



THE WATCHDOG

The Youth Coalition's Quarterly Newsletter

Youth Participation and Sexuality Education: Young People Share their Expertise

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By Jennifer Curran

On February 25, 2002, a number Youth Coalition members collaborated with other young people active on sexual and reproductive health and rights issues to conduct a series of panel presentations and discussions about young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights and the role of youth participation in furthering adolescent/youth rights and health status.

The occasion was a public roundtable titled *Let's Talk About Sex... With Youth*, sponsored by the Netherlands Network on Sexual & Reproductive Health and AIDS (or Share-net, for short), Working Group on Sexual & Reproductive Health. As their name suggests, Share-net is a network of sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS groups, institutes and individuals who have assembled to increase collaboration and exchange of knowledge, information, views and experiences on sexual and reproductive health and rights and HIV/AIDS issues. This event was part of a series of public roundtables organized by the working groups of Share-net to increase awareness and knowledge about these topics.

For the February 25 event, Share-net members invited young people to present their experiences and perspectives on sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health programs, and

youth participation in advocacy related to sexuality and reproductive rights and health issues.

The program opened with a brief overview of the United Nations' World Summit on Children (planned for May 2002). Youth Coalition member Maria Antonieta Alcalde (Mexico) spoke about adolescent and youth health and decision-making rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and how young people's sexual and reproductive rights issues are being treated in the 10-year review process.



YC members Maria Antonieta Alcalde, Sonu Chhina and Fredrik Lindahl (from left to right)

This was followed by two 'testimonies' on sexuality education experiences, provided by Youth Coalition members Fredrik Lindahl (Sweden) and Sonu Chhina (India). While Sonu provided the assembled crowd with her memory of a rushed - and interrupted - anatomy lesson in the classroom, Fredrik's remarks focused on the basics of Swedish sexuality education:

"We focus quite a lot on the conversation, the dialogue and group talks as a way to form an identity. Because the sex education is basically a matter of identity. ...

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I am going to start by relating my sex education class. I am 15. The teacher enters the room, for once there are no jokes, no small talk before the beginning of class. She goes straight to the board, she isn't meeting anybody's eyes. Draws the female reproductive system, total silence. We copy the diagram. She labels the various parts: The ovary, the fallopian tubes, the uterus. She begins talking. About ovulation, the monthly cycle, the period.

Has everybody copied it? People mumble yes. Rubs the board, begins drawing the male reproductive system. She draws arrows and she labels the penis, vas deferens. A boy begins giggling. She flies into a rage. She gets really angry. Talks about irresponsible, silly students, slams her book shut. Throws the giggling boy out. Rubs the board off and says that with this class, she doesn't really need to bother.

Youth Coalition member, Sonu Chhina (India), recalls her experience with sexuality education, *February 25, 2002, Amsterdam, the Netherlands*



Update: Women on Waves

In the last issue of the Watchdog (*Abortion Boat Sails the International Waters*), Nadia Van der Linde reported that Women on Waves had begun a project to provide abortions to women in countries where abortion is illegal. To do this, they planned to sail the women seeking abortion to international waters, provide RU486, and then sail back into the harbour. Women on Waves also planned to provide post-abortion care to their patients in harbour aboard their floating reproductive health clinic. At the time of publication, Women on Waves was still in the process of application for a license to perform abortions aboard their boat.

In February 2002, the Dutch government denied Women on Waves' application for a license to operate based on speculation about Women on Waves' ability to provide follow-up care to patients and on their doubts about being able to inspect the repro-



The floating reproductive health clinic

ductive health clinic on board the 'Abortion Boat'. While Women on Waves plans to appeal this decision, they are also looking for opportunities to sail under the flag of another country. They are hopeful that their next project will get under way during the summer of 2002.

What you can do: Women on Waves has issued a call for letters of support to be sent to Minister Borst to express

solidarity, the need for the services that Women on Waves will provide in your country and/or in others, and your faith in the quality of the project and the quality of the medical care they will provide. Women on Waves also requests that you send a copy of any letters of support to them, and indicate whether they can use your reactions in the Dutch press.

Write to the Minister at:

Minister E. Borst
Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport
Postbus 20350
2500 EJ Den Haag
The Netherlands

- Source: Women on Waves Foundation Newsletter #4 (14 February 2002)

Young Advocates for Sexual and Reproductive Rights: Youth Coalition members address the 8th Canadian Conference on International Health

In summer 2001, the Youth Coalition received an invitation from the Canadian Society for International Health (CSIH), an NGO that facilitates and supports health and development activities around the world, to participate in their 8th Canadian Conference on International Health. The conference is a four-day meeting of health professionals, policymakers, NGO workers, students and others engaged in the international health and development field.

