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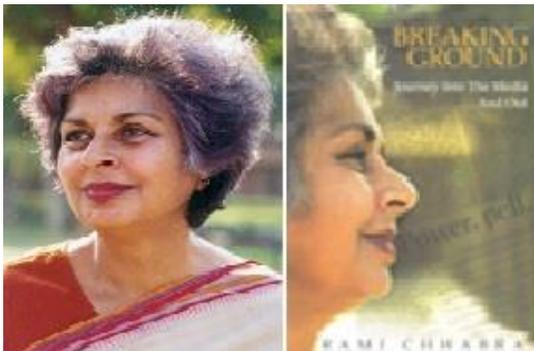
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'Gangrapes reflect social destabilisation'

Apr 10, 2013 - [Rami Chhabra](#) |



With the publication of her book *Breaking Ground: Journey Into The Media ... And Out*, Rami Chhabra, one of India's earliest feminists, newspaper columnists and communication experts, has decided to put the record right on why she turned her back on working as a health expert in the ministry of health and family welfare, especially after Rajiv Gandhi's had singled her out for the job. Her book also explains why she took the controversial stand on questioning why millions of dollars should be poured into the HIV/AIDS campaign and the National AIDS Control Programme in India when it would have been better served in giving a boost to the national health programme which was in desperate need for funds.

Her criticism stands vindicated, as today, both the global HIV/AIDS campaign and the National Aids Control Program in India have been critiqued on grounds of corruption and falsification of figures.

Q: You were handpicked by Rajiv Gandhi to help him with the family planning programme. Was it a challenging experience for you?

A: It was a great honour to be invited by the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to work in the ministry of health and family welfare. I was appointed Additional Secretary Media and Communications to help refurbish the program which had developed a bad reputation during the Emergency. I must confess I was a little wary of the bureaucracy but Rajiv told me not to chicken out and I am never one to refuse a challenge. During my stint there, I broadened the entire family planning programme and made contraception a crucial part of it. These 35-40 spots that were prepared in a matter of weeks were made by in house talent of films division at a minimal cost of `6,000 as against the lakhs being charged by private companies. These spots turned out to be extremely popular and were aired free of cost on Doordarshan at prime time ô just prior to the 9 o'clock news. A number of politicians, including Sushma Swaraj complained in Parliament that she found them obscene.

Q: You were not happy working in the government?

A: Working in the government was not easy experience. I was in the ministry for three years working 18 hours a day but I continued to be looked upon as an outsider. After quitting, I went to Malawai to do a short-term consultancy on family planning there from where I went on to do a consultancy on HIV/AIDS in Geneva. But when I reached Geneva, I found a very different perspective prevailing there. The disease was beginning to take on startling dimensions but the sensibility there was shaped by the western idiom which did not take into account the local social sensibilities prevailing in Asia. I prepared a paper sketching the broader context within which condom services need to be promoted. I wrote `With sexual transmission documented to be the predominant mode of HIV transmission the critical identified need is to promote lifestyles that will help in the prevention of the spread of HIV infection. Fortunately, what is scientifically most appropriate to block the AIDS pandemic is totally congruent with age old Asian cultural values: sexual abstinence for the young unmarried and life-long monogamous relationship within marriage.

But these comments were taken amiss. The clique of western consultants were outraged at these suggestions. Another short consultancy in Tanzania in 1991 confirmed her worst fears. A visit to a seedy red light areas exposed me to seeing young girls and emaciated women who were being offered nothing in the name of protection except condoms. Initially, I had thought international agencies s pumping money into the HIV/AIDS campaign did not know enough about the ground reality of the recipient countries.

They were bringing in a philosophy where they believed there was a lot of concurrent sex between different partners. For example, they started distributing condoms along our highways. I pointed out that 6 to 7 per cent of our truckers may be going in for commercial sex but this was not the case with the remaining 92 per cent. But no, they started keeping condoms with the tyre puncturewallahs, dhabhawallahs, the chaiwallahs. And over the years, this has changed the mindset of the public. I paid a huge price for my observations. From being wooed and sought after, I found myself being marginalised.

Q: You became a huge critic of the condom-centric approach to family planning. How did that approach influence our lifestyles?

A: Condoms for married couples is one thing but to preach it for the young to be used in relationships and so on , is to beyond talking about it as a technical devise because then one is going into the social ethos of our country. I recently argued on all our news channels that the number of teenagers having premarital sex in the nineties was 0.03 per cent for girls and two and a half per cent for boys. The figures have risen to two to three per cent for girls and seven to eight per cent for boys but hardly the kind of figures being bandied about these days. Sex is not something recreational.

Here we are talking about intimacy that is part of commitment in our relationships. My point is that the earlier family planning campaigns were made within the family context. The new thrust was to normalise casual sex by a male population that had earlier been kept in check by strong social traditions. It is for this reason that I urged that we should not follow the artificially-hyped African and Thai models but create an enabling environment that laid emphasis on low risk lifestyles for both sexes.

Q: In your book you mentioned that many doors closed when you spoke out against the silo approach. Have you regretted adopting that critical stance?

A: Not at all. I wouldn't be myself if I had not taken that stance. We have paid an enormous price for taking the stance that we did. The other issue that I got involved with was when sex workers in Sonagachi got together and began to demand that "Sex Work is Real Work," we demand workers' rights. That was in 1997 by which these 5,000 women had received `3 crores as aid while the women and child department's annual budget for the whole country at that time was much less. Compassion for women-in prostitution is necessary because a vast majority are victims of dire circumstances. But to demand the abolition of existing laws controlling the sex industry in order to create a self regulatory board constituted solely of sex workers is to fail to express the horrendous nightmare of the women who are trapped in this trade. We never had brothels on this scale dotting all our highways. You can criticise me for repeating myself but the consequences of this social destabilisation is enormous.

The kind of gangrapes that we are witness to on a daily basis only reinforces this complete breakdown. These questions are being asked across the globe but they are not getting reorted in our newspaper.

Why is the EU presently debating the whole issue of pornography in their countries? I must add that the Thais and African countries have all, following a lot of introspection, adopted a much more disciplined approach. We have been shortchanged by our politicians and bureaucrats.

Q: Has the pushing of condom helped improve our family planning figures? We continue to face such a major population explosion?

A: Figures released by the ministry of family planning and welfare confirm that condoms users form only three per cent of contraception use. You can see how little impact social marketing has had. As far as AIDS talking about universal usage - these figures are doctored. If it was universal, how come there has been such a dramatic increase in abortion as trends show in India. Obviously, something was flawed.