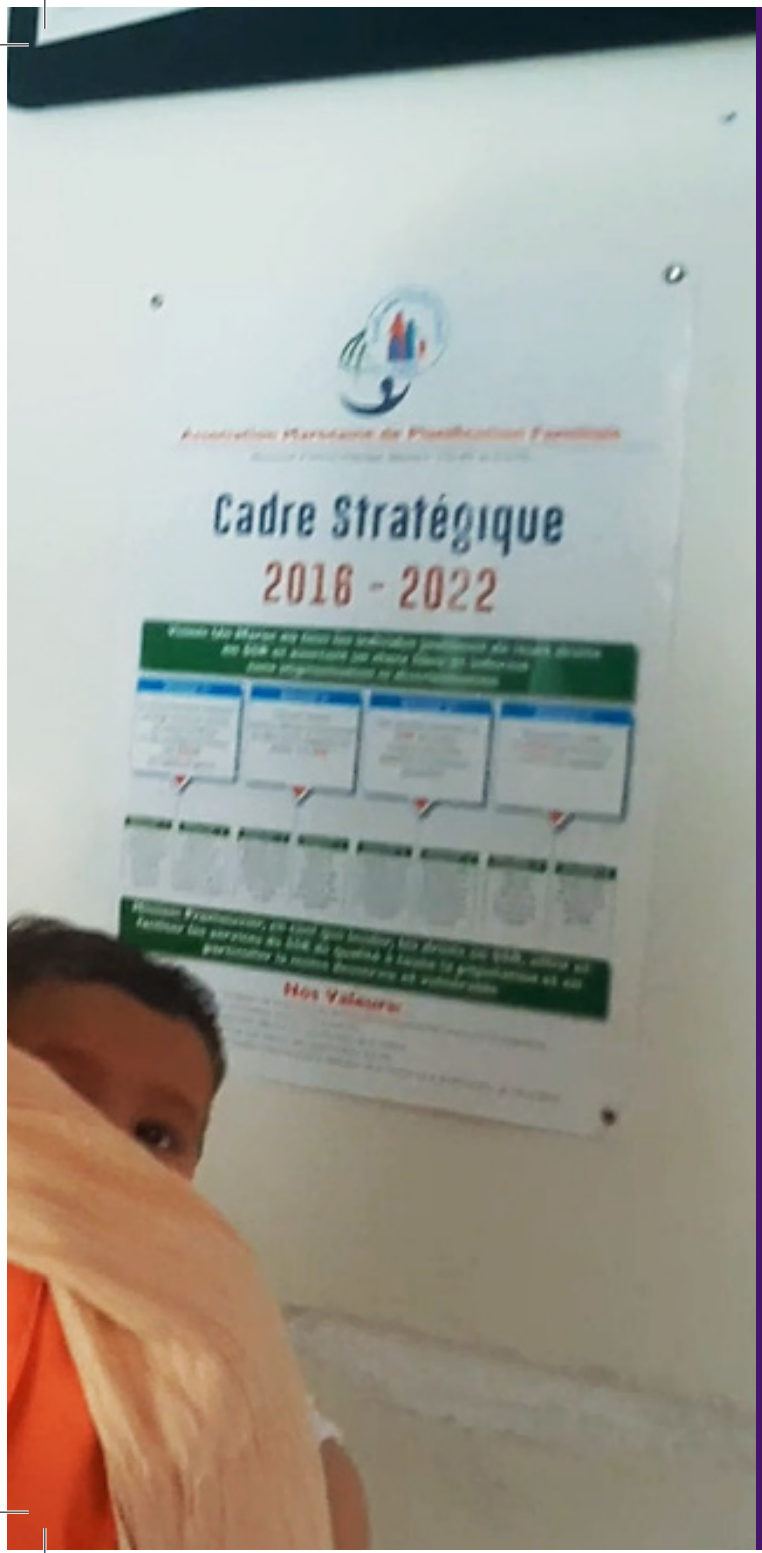
Mawaddah still regrets having to drop out of school because of early marriage. But she is hoping that her own children will not suffer the same fate and unlike her, will be able to pursue their dreams.