Because the theme of this year's conference was *Child and Youth Health: Action, Research and Advocacy*, the CSIH conference organizers invited the YC to present a panel on our advocacy activities around young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights. "We would like to invite the Youth Coalition to present their experiences in the area of advocacy with regard to the issues on population and reproductive health," wrote CSIH Executive Director Jan Hatcher-Roberts. "We feel that your

experiences and networks have been particularly successful and the youth involved will be able to transmit their lessons learned."

There is no doubt that YC members have a lot to share with international health folks about advocating for health rights, but how could we address this huge subject - young people's international advocacy work on health rights - in just an hour?

Well, the first thing that YC Secretariat staff did was to take our lead from our members, and determine what exactly we wanted to communicate in this forum. There was general agreement that our key issue - young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights - is often lost or ignored within the mainstream child and youth health field. A second significant issue to address with this event was youth participation - what is it, and why and how are young people doing this work?

During the fall, YC secretariat staff and the YC Steering Committee con-



YC volunteers and CCIH presenters Claudia Ahumada and Saskia Hüsken

tinued to discuss what we wanted to achieve with this panel, and invited several youth to participate in these activities. In mid-November, two YC volunteers - Claudia Ahumada (Chile) and Saskia Hüsken (Netherlands) - joined YC staffers Raie Leith and Jenn Curran in lovely Ottawa, Canada to participate in this conference. We decided to tackle our presentation by addressing the issue from three ...



YC: Out of Africa

Three from the Youth Coalition spend time in Africa in the hope of plugging the gap of a region absent in our international network.

The first requirement is an open mind

'I found in Africa the same enthusiasm I find here in my country'

By Gabriela Cano Azcarraga

In August 2001, Maria Antonieta and I went to Africa to conduct the first field research for the Youth Coalition. We were there for 22 days. Beginning with participation and facilitation at a summer camp in Kenya, followed by visits to different organizations in South Africa.

It was a very important experience, and it provided the Youth Coalition a lot of knowledge. It is also a precedent for our activities of field research and the expectations we need to have of such trips. There are scores of lessons learnt and insights gained from this painstakingly detailed research process and I would like to share with you some of them:

Never before have I felt so conscious of the importance of approaching a group with utmost modesty and an open mind. I say this because for the first time I witnessed a perspective totally different from mine in important programs on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRH&R) by pro-choice and pro-youth rights people that are sup-

ported and promoted in Africa. To give a specific example, understanding the ideology of abstinence as THE solution for the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This made me think deeper of the specific situation of Africa as a continent facing extermination because of AIDS. I have learnt a lot since my visit because I have been making an effort to understand what is behind that logic, even if I don't agree with it.

I also think that it was very useful to have an outsider's approach to the African reality, I don't mean to say that for research purposes, people from the region are not useful, but I strongly suggest that as much as possible, the Youth Coalition should try to incorporate someone with enough distance to the object of study. And the reason why is because that viewpoint can appreciate and identify things that are too close for a person who is living in that situation.

The greatest experience was to meet people so kind and so interesting. For me this is why I am working for the promotion of the well being of

young people. To be able to have, some day, societies with people who are responsible for their own development, with sufficient, respectful, fair and equal participation of all its members, where each person has a voice and where people have reasons to be positive and to maintain a kind spirit.

I found in Africa the same enthusiasm I find here in my country, and the same I have seen in the faces of a lot of young people around the world who are working to promote human rights and are advocating for a better future.

Youth Media

By Fredrik Lindahl

In October and November 2001, I worked as a volunteer at Youth Media, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Lusaka, Zambia. Youth Media is a youth-led NGO that is focusing on providing youth in Zambia with information about sexuality in order to help the youth protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies, STDs and HIV/AIDS. Their main tool to reach out to the youth is Trendsetter, their paper, which is published monthly. It is the biggest edition of any monthly paper in Zambia. Trendsetter is Youth Media's first big project, but as it is settling down they are looking into new medias and new ways of reaching young people with information. They will always have to develop new ways to communicate with other youth, because their target group (youths) always get much of their information from different medias. Youth Media needs to make their own information fresh and interesting in order to keep their fellow youths' and their donors' attention and to keep companies interested in advertising in the paper. ...

Continued on page 4



Youth Coalition member Gabriela Cano interviews Salomón Kamwendo of Botswana, during the International Youth Camp in Kabarak, Kenya.



AIDS in Africa: The subtle advocates

The rights-based approach has not percolated to the African grassroots

By Sonu Chhina

A meeting of young reporters covering AIDS! When I looked at the announcement in my inbox, I could not believe my eyes. It was a dream opportunity. And I wasn't about to let it go, so what if the meeting was in French and I do not know a word of the language. Communication is my business and I consider language no barrier. More so when youth worldwide face the same sexual and reproductive rights issues.

