

In some more conservative areas in India, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is considered a taboo subject, and discussing these subjects openly, particularly by youth, is a concept that has taken a while to accept. However, the difficulty or novelty of this situation did not prevent these Indian young women from working as peer leaders with the Action Project in order to pass on information about child marriage, pregnancy, contraception, HIV prevention and care, STIs and other aspects of sexual health to youth in their village.

Supported by European Union, the Action Project empowers youth and especially girls and young women by educating them about issues that are important to them and discussing subjects that no one has talked to them about before. Peer leaders are integral to this work, helping to spread the information to other young people, as they are more likely to listen and learn from peers their own age. The project's partner NGOs in Allahabad and Manipur train youth peer leaders on how to create groups that they go on to mentor, and teach them how to lobby for district and state-wide policy changes on issues related to young people and sexual and reproductive health.

Savera (name changed), a 20-year-old peer leader, says, "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." Remembering when she first started working as a peer leader, she recalls, "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."

And more and more girls are doing just that. Another peer leader who joined the Action Project, Divya (name changed) found the information she received to be helpful on a very personal level. The 19-year-old explains, "I met this boy in college three years ago and we began to like each other and he asked me to have sex with him. After everything I had learned from this project, I knew that I didn't want to have sex with him and I had the right to say 'No', and so I refused. I'm happy that I had the right information and was able to protect myself from potentially ruining my life."

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 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 capacity of these girls and young women leaders and offering them a sense of confidence they never had before, while also empowering them to change the social landscape of their villages, one peer group at a time.

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