[1] Someone who is believed in some cultures to be able to use magic to cure people who are sick, to control future events, etc.



Religious and indigenous customs encourage child marriage. It is seen as a way to “ensure” a future for girls and are usually arranged by parents based on their relationships with other families


2013



Morocco

A rape survivor raising her child

Twenty-four-year-old Elkhalfi Meryem comes from a poor family in Tamansourt, a city that lies at the foot of the Atlas Mountains in the Marrakech region of Morocco. Belonging to a very conservative family, she was forced to give up studying and stay at home. But when Meryem defied her family to work in a farm, little did the trusting young woman know she would be raped by her colleague and become pregnant. This is the story of her struggle to abort, dealing with the social stigma of rape and her subsequent decision to have the baby.

Elkhalfi Meryem, 24, comes from a poor and conservative Muslim family in a village in Morocco. The inhabitants of her village depend mostly on agriculture and traditional handicrafts for a livelihood.

In her village, it was not uncommon for girls to be kept at home, instead of being sent to school. Many—including Meryam's family—hold the patriarchal view that a woman's place was confined to the home. "My brother, in particular, had extremely conservative beliefs. He told me that the place for girls was at home, as housewives, serving their husbands and children," she narrated to a translator, who helped write her journal.

Therefore, Meryam's family did not allow her to complete her studies. But Meryam refused to accept her family's decision to limit her role to a homemaker. Instead, she wanted to become a breadwinner. "I decided to go against the traditions of my family, seeking out opportunities to work so that I could support myself and my family," she said.

Meryam found a job as an agricultural worker in a farm. Sexual violence, however, would ruin her simple dreams.

One day while returning home from work, one of Meryam's co-workers offered to take her home on his motorcycle. "Although I initially refused, he insisted and I eventually agreed. After a while, though, I noticed that he went in an unusual direction. Here was the beginning of my nightmare," she narrated.

When Meryam questioned her co-worker about the direction he was driving, he said that he was just going to drop by a friend's house first. "With my usual innocence and naivete, I believed him without hesitation. But when he began to exit the town, I started to feel unsafe. After a while, I found myself alone with him in the middle of the forest," she said.

Her worst fears were confirmed. "You will accept willingly or I'll kill you," Meryam's co-worker told her. Meryam tried to defend herself. But she was raped in the forest. "I lost my virginity and my innocence forever," she said.

"Afterwards, the rapist said to me in a threatening voice, if you try to complain to the police or tell anyone I'll kill you. I was abandoned in the forest resigned to my fate, not knowing what to do or who to tell," she said. Meryam suffered in silent anguish and told no one of the crime.

A month after the incident, Meryam realised she had not had her period and was pregnant. She went hysterical, and decided to leave her family's home. "I headed towards Marrakech in search of a refuge and a way to abort the



