

Realizing the right to health: Barriers to access amongst victim/ survivors of sexual violence in low income countries

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Access to health services is a fundamental aspect of the right to health. The violation of women's right to health - physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially, inherent in the experience of sexual violence is further compounded when victim/survivors are denied access to gender sensitive sexual violence services. This paper explores qualitative responses from service providers, activists and researchers from 14 low income countries, as defined by the World Bank, who participated in the on line 'Practice Wisdom' survey of the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI). Thematic analysis of responses from workers in South Asia, Eastern Europe, South America and Africa revealed that lack of access to services was not merely a function of insufficient numbers of services relative to need, lack of community awareness of services or inadequate funding of services by governments and donor agencies. Of equal importance was the interplay between high levels of negative community attitudes towards victim/survivors including victim blaming, stigmatization and discrimination and the corresponding shame and unwillingness of survivors to disclose sexual violence and to access the few available services. This was reinforced by a fear that services might not protect privacy and confidentiality. Strategies were identified to overcome the dynamic operating between social blame and impunity for perpetrators on the one hand and the engendering of private shame and silence in victims, on the other. Significant changes were advocated in community attitudes, perceived deficiencies in the health care system and the skills of health care providers to be more responsive to victims of trauma and together these provide the basis for health sector and policy reform.