

21 November 2014

Dear Friends,

The Asian Human Rights Commission has received information about the death of 17 women due to medical negligence in botched sterilization surgeries organised in an abandoned hospital that lacked basic infrastructure. The information from Society for Fast Justice has revealed that the incident is not a standalone one; it is part of a campaign aimed at population control that has left hundreds of women struggling for life in three other hospitals.

CASE NARRATIVE: A doctor conducted sterilization surgeries on 83 women in 5 hours in an abandoned hospital devoid of basic infrastructure, as part of a mass sterilization camp in village Pendari near Bilaspur in the Chhattisgarh state of India on 8 November. A total of 17 of these women are now confirmed dead. Another 17 women are reportedly in a precarious state of health, while over 100 others are being treated in different hospitals.

In another recent incident, one woman died on 13 November in a similar sterilization camp in Gaurela, and three of the survivors of this camp are currently undergoing treatment.

The site, where the first deaths occurred, is around 100 kilometres away from Bilaspur city in the state of Chhattisgarh. Most of the victims are in the 28-32 years age group, who have left behind young children.

Most of the women coming to such "camps", often operated upon in the open, are from the most marginalised sections of society. They come to these camps because of the meagre (but significant enough for them), remuneration that they receive. In fact, right from the women, to village health worker, to surgeons, everyone involved in these surgeries get rewarded.

Worryingly, some of these women belong to primitive tribal groups, the Baigas in this case, for whom the law prohibits sterilisation.

In addition to the medical negligence, state authorities have also admitted to the possibility of drugs containing substances used in making common rat poison, as well as other poisoning agents, being administered to the women. The drugs were manufactured by a local pharmaceutical company, Mahavar Pharma (P) Ltd., Raipur, and sold by Kavita Pharma and its subsidiary Karva Pharma, both located at same premises in Tifra, Bilaspur. There are allegations that the manufacturing company, allegedly owned by a person close to the political party in power in the state, operated out of one room.

The state authorities have further admitted that there was no special reason for buying the drugs locally; this has raised the suspicion of corruption in procurement. The allegations gain further weight from the fact that the state owned Drug Testing Laboratory, Raipur, is authorized only to test the drugs of Indian systems of medicine and not those from the allopathic system. One of the three drug testing laboratories where the seized medicines have been sent for testing has confirmed the presence of Zinc Phosphide, a poisonous compound, in the antibiotic Ciprocin 500 that was distributed to victims of the botched sterilisations in Chhattisgarh.

Unfortunately, the problem goes beyond 'family planning'. In February 2013, Amar Agrawal, health minister of Chhattisgarh admitted in the state assembly that the government organised health camps in Balod in 2011 left 44 people blind. He also admitted that similar camps had left 4 people blind in Durg in March 2012, and 14 people blind in Bagbahra in December of same year. Furthermore, in July 2012, ovaries of poor women were found to have been removed. At that time, Mr. Amar Agarwal had stated that the "women were deliberately ill-advised by doctors who removed their uterus to get money".

The government, on its part, has been trying to make a scapegoat of the doctor who conducted the surgeries, and have arrested him. The doctor concerned, however, has asserted that neither was he negligent and nor was his equipment dirty. Further, he has added that it was the administration's duty to control the number of people that turned up at his family planning "camp". On Republic Day this year, the same doctor has been awarded by the state government for conducting 1,00,000 surgeries.

Many studies and surveys have pointed out that it is the government that pressurises doctors working for it to meet family planning targets – the euphemism India uses for population control targets – despite repeated calls from both the medical fraternity and civil society to abandon the 'target centric' approach.

Additional Information:

Though the recent sterilization deaths might seem surprising, the incident is not a bolt from the blue. At least 363 persons have died during sterilisation operations and 14,901 surgeries failed between 2010-11 and 2013-14, according to government's own data submitted to the Parliament this year. And, the phenomenon is not a recent one. Government data submitted to the parliament shows, that a total of 1,434 people have died in sterilization surgeries in India between 2003 and 2012; i.e. 12 people dying every month on average over last decade, which has been a decade when India was preparing to send a mission to Mars. Women bear the brunt of these malpractices, as 97.4 percent of all such surgeries are conducted on them. Of all the deaths in sterilization camps, a majority take place in the states of Chhattisgarh and Assam.

SUGGESTED ACTION:

Please write to the authorities listed below, demanding immediate intervention in the issue seeking compensation for the victims and prosecution of those guilty. You may also want to demand an immediate end to target based sterilization camps.

The AHRC is writing a separate letter to the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences seeking his intervention in the case.

source :- ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION – HUNGER ALERT PROGRAMME
Hunger Alert Case: AHRC-UAC-148-2014

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