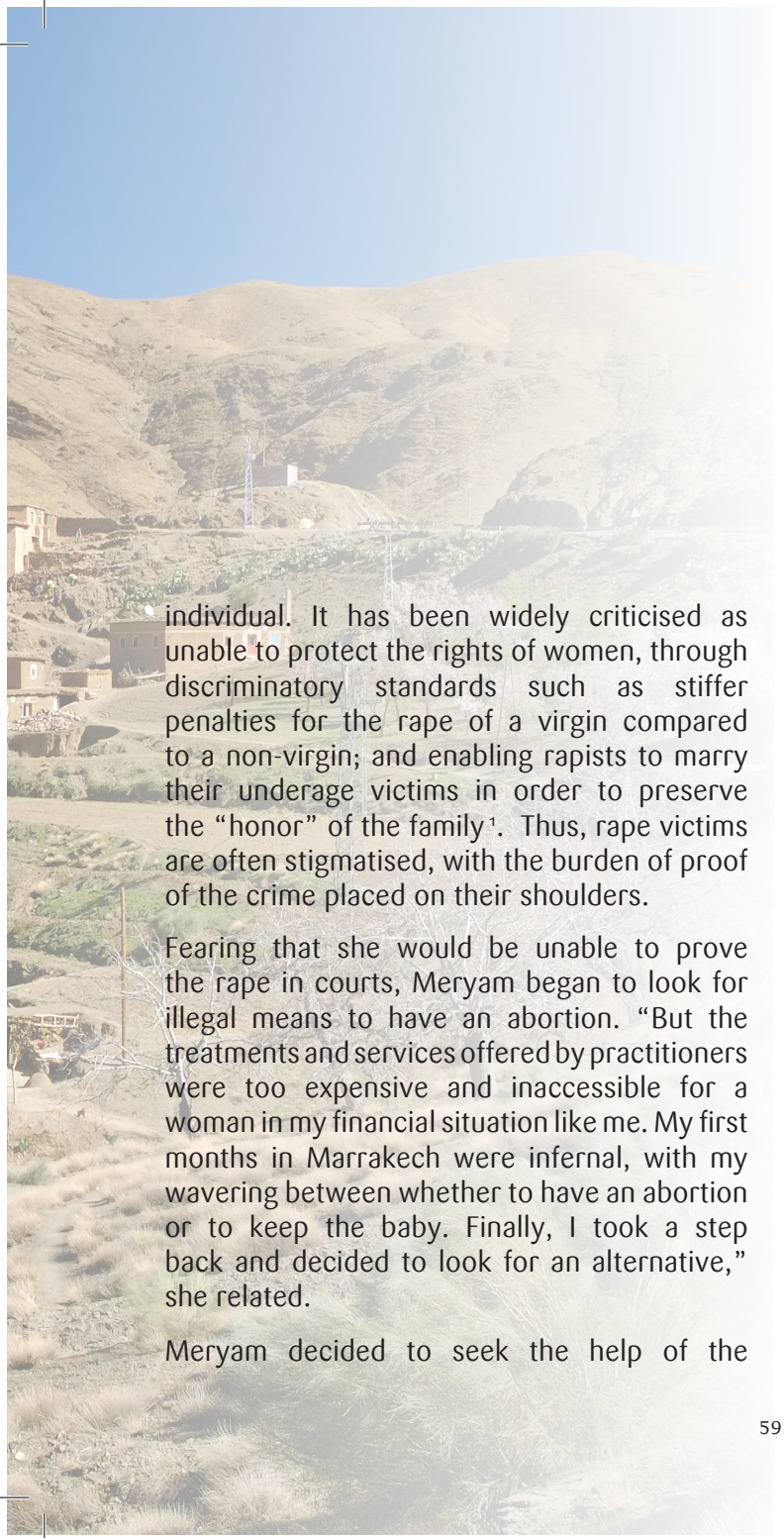
foetus. No one in my family knew my secret, except my sister," she narrated.

At Marrakech city, Meryam filed a complaint with the police. But she was eventually forced to abandon the case. "I felt that I had no tangible evidence to start the prosecution process. I didn't know the laws," she said.

Under the 2015 revised penal code of Morocco, women are permitted abortions when their life is in danger, and in cases of rape, incest, and birth defects. However, the amendments haven't come into force as the parliament is yet to vote on it unanimously. In Moroccan law, rape is provided for under the section of the Criminal Code that deals with "crimes against morality."

This means that the law on rape is meant to protect "public morality," instead of the





individual. It has been widely criticised as unable to protect the rights of women, through discriminatory standards such as stiffer penalties for the rape of a virgin compared to a non-virgin; and enabling rapists to marry their underage victims in order to preserve the "honor" of the family[1]. Thus, rape victims are often stigmatised, with the burden of proof of the crime placed on their shoulders.

