

Draft Chapter for Researching Sex and Sexualities

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Hesitating at the Door: Youth-led research on realising sexual rights informing organisational approaches

This chapter will consider methodological issues confronted in the youth-led aspect of participatory research that was carried out for International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) in Benin, Kenya, Nepal and Nicaragua. Photo narratives were used by young peer educators to tell stories about being young in different cultural contexts, and what helped and hindered them to realise their sexual rights. Young people were supported to analyse their evidence and present recommendations to realise their sexual rights to local decision-makers. Presentations by young researchers in the four country cases was analysed alongside the interviews conducted by a team from Panos London and the University of Brighton. The chapter addresses questions around interdisciplinary collaboration and conversation as the youth led research was taken to national, regional and global levels and informed a process of reconceptualising youth programming in sexual rights. Building on Johnson's change-scape framework, the research informed a youth centred approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights across IPPF and Member Associations. This socio-ecological framework places young people's identities, inclusion and interest at the core of developing services and programming. It includes young people's priorities to find safe spaces in which to interact with each other and access services, to work with adults, religious leaders and service providers in the community, and to influence policies and laws that affect their health and rights. It builds on IPPF's strategies of youth friendly services, advocacy and comprehensive sexuality education.

Key words: context, culture, rights, youth-centred

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Introduction

This chapter has three main sections. In the first, I provide a short introduction to the research on youth sexual rights and reproductive health carried for the International Planned Parenthood Federation by Panos London and the University of Brighton. This includes a snapshot of some key findings from the youth led aspect of the Nepal case study. I then present cross case analysis highlighting issues that confronted young peer educators in their research on sex and sexuality across the four countries in West and East Africa, South Asia and Central America. Lastly I consider the interdisciplinary collaboration and conversations that led to this research informing youth programming across IPPF in their global strategy. Champions for youth within IPPF have worked to move towards youth centred approaches to

realising sexual rights by providing practical advice on implementation to the Member Associations in the 152 countries where they work. To conclude, the chapter discusses possible ways forward in taking youth seriously in rights based research.

The Importance of Linking Young People to their Context

Introduction to the Research

The research on youth sexual rights was commissioned by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). It was carried out during 2012 within a broader assessment managed by Panos London that evaluated a Dutch Government funded programme of service delivery implemented in 2010-2013 to realise the sexual youth rights across 16 countries. Mixed methods were used in the assessment case study research in four countries led by the University of Brighton. Creative visual methods formed the basis of the youth-led aspect of the research. The case studies in Benin, Kenya, Nepal and Nicaragua asked: what it is like to be young in that particular place and how this has changed? How have local and national cultural and political/policy changes affected young people's feelings about sex and sexuality? And how have strategies, including making service youth friendly, sexuality education and advocacy, helped youth in realising their sexual rights? (see Johnson *et al.* 2013).

The case study research incorporated participatory rights based research with young people in that it included youth perspectives as well as research with other key stakeholders, followed ethical protocols and employed mixed methods research (Beazley and Ennew, 2006). The youth led aspect of the country case studies examined how realising youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHRs) is helped or hindered by cultural and political contexts in Nepal, Kenya, Benin and Nicaragua. In the case studies. Young peer educators were both informants and researchers. For example, in Nepal after training a team of 12 young peer educators, they went back to their villages in the Himalayan region of Kaski to carry out their own research with their peers and other community members.

The research was youth centred in that it followed a 'Change-scape' approach that links young people to their contexts through mechanisms that address intergenerational and institutional power dynamics (for example, Johnson 2015, 2017). The 'Change-scape' provides a framework to systematically analyse cultural and political contexts and link the identities, inclusion and ideas of young people to decision-makers in communities and service providers locally and nationally. Mechanisms that help to ground findings in youth perspectives include: building the capacity of young people as researchers who then present their own evidence and findings to local key stakeholders; and supporting them to make recommendations to policy makers at local and national levels. Evidence from youth led research lay alongside research carried out by adult team members in the same locations and was analysed across the four country case studies to provide recommendations at national, regional and global levels to IPPF and their federation of Member Associations. (See Johnson *et al.* 2013).