Presse Jeune, a youth organisation in Cameroon, was the host and their intentions were kind. Not all reporters turned up for the fortnight's meeting in November but hey, there was a whirl of ideas, experiences and discussions to compensate for that.

Young reporters in Africa bear a tough legacy. Corruption in the media is rampant. And the readership is more or less switched off to the litany

of the word 'AIDS'. It is a tough job to make people read and subtly advocate on the issue. It is a tough job to fight editors and get space for a socially relevant issue.

In spite of the odds, these young African reporters are a healthy distance away from jadedness. The drive and the feeling of needing to 'do something' in the face of the high tide of AIDS is palpable. A network of likeminded colleagues cutting across the borders (formed out of the meeting) of the continent will help. Also critical at this juncture is support from NGOs in making them experts on the issue of sexual and reproductive rights. Workshops and the 'correct' information is needed for correct perspective in all messages that the media sends out.

The rights-based approach has not percolated to the African grassroots; they are more concerned about specifics that have threatened to over-

whelm societies. For instance, they would rather talk about AIDS or FGM or poverty rather than sexual rights. Maybe there is no time to look at the bigger picture. I, for one, felt that I did not manage common ground with a lot of Africans when I spoke to them about the rights-based approach. They would brush it aside and say but what about the immediate problems?

I think only a minority in Africa (based strictly on the representation in this conference) is openly for choice. Value of time is another hurdle. We have an uphill task while planning our workshop in Africa.

This college in rural Cameroon really told the whole story. The youth were asking questions like 'we would like to know what is SIDA?' 'How do you get it?' 'What happens if you get it?' It was a visit organised by government officials to show off the success of their project in this school. And as I faced the sea of innocent questions, here lay one of the biggest stories of Africa.



- *An estimated 11.8 million young people aged 15–24 are living with HIV/AIDS worldwide: 7.3 million young women and 4.5 million young men.*
- *Half of all new infections—almost 6 000 daily—occur in young people.*
- *At least 10.4 million children under the age of 15 have been orphaned by AIDS (they have lost either their mother or both parents).*
- *An estimated 88 percent of young people in Chad have either never heard of AIDS or do not have accurate information on how AIDS is transmitted.*
- *76 percent of women aged 15–49 in Sudan do not know that HIV can be transmitted from mother to child.*

- source: www.unaids.org

Youth Media...continued from page 3

Training young people in media skills is another important objective for this NGO. For example their editor is just 18 years old, and she is only one of a number of youth that get a good insight into the media business. Youth media wants to train young people in media skills in order to make the youth able to affect issues that they are influenced by.

It is a big project to handle with salaries, distribution and so on, and this is a great example of how young people can work with sexual health information. It is possible for youths to start their own NGO's, but it takes a lot of work and a lot of creativity.



Youth Participation - continued from page 1:

...The conversation and other interactive activities is a very vital part of the sexuality education because that is the way to make young people process their own thoughts and knowledge. It makes them find their inner compass, their "yes", "no's" and "don't knows".

So, while Sonu and her classmates may be able to identify the vas deferens (on a diagram, at least) and Fredrik and his school friends are identifying aspects of their "inner compass," both presenters also spoke about the challenges and shortcomings of sexuality education and sexual health programs in their home countries.

In India, the biggest single challenge in sexuality education is the subject itself. "Sex is taboo," says Sonu. "It goes against the culture and tradition...There are no services or counselling to talk you out of your feelings of guilt for having pre-marital sex."

As for Sweden, Fredrik also spoke about the influence of taboos, and addressed how language and school norms place limitations on the 'sexual space' and sexual expression of young men and women. For example, take usage of the term 'fag.' "When this was used by the youth the educators met in sexuality education, it was not a word used for a man that had sex with another man," says Fredrik. "It was more used as a word for a man that did not act along with norms about how a 'real' man should act.. I believe that this is the next challenge for sexuality education in Sweden. It is about equality and freedom."

After some questions from the floor about these testimonies, the subject shifted from sexual space to decision-making spaces and youth participation. The second part of the roundtable consisted of five short presentations on the subject of youth participation. Imme Zengerink of the International Federation of Medical Students spoke about her work as a

peer educator in the Netherlands; Jessica de Ruijter of the Dutch Council on Youth and Population addressed the subject of peer education (with a focus on HIV/AIDS) in Zimbabwe; Youth Coalition member and former member of the Latin American and Caribbean Youth Network on Sexual and Reproductive Rights Gabriela Cano spoke about regional youth networking in Latin America; Youth Coalition and Dutch Council on Youth and Population



YC member Nadia Van der Linde presents at the Share-Net panel

member Nadia van der Linde provided an overview of youth advocacy efforts at United Nations conferences; finally, Saskia Hüsken, also a member of the Youth Coalition and Dutch Council on Youth and Population, rounded out the panel with a presentation of her experiences as a youth representative on an official government delegation to a UN conference.

