

Notes Workshop “How to break the barriers: linking international advocacy to a grassroots level. Abortion and sexual and reproductive rights from a young woman’s perspective”.

Introduction:

The workshop started with an exercise to make us think deeper about abortion through voting pro or con statements related to maximum gestational stage for abortion, and sex-selective abortion etc. We were asked to think about the definition of ‘unsafe abortion’.

The presenters introduced themselves and their organisation: Youth Coalition for sexual and reproductive rights. Their work entails both prevention of unwanted pregnancies (eg. Through promotion of laws for comprehensive sexuality education; access to free contraceptives/family planning services) as well as advocating against restrictive laws regarding abortion. Their focus includes children (examples of cases of 8 year old girls).

Group work:

In groups the participants worked on challenges regarding abortion, even in contexts where it is legal. Levels that were addressed:

- individual level (decision making, morality, religion etc.)
- access to information and services (sex education, safe abortion, costs, parental consent, counselling process, only for married women, attitudes of service providers, lack of confidentiality etc.)
- law/policy (criminalization)
- environment (stigma, acceptance)
- timing (gestation period, but also regarding with early recognition/awareness of unwanted pregnancy: availability of pregnancy tests, awareness of legality of abortion)

Plenary:

Examples from youth coalition: young people were trained (by Youth Incentives) in 2005 on youth participation in pro-choice advocacy. The workshop was replicated in 6 countries and adapted to each situation (legal, medical aspects as to prepare arguments). Young people who had abortion were involved in organising efforts to legalize abortion. They participated in getting abortion on the agenda resulting in debates on parliament level. But also participation in public surveys; to assess the opinion of the public, collect evidence and strengthen argument pro choice.

Results: Campaign, website, radio debate, two publications from youth coalition which were/ are presented at conferences

- International Youth Perspectives on Abortion
- Freedom of Choice: A Youth Activist’s Guide to Safe Abortion Advocacy

(available online:http://www.youthcoalition.org/site08/html/index.php?id_cat=7)

Lessons learned / Recommendations from Youth Coalition:

- workshop is a safe place to discuss abortion issues
- preliminary questionnaire very useful for improving the agenda
- smaller number means more fruitful discussions and interaction
- gender analysis in context of SRR
- put face to the problem, make it personal, not just statistics (ask parliamentarians: “do you know someone who had an abortion? No?” shake hands – “Now you know!”)
- opposition or resistance can be dangerous in some countries. Goal is not to fight, but to confront, to invite to debate.

Strategy examples from workshop participants (Bangladesh & Nigeria):

- Abortion forbidden, but not “menstrual regulation”. Staff from the embassy officially say menstrual regulation, but in speeches they say ‘abortion’ (as to put it on the agenda).
- Tie in with reaching MDG’s and calculate costs
- Ministry has extra funding on SRHR for adolescents and provision of menstrual regulation.
- Lot of donors are also not allowed to fund advocacy on abortion or to address it at all.
- In Nigeria women groups were targeted (including the national society of women) for training and advocacy. These groups turned out to be quite powerful, if they can be mobilized.