During a two-week period in each location, young peer educators identified key issues that they wanted to investigate further and, after research training, conducted qualitative participatory research. They used photo narratives with peers and community members to develop their stories of change, and after further analysing their research, they presented their evidence and key recommendations across the groups to local decision-makers. In this chapter I use the example of the youth led research from Nepal. Young peer educators identified barriers to progress in realising young people's SRHRs that included the attitudes of adults within local communities, especially those uneducated and living remotely in deprived rural areas. They chose to further investigate cultural and religious beliefs that they

felt countered progress in making services more youth friendly and comprehensive sexuality education. One of the young male peer educators from Nepal said:

“We may not be able to change cultural beliefs but at least we can edit them...”

As young researchers, the young men and women from the Kaski hills wanted to highlight specific aspects of local culture and intergenerational and gender power dynamics that they felt were important to their peers in local communities. They suggested that these issues needed to be addressed, not only by continuing to make services more youth friendly and delivering comprehensive sexuality education in schools, but by also working with adults to change their attitudes towards young people, love, sex and sexuality. They made very specific recommendations to changing programmes and services locally. For example advocating for spaces where young men and women can talk to each other and form relationships, working on comprehensive sexuality education with adults as well as children and out of school as well as in school, and providing stronger condoms that don't split. In Nepal, peer educators also suggested that services of the Member Association reach out to more marginalised young people who were working in hard labour and unable to attend school or any form of peer group discussions about sexual health services, those involved in selling sex and drugs to tourists, and young people of the third gender.

Snapshot of Findings from Youth Led Research

Here I provide a snap shot of findings from the youth led research in the case studies and focus on the Nepal Case study (see Johnson *et al.* 2013 and Johnson 2013 for further details). In the mountainous region of Kaski, in the foothills of the Himalayas, youth researchers carried out photo narrative research in their remote hill communities. In these areas mobile health services provide much needed access to basic contraception and advice. In many communities it may take most of the day to walk to the nearest government health post. Two of the young researcher groups decided to address cultural and traditional beliefs and power dynamics and decision-making in households. They presented what it was like to be young in Kaski they described how traditions meant that they are not able to meet with members of the opposite sex until they were married. They also discussed how they wanted to change the safe spaces where young men and women could meet and talk to each other and form relationships. One group said that there were cases of young people marrying early despite national campaigns against this practice, so that they could have a sexual relationship.

One of the groups specifically presented gender issues and pictures showed role plays of the traditional practices still prevalent in the area: when menstruating girls do not wash their hair, eat or sleep with the family and sometimes sleep with animals, they are also not meant to touch plants in case they cause leaves to die. Another group presented a picture of a tree bare of leaves and said that this is how it feels to be a young women in the local communities. Young women felt lacking in any power in decision-making and discussed other issues of damage to the bodies of older women who had married early and how in marriage women could not choose when they had sex.

One group who presented the issue of reaching out to the most marginalised took photos of role plays of young people smoking and selling drugs and carrying bricks and rocks in hard labour. They also presented a rose coming into bloom and talked about how despite national policies to reduce discrimination towards young people of the third gender these young people could not talk openly about their sexuality.

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Challenging aspects of methodology for this youth-led research are discussed in the next section of this chapter giving specific examples from Nepal as this was the case study that I facilitated. After gathering carrying out the research in the four countries, I analysed the youth-led research alongside interviews carried out by the research lead and local facilitator across the case studies. A model that was developed has been shared and acted on by the youth programme and subsequently the global Board of IPPF. This is further discussed in the third section of this paper.