Fearing that she would be unable to prove the rape in courts, Meryam began to look for illegal means to have an abortion. "But the treatments and services offered by practitioners were too expensive and inaccessible for a woman in my financial situation like me. My first months in Marrakech were infernal, with my wavering between whether to have an abortion or to keep the baby. Finally, I took a step back and decided to look for an alternative," she related.

Meryam decided to seek the help of the Association Marocaine de Planification Familiale (AMPF). The group took charge of her health, providing her with counseling and medical care. "Little by little, I began to overcome my nightmare, thanks to AMPF who supported me," she said.

"I am now living a harmonious life with my little daughter, who is my warm refuge," Meryam said optimistically, despite life's continuing hardships

In the end, she decided to have the baby. Her daughter is now over a year old.

Sadly, Meryam is still suffering from poverty and gender oppression. She works as a domestic worker, but is sometimes forced to supplement her income as a sex worker. She has lost touch with her family and friends in the village. Only her daughter keeps her happy. "I am now living a harmonious life with my little daughter, who is my warm refuge," Meryam said optimistically, despite life's continuing hardships.

[1] Article 475 of the penal code that allowed rapists to escape prosecution by marrying their underage victims was repealed in 2014; but the practice of marrying their daughters to their rapists continues among Moroccan families.





Bangladesh

Child marriage couldn't stop her from soaring

At 13, when many of her friends were still in school, Fatima, had already been married. But the Muslim girl from a predominantly fishing village called Boroitola in Barguna district in Bangladesh, refused to let early marriage or even motherhood stop her from chasing her dreams. The now 33-year-old pursued her education in stealth and is now doing her Bachelor in Law. The determined mother of two won the local elections in 2015 to become one of the few female vice presidents. A passionate activist and community leader, Fatima now helps other child brides pursue their dreams & is an active proponent of women's rights

Fatima was the fifth girl child born to her parents and she was definitely not the child her mother was hoping for - a son. In the agricultural and fishing village of Boroitola, there are little opportunities for women. Most Muslim girls are married off by their parents as soon as they hit puberty. Fatima was no exception.

"The society I [was] was born in was covered [with] superstitions and bigotry. Ever since I was a girl I had to [wear a] purdah[1] to go outside of the house. My parents forced me to wear a burkha[2] at the age of ten, long before I got to understand the meaning of all these," Fatima wrote.

At the age of 13, Fatima had an arranged marriage, without her consent. Religion was a big factor. "They said, it would be a sin if I do not get married now," she narrated in her journal.

At that time, she was in her eighth grade. Getting married meant stopping school. After a year, she gave birth to her first son.

Describing herself as "rebellious" in spirit, Fatima was determined to resume her schooling. This caused considerable tension with her husband and in-laws. "I was consumed by the conflict in my household about continuing my studies...I discussed this with my parents, but they told me that women should adjust. They tried to make me understand that my heaven is under my husband's feet, that he is always right and I should obey him and accept everything," she related.

Fatima pursued her studies secretly. Her teachers encouraged her and helped her along. After she got her Secondary School Certificate in 1998, Fatima's husband and parents-in-law found out and got angry. Still, she persisted. Two years after, she acquired her Higher Secondary Certificate and in 2012, went on to study Law. She described the constant struggle to finish her studies as "brutal torture" because of her husband and in-laws' opposition. Once, she attempted suicide to escape this torment. "While I was in the hospital, one doctor told me, 'Your life is not for you only. You have to live for others in society. Death is not the only solution.' After this, I tried to live my life in a different way," Fatima said.

She started to write about her feelings towards child marriage and women's rights. Fatima penned poems and novels, which were published in three national dailies and a magazine. "I was inspired. I thought that I have to do more for society, so that what happened to me does not happen to anyone else," she said. Fatima began to talk to other women who were victims of child marriage and domestic abuse.



She discovered other Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) issues. According to her, women cannot speak about their problems freely at hospitals and health care centers. Women do not get adequate health care and usually suffer from post-delivery complications. They also do not have information and access to birth control. She started organising women around SRHR issues.

