

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 19

Around ten years back, I was part of a team which was assigned the task of evaluating the outcomes and performance of a HIV /AIDS control and prevention program that was taken up in the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh state and prepare a report on it. The said project was funded by an international funding