Issues Confronting Sex Researchers in Their Methodologies

This section further explores some of the key issues discussed under the following areas of reflection:

- Ownership and extent of participation of young peer educators in the research
- Ethics and how globally agreed protocols were rolled out in the youth led research
- Flexibility and creativity in methods versus comparability across cultural contexts

Ownership and extent of participation of young peer educators in the research

In order to carry out research that was meaningful for young peer educators, time was planned in the overall assessment for research training. This included facilitating young people working with IPPF member associations on programmes to identify local issues that they felt affected their how they address sex and sexuality. It also involved learning about the overall ethical protocols and further developing how they would implement ethical procedures in their research, and piloting different methods including focus group discussions and photo narratives. The research training took place over two weeks and included the young peer educators going to villages or urban areas where they lived and worked to gather evidence from their peers and adults in communities about the issues that they wanted to further explore.

The participation of young people in the research was, however, limited as the research had been initiated at the global office level by the youth team. The team that I led designed the approach to be comparative although there was some limited flexibility in the way that the methods were facilitated and used across the four country case studies. Had there been more time in planning then young peer educators could have been involved in design at the global level but instead were involved to some extent in piloting and design at the local level. They also identified issues, carried out the research in their local communities, and analysed and presented their evidence and key conclusions. All of the recommendations at national, regional and global levels were informed by the youth-led research that was carried out as the starting point of the international analysis.

Ethics and how globally agreed protocols were rolled out in the youth led research

Ethical protocols were developed and agreed at an international level for the assessment as a whole and the research in the four country case studies. These ethical protocols included obtaining informed consent for research from young people and adults in communities, maintaining confidentiality on sensitive issues discussed in the research, ensuring meaningful participation of young people as discussed above including their identification of research issues and their lead role in analysis and presentation of findings.

As creative methods, such as photo narratives were used to discuss sex and sexuality, part of the research training was to practice taking photos of symbols that would represent feelings and using role-play to ensure that individuals photographed were not directly associated with the stories that were told. For example in Kaski in Nepal young people took photos of trees that were bare of leaves to represent how it feels to be a young woman in the area and a photo of a rose coming into bloom was taken to show how young people of the third gender (including transsexuals, transgendered and intersex) should be able to feel about expressing their sexuality. Role play was used by the young people in Nepal for example, to show issues facing girls who had to eat separately from their families and sleep with the animals during menstruation, and to highlight the importance of including marginalised young people are involved in hard labour, sex tourism, drug and substance abuse and drug dealing (see Johnson 2013).

A particularly challenging ethical procedure was that, as well as signing the informed consent for participating in the research, young peer educators had to gain informed consent from young people and adults in communities, many of whom were not literate. Clear concise information sheets were developed so the young researchers felt happy to explain their intentions and simple signing sheets developed so that community participants including young people could sign or make an indication that they were giving their informed consent to the research and to photos being used in local, national and global presentations.

Flexibility and creativity in methods versus comparability across cultural and political contexts

As mentioned in the section above on the limited extent of participation, there was a trade off between flexibility/creativity and comparability across the four country case studies. The methods that were developed and used were piloted in Kenya and modified for the training in the other three youth research training sessions in Nepal, Benin and Nicaragua (see Johnson *et al.* 2013b). Although after the pilot, methods used were the same across the country case studies, they were creative and young peer educators in Kenya had enjoyed the process and felt they had worked for their research.

As young peer educators were encouraged to explore issues of relevance to their cultural and political context, they were still able to lead research that they were interested in and they constructed power point presentations to present their findings. In Nepal and Benin the young people presented to local decision makers with the team adult facilitator then taking it to national and regional levels. In Nicaragua the young people prepared the power point with the facilitator who presented it locally as well as to member association and IPPF at the different levels of decision-making.