The discussion that followed this second panel featured a spirited debate about the nature and sustainability of peer education programmes and methods for facilitating youth participation in decision-making.

It was noted that, in most cases, a given NGO or policy body (the big United Nations, for example) will have an established structure or model for engagement or dialogue, will impose this on youth, and call it youth participation. The challenge is to get young people meaningfully and effectively involved in setting the mission and objectives, and ensure that they participate in the whole decision-making process, not just casual consultation.

Overall, there is a need for great flexibility on the part of any agency wishing to enhance youth participation. "Including what has been excluded means you need to change existing

structures and current systems," remarked one panelist. Others agreed that there is an element of trust involved in opening youth-friendly spaces and recognizing young people as resources and sources of expertise. "There are many challenges in providing sexual and reproductive health and rights to young people," concluded Dutch Council on Youth and Population member and roundtable chairperson Anouka van Eerdewijk. "We should include what is excluded," continued Anouka; "others can support what we say, but not always speak for us."

Hey you! Want to write for the watchdog?

We're looking for young people who want to write about the sexual and reproductive rights issues they face in their own countries.

Write to Raie at outreach@youthcoalition.org to propose an idea for an article.

Contributions will be accepted until June 24, 2002.

Articles should be between 150 and 600 words. Photos would be appreciated!



Young Advocates... continued from page 2

...by addressing the issue from three perspectives or areas:

- *advocacy, policy and action:* YC advocacy experiences at various international conferences and events (Jenn's presentation)
- *rights-focus and approach:* how young people's sexual and reproductive rights are grounded in fundamental human rights (Claudia's presentation)
- *sexual and reproductive rights programming:* what young people are sharing and learning about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (Saskia's presentation)

Our panel - **Young Advocates for Sexual and Reproductive Rights Worldwide** - was the first plenary session on the final day of the conference, November 21, 2001. Jenn opened the panel with a review of what young people have been doing to advance our sexual and reproductive health and rights, focusing on the history and origins of the Youth Coalition and our progress at various international conferences. These included: the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) +5, the five-year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing+5), the United Nations General Assembly on HIV/AIDS and the World Summit on Children.

Claudia followed with a very eloquent address that emphasized the importance of the human rights, in particular the sexual and reproductive rights, of young people. Using examples from Chile and throughout Latin America, she explained how young people's sexual and reproductive rights are based in fundamental human rights and must be recognized and championed, not just by young people and youth advocates, but everyone involved in the advancement of human rights.

Saskia rounded out the panel by presenting some findings from her research on young people's knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and

rights in Senegal. She shared her expertise from a seven-month research project on the reproductive health situation of adolescents in Dakar, focusing on how they experience the different sources of information they have regarding sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. "In order to make education programmes and services for young people work, you'll have to listen to young people, to get to know their opinions," Saskia concluded. "Young people themselves know best in what ways they can be reached."

The talk was very well-received by the delegates present and sparked some good discussions around child rights and youth participation in health policy. The YC panelists were asked numerous questions which basically fell into two different categories - questions about our expertise and work in advocacy ('how do you promote these international agreements at the domestic level?') and questions about how we ended up working on this in the first place ('how did you get involved with this issue?'). This provides a glimpse into how our work and our issues are sometimes viewed by mainstream health folks - embraced and championed or tentatively recognized and congratulated on doing what we do. As I stated in my concluding remarks to the conference:

The Youth Coalition is not a group of young people which has been selected by adults - what is new and different is the fact that we spontaneously developed into an independent and organized group which is directing its own platform and activities. Our challenge is to

effectively articulate and communicate our needs, and our recommendations on how to address those needs, to governments and the NGO community.

Although young, our membership is comprised of knowledgeable and experienced people who work or volunteer with organizations in the sexual and reproductive health and rights field. Tradition has been "adults identifying youth issues and agreeing on how to address them. The Youth Coalition seeks to change the dynamics of the UN process into one

By gaining an insight in the lives and opinions of young people, services and programmes can be ameliorated in order to improve young people's sexual and reproductive health.

Young people have the right to information, but the information should be given to them in a youth-friendly way, focussing on their specific needs. If the service or program does not take into account the cultural and social contexts of young people, they will not reach them.

- Saskia Hüsken

The Watchdog is the quarterly newsletter of the Youth Coalition. Editor: Sonu Chhina. For more information on the Watchdog or on the YC, contact us at:



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