Empowering young women to speak out about sexual and reproductive health and rights in India

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To increase access to comprehensive SRHR education and services amongst young people, especially from the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in India and Bangladesh.

"The villagers used to criticise me because I spoke openly about sexual reproductive rights, which was something 'nice, conservative girls' aren't allowed to talk about. Now other village elders ask me to get their daughters involved."

Savera, peer leader

Context

India has a high fertility rate, a young marriage age for girls, and increasing sexually transmittable infections amongst adolescents. These issues are prevalent in conservative areas, where sexual and reproductive health and rights are considered taboo subjects. This project empowers youth by educating them about previously undiscussed issues. The project’s partner NGOs in Allahabad and Manipur train youth peer leaders to create and mentor groups, and teach them how to lobby for district and state-wide policy changes on issues related to sexual and reproductive health.

Objectives

- To disseminate information about child marriage, pregnancy, contraception, HIV prevention and care, sexually transmittable infections and other aspects of sexual health to youth
- To support community mobilisation and advocacy in order to improve sexual and reproductive health of young people

Impact

- Peer-led discussions strengthened and empowered civil society organisations to advocate for more responsive policies addressing the sexual health of young people
- Youth Partnership Platforms (YPPs) were developed to link youth group networks together and Youth Information Centres were established
Savera (name changed), a 20-year-old peer leader, works as a peer leader for the partner organisation, Action Project. "I was completely unaware about hygiene and nutrition during menstruation, safe sex, condom use or consensual sex. I also learned so much about HIV prevention and care here."

Thinking back to the when she first started working as a peer leader, she recalls that "the villagers used to call me 'characterless' because I spoke openly about sexual reproductive rights, which was something 'nice, conservative girls' aren't allowed to talk about. Now, however, my uncles and other village elders ask me to get their daughters involved in the project."

According to Savera, it is important to note that having the right information isn’t enough if it isn’t coupled with the confidence to share the information or to search for more information. While speaking about her attendance in health camps and information sharing meetings with doctors, Savera said, "I would never have dreamed of speaking to a doctor even about my own health problems. Now I can openly ask doctors questions about sexual health and other issues and I can see how amazed they are that I, being a village girl, am able to confidently ask these things."

Kavita, another peer leader who joined the Action Project, added; "I used to be ashamed when they taught us about sexual and reproductive health and rights but now there is no shame and our perspectives have changed. Now I feel confident and at ease sharing information about these issues."

With the right type of support and access to information, the Action Project is building the capacities of these young female leaders and offering them a sense of confidence they never had before, while also empowering them to change the social landscape of their villages.