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Talking to Youth in South Asia About HIV/AIDS

In Sri Lanka, some 25 young people joined Sara McKinley for a four-hour discussion about why youth are at risk, what currently is being done and what they would like to see from the government.

“The common concerns that they expressed were issues related to stigma and discrimination. They also felt that in their culture there was this overall denial that this shouldn’t be happening in Sri Lanka. HIV shouldn’t be an issue.”

To start a discussion about HIV/AIDS, which can often be difficult for people, Sara brings up the subject by asking young people what they know about the topic. “The way that I tend to start off a conversation is to ask what they know about HIV. I think it’s a very helpful place to start. I try to dispel any myths that come up in order to make sure that we are talking about the same issues with the most accurate information. So a lot of times it starts with a question and answer period about HIV and then I tend to ask them about youth behaviors and make sure that I’m not talking about their own behaviors, but rather youth in general in their country, in their city, and in their school.”

Most of the young people Sara met with hadn’t even told their parents what kind of meeting they were going to. “There’s an overall reluctance to talk about HIV, and even to talk about sex with adults, let alone officials, or serious representatives from a large institution like the World Bank.”

Sara hoped that the fact that she was a young person helped make others feel more comfortable since she was a peer that they could talk to. “When there was an adult in the room the conversation was more forced, it was slightly more awkward, you were talking to someone who could have known your parents or your parents’ friends.”

Youth are diverse, hold different opinions and views. “Youth is a very heterogeneous population, and as a result, they’re spread out throughout the country in very different regions and different levels of literacy, education, socio-economic status.”

Young people from rural Sri Lanka insisted on coming to the meetings to make sure their views were heard. “There was a girl

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SPOTLIGHT


Sara McKinley is a Junior Professional Associate who works in the South





East Asia Region on human development, specifically on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health issues related to youth. She recently traveled to Bhutan and Sri Lanka, where she met with young people and government officials working on youth issues to talk about HIV/AIDS.

MULTIMEDIA

Sara Speaks About ...

 Starting a discussion about HIV/AIDS: [High](#) | [Low](#)

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who came from over four hours away in order to attend one of our meetings who, because she was concerned that the rural youth weren't being represented at these meetings."

Sara knows that talking about HIV/AIDS can be difficult but it's necessary. "I think it's a very difficult conversation to have. But I think that people have to have these conversations ... silencing it will only increase stigma."

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