Recognising that women need economic empowerment, Fatima took her advocacy a step further by putting up a tailoring shop. Gathering donations from well wishers, she bought sewing machines and employed underprivileged women, most of whom were victims of violence. She also used the income to pay for tuition for her Law studies.

"I took tailoring training and started a tailor shop for underprivileged women. Moreover, I gave them free training for their capacity building. I collected donation from rich people and brought sewing machines for those women. Until now, I have trained 242 women in tailoring. All of them are now self-reliant and earn money through their work," she said

At the age of 33, Fatima is a highly accomplished woman. She has helped stop around 90 child marriages, provided care for around 100 women victims of domestic violence, employed more than 200 women and educated more than a thousand women on birth control.

Fatima has also led human chains and other mass actions on issues such as rape, as well



as conservative religious traditions, such as forcing women to wear the purdah and restricting their reading to only religious texts.

In 2015, Fatima won the upazila parishad elections to become the female vice-president. The upazila parishad is mainly responsible for providing social services in her sub-district. As a member of the hospital management committee, she plays an important role in ensuring women's access to health services.

"I believe that sexual and reproductive rights are the prerequisite for achieving gender equality, since those are integral to individual uniqueness...Religion should not affect the protection of SRHR. However, misinterpretation of religion, ignorance and social superstitions affect society and women," she wrote.

Fatima continues to assist child marriage victims, who are just like her during her younger days. She wrote that she derives satisfaction from being able to "do a few good things" for women, and hopes that her life experience will encourage them to struggle for their rights and freedom as well.

[1] The practice among women to dress in all-enveloping clothes in order to stay out of the sight of men or strangers. Purdah, in Urdu, literally translates to a curtain or a veil.

[2] A long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by many Muslim women.



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India

Saying no to polygamy

Thirty-five-year-old Sultan Begum (name changed) is from a village in India's Tamil Nadu. Raised in a Muslim family, the mother of two courageously turned her back on her marriage when her husband took another wife. Although Islam permits polygamy and society disapproved her decision, she refused to change her mind. The decision was not without consequences. She battled severe depression and even attempted suicide but eventually took back her life and started a small business. Now she supports her children and parents and urges other Muslim women to also reject polygamy

Polygamy—the practice of allowing men to marry up to four wives in Islam —can have profound psychological effects on women. Women's views regarding polygamy, however, are considered taboo in many societies. One woman from a small village in Tamil Nadu, India has broken such a taboo.

Sultan Begum, 35, is a mother of two. Like many women in her village, she married young, at the age of 19. It was not a marriage of her choice. "I studied up to 8th standard. Then, as usual, I was compelled to get married in spite of my parents knowing that I wanted to study," she wrote in her journal.

Sultan Begum was the second wife of her husband, who, she said, was left by his first wife after only 40 days of marriage. "At the time of marriage my husband was 31 years old and I was 19 years old...Both my elder brothers and my elder sister were not happy with this decision. They even asked my father, why he decided to go ahead with this alliance, as I was very young and there was a huge age difference."

She described her marital life as "happy" for the first few years—that is, until her husband decided to marry her close friend and take her as a third wife. "He was working abroad. He came back after three and half years, in 2007 and we planned and had another baby. After that there were lots of problems and difference of opinion. I did not share my problems with my parents. This made me feel very bad and I was emotionally down and very depressed. My husband thought that I was a patient and could not have sexual relationship or emotional bonding with me," she wrote.

"He took a wrong decision and started having an affair with another woman. When I came to know about this, I told him that I did not like this and came back to my parents' place...I lost my faith and attempted suicide," Sultan Begum disclosed.

"I became sick and had severe mental worries. I sought treatment in temples, mosques. I was suggested to seek different religious healing procedures and visited many religious places. They demanded large amounts of money for it. I was branded as a mentally ill person by my husband's relatives and society," she narrated.

Sultan Begum's husband filed for divorce alleging mental illness. However, instead of demoralising her, the divorce notice served as a wake-up call. She asked herself, "'Why should I end my life?' I decided to live for my children."