The young people in Nepal that had participated in the research felt that they had gained skills that they would like to continue to develop more widely in their peer educator roles. This was included in their recommendations. The creative methods used such as photo narratives I have also used in, for example, UNGEI funded research with street connected girls in Nairobi.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Conversations

Globally, the research is informing a new youth centred model of programming. This model was formulated through new conceptual thinking that arose from the youth led research across four countries described above and builds on IPPF's 'triangle approach', including youth friendly services, advocacy and comprehensive sexuality education, with youth participation, gender and partnership as cross cutting. Inductive theorising during the research on realising sexual rights suggested a socio-ecological model that places young people at the centre and considers their interest, identities and inclusion. In addition the model gives

attention to identifying and developing safe participatory spaces for peer discussion support and accessing services. It also highlights the consideration of intergenerational and gender power dynamics and the importance of changing adult attitudes to youth sexual rights, and provides a framework to increase understanding of cultural and political context. This model is fully explained in the output from the research, '*Love, sexual rights and young people: Learning from our peer educators*' (Johnson *et al.* 2013).

The adoption of this model across programming is discussed under the following headings:

- Collaboration across academia and practitioner worlds
- Communicating to decision-makers and practitioners at all levels throughout the research
- Youth centredness and how this is being applied across IPPF

Collaboration across academia and practitioner worlds

Contributing to reconceptualising youth programming has largely been down to the commitment of IPPF management and staff to be critical of their existing approaches and to learn from and build on their experience of youth programming. In order to move forward they supported the research to engage with young people and conducted consultations with youth focal points and networks globally to inform the journey forwards. The combination of academics and practitioners in the research was also key to bridging theory with practice and ensuring that the new conceptual model based on Johnson's (2011) Change-scape socio-ecological model of child and young people's participation was developed with practitioners at different levels of implementation.

Key issues that were highlighted in the youth-led research such as the importance of safe and participatory spaces for peer interaction and youth friendly ways of accessing services were incorporated into an iterative model that continued to change with discussions throughout the research. Members of the South Asia Regional Office of IPPF worked with myself to fine-tune the model and this was further developed through discussion with global youth advisors. The language that built bridges between academia and practice and between disciplines was important in developing a model that IPPF felt ownership of and that was relevant to their vision of working with youth as partners and agents of change.

Communicating to decision-makers and practitioners at all levels throughout the research

The youth-led research and complimentary research carried out by adult facilitators was communicated with decision-makers and practitioners at different levels from local to national to regional to global. The research process included them as research participants and receivers and users of research. It was important that during the youth led research, where possible, young people interacted with decision-makers and practitioners to express their views and explain the recommendations that they were making at local level. In the change-scape model that is informing youth programming in IPPF, these mechanisms of communication and collaboration are seen as key to translating research into change and making a positive impact on the lives of young people.

The co-construction of power point slides and presentations with young people was a powerful way to help young peer educators to get their key issues heard at different levels of decision-making and to encourage further commitment to take their research evidence seriously and to treat them as agents of change rather than as recipients of programmes.

Youth centredness and how it is was shared across IPPF

In order to turn new conceptual thinking in the research into a youth centred model that is accepted as a new theory of change for IPPF globally, it needed to be presented and discussed at a global strategic level by the Board of IPPF. In order to do this the youth programme produced a strategic document, *Young at Heart*, that described the journey of IPPF from being an organisation that would not turn young people away from services to one that made services youth friendly, to one that now regards young people as partners and agents in social change. The development of the new socio-ecological model that arose from the research is discussed alongside the experiences of IPPF and its member associations in youth programming globally.

A user-friendly guide has just been written by an academic (Vicky Johnson, myself) and an experienced manager and practitioner in youth programming (Doortje Braeken from IPPF). This is intended to give practitioners globally in 152 countries where IPPF and Member Associations work, the background to the new model of youth centeredness and a way to understand the transitional steps to implementation. Markers of success are offered to organisations so that they can embark on a journey to put youth centred programming and strategic thinking in practice across the Federation in different cultural and political global contexts. Markers needed to be flexible enough to allow for differing contexts and institutional settings, but to indicate what kind of capacity building and changes in thinking would need to be achieved locally and nationally to reach a vision where young people are treated as agents at the centre of change. It also acknowledges the heterogeneity of young people and how important it is to include those that feel most marginalised in their societies, rather than just counting the young people who access contraceptive services. Principles of treating young people as sexual beings and embracing the values of youth centeredness also underpin implementation of the model.

Conclusions

(To complete)

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