Today, she is struggling with how society views her situation and decision to leave her husband, who eventually wanted to get back to her after his third wife left him.



"Now I live with my parents and my children are with me. I told my husband, 'I don't want to live with you. I am earning and supporting my children.' You may ask me, being a Muslim, how can you do that? How can you live without your husband?' I am not living with my husband because he wanted to marry someone else. According to my religion, it is acceptable. Isn't it?" Sultan Begum questioned.

Under Sharia or Islamic law, men can have up to four wives at a time, as long as he can provide materially for all of his wives and children. The origin of polygamy in Islamic law is an interpretation of a verse in the Quran. It is argued, however, the historical context of the verse reveals that marrying wives were meant as an act of compassion for widows and orphans at a time of war.

Polygamy for Muslims differs in law and in practice throughout the world. Not all predominantly Muslim countries adopt the Islamic law for marital regulations. In countries that do, however, women like Sultan Begum have difficulty in asserting their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).



Instead of being treated medically for the psychological stress from a polygamous marriage, Sultan Begum was ostracised by society. Still, she found the courage to speak up.

"I'd like to raise a question against all these norms. Whatever religion may say, I believe that conscience matters the most. Conscience does not obey norms and rules. It obeys only trust, faith, and compassion," she wrote.

Sultan Begum's economic empowerment helped her gain independence and assert her rights. She now owns a grocery store and has become a successful entrepreneur. She realised that she does not need to rely on her husband to support her children.

As a mother, she believes that girls need to be taught SRHR at a young age. "I taught my daughter what puberty is all about, the reproductive 'dos and don'ts.' Because back in those days we lived in fear and could not understand what SRHR was all about. The deprivation of knowledge gave us stress. That should not happen in my daughter's life," Sultan Begum said.

Even though polygamy is still widely accepted in the Islamic world, Sultan Begum is hopeful her personal story would inspire more Muslim women to break down barriers that disempower them and limit their rights.

"I'd like to prove myself and show to the world that a woman can do what she thinks. I want to be an example for my fellow women. Be brave and strong, set goals and be ready to face challenges. And in course of time, you will succeed," she wrote.



I taught my daughter what puberty is all about, the reproductive 'dos and don'ts.' Because back in those days we lived in fear and could not understand what SRHR was all about



Collaborating Partners



arrow
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Asian Pacific Resource and Research Center for Women (ARROW)

ARROW is a regional non-profit women's NGO based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was established in 1993 and has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC) of the United Nations. Over the past two decades, ARROW has been working to advance the rights of women and young people throughout the region in collaboration with other women's rights organisations, youth-led and youth-serving organisations and NGOs working on sexual and reproductive rights and health issues.

ARROW's work spans information and communications, knowledge exchange and transfer, evidence generation for advocacy, consistent monitoring of progress towards relevant international commitments made vis-à-vis women's health, capacity building, partnership building for advocacy, engagement at international and regional for a and enhancing the organisational strength of both ARROW and partners. ARROW presently works with a core group of partners in 17 countries across Asia and the Pacific and with regional partners in four global south regions - Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa.

www.arrow.org.my

Association Marocaine de Planification Familiale (AMPF)

Country: Morocco

AMPF or the Moroccan Family Planning Association was founded in 1971. They work with agricultural workers and women in rural areas who are poor, marginalised and suffer from sexual harassment, rape, incest and all forms of GBV. AMPF actively promotes a national population policy through advocacy with political and religious leaders. This is complemented by a committed programme of information, education and communication (IEC) within the community. It is designed to enhance understanding of the benefits of careful child spacing and contraception, in terms of health and personal welfare, and economic security and stability.

There is also a strong focus on sensitising men on gender issues to improve women's status. AMPF operates a large and successful network of hundreds of service points, including permanent clinics, mobile units, and community-based distributors/services (CDBs/CBSs).

www.ampf.org.ma

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD)

Countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Spain

The CDD or the Catholics for the Right to Decide Latin America network was established in collaboration with Catholics for a Free Choice at the Fifth International Meeting on Women and Health held in 1987 in Costa Rica. It was set up mainly to tackle the high rates of maternal mortality due to clandestine abortions and the complications arising from unsafe abortions in hospitals throughout the region.

These groups are working to assist Catholic women in making personal moral decisions about reproductive health and is advocating a change in laws and practices so that abortion will be safe, legal and accessible. CDD also focusses on gender equality, access to health services for all women, educational support and dissemination of religious arguments in favour of sexual and reproductive rights of women and confronts fundamentalist discourses.

http://www.catolicas.org.br/

Ikhtyar for Gender Studies and Research

Country: Egypt

Ikhtyar is a feminist collective launched by a group of feminist women, hoping to achieve gender equality in Egypt. It is an innovative syndicate powered by gender research and interactive learning. Ikhtyar is trying to address the issue of access of SRHR services and information and the lack of sexual education. Their advocacy tools include gender seminars, which stocks books and periodicals and through one of their most powerful mediums - Feminist Podcast.

https://www.ikhtyar.org/

LOOM

Country: Nepal

LOOM work towards synergising collective power of women through multi-generational activism, where activists of all ages connect, organise and transform structures that impede our equality. Registered in 2010, we are a platform that recognises the diversity and intersection of Nepali young women and collaboratively engage to equate power hierarchy, sustaining activism, and building movements. LOOM believes that reducing the multi-generational gap will harness fundamental and structural changes. LOOM consists of a group of individuals and organisations dedicated to movement building, young women leadership, human rights, sexuality and bodily integrity and feminist politics of the internet.

http://loomnepal.org/

Naripokkho

Country: Bangladesh

Naripokkho is a membership-based, women's activist organisation working for the advancement of women's rights and entitlements and building resistance against violence, discrimination and injustice. Women's reproductive health and rights is one of its main working areas. Naripokkho also helps to prevent child marriage, provides legal aid in sexual harassment and sexual assault cases, raises awareness among female school students on adolescent reproductive health and distributes sanitary products among female school students. The organisation also conducted valuable research exploring the influence of religion and interpretation of religion in the inclusion of SRHR in education (focusing on secondary and tertiary level) in Bangladesh.

http://www.copasah.net/naripokkho.html

নারীপক্ষ

Rural Women's Social Education Centre (RUWSEC)

Country: India

RUWSEC is a women's NGO working for sexual and reproductive health and rights and is based in Karumarapakkam village near Chennai in South India. The organisation was founded by mostly Dalit women in 1981. Its main focus is enabling women to gain greater control over their bodies and their lives and achieving wellbeing through promotion of gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights. RUWSEC's overall approach has been to motivate, educate and organise women from poor and marginalised communities to stand up for their rights and become agents of social change.

RUWSEC's field programmes has four major themes including promoting general health and wellbeing in the community, promoting SRHR of adolescents, young people and women and prevention of intimate partner violence against women. They do these through community capacity building, providing health care services, monitoring, research and bringing out popular health education materials and advocacy for wider policy change.

http://www.ruwsec.org/

RUWSEC

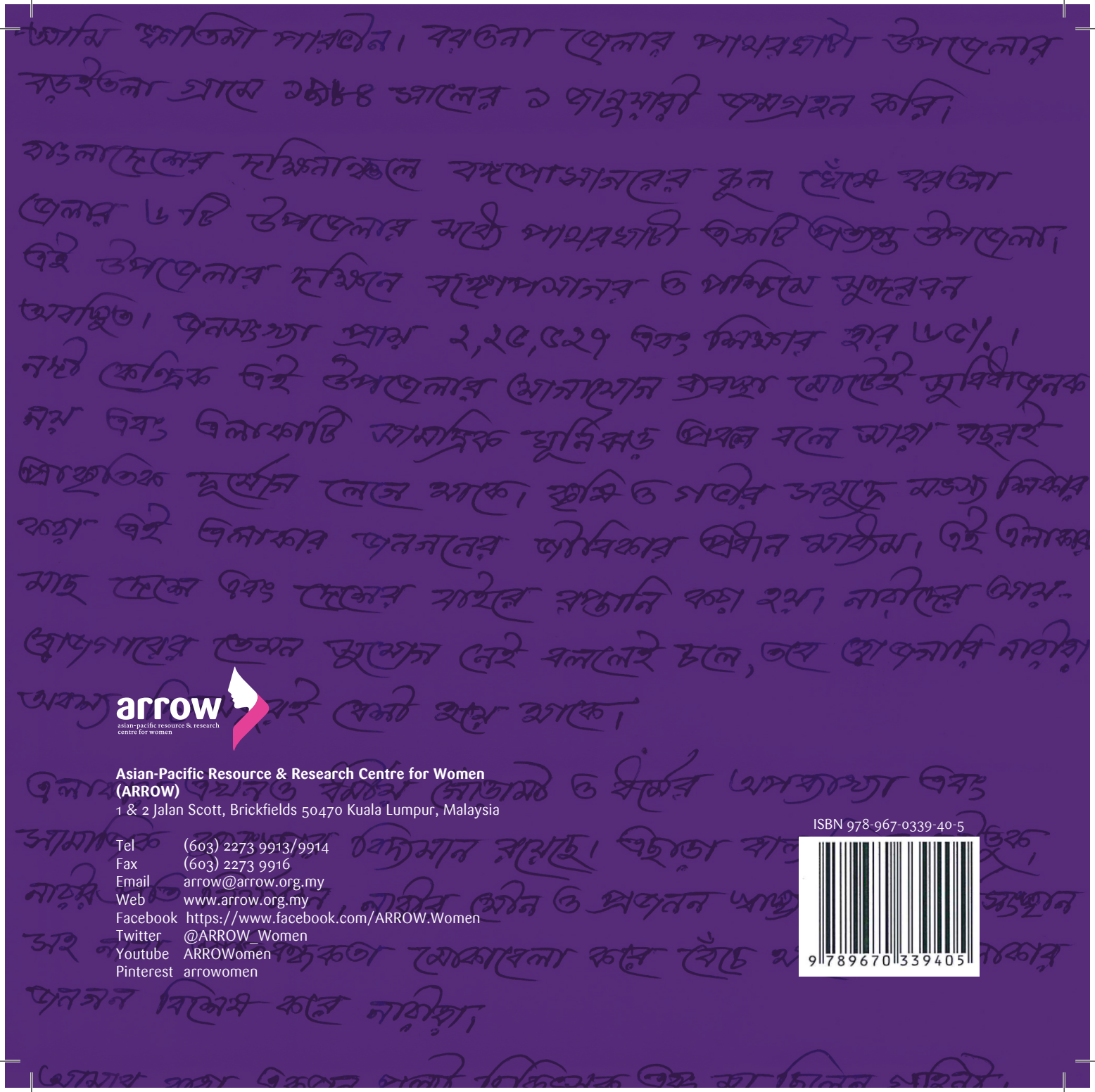
Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan (YKP)

Country: Indonesia

Yayasan Kesehatan Perempuan (Women's Health Foundation) was founded in 2001 as a not-for-profit social welfare institution in Jakarta by the Women's Health Forum, which comprises of activists, researchers and academicians. The NGO was set up because of their concern about the issues relating to women's reproductive health and sexual rights, which are considered controversial in Indonesia. YKP's main focus has been women's reproductive health and it aims to strengthen the network of women's forum on health issues and improve public's knowledge on reproductive health.

YKP works by strengthening any movement related to women's health to promote effective change for their surroundings—especially the poor. They also build networks to become pioneers in advocating policy changes. The highlight of their work has been with the Association of teachers who were keen on learning more about SRHR in Kabupaten Sampang, East Java, Indonesia. The teachers subsequently championed SRHR in the community and that has significantly helped in eradicating child marriage in the community.

http://ykp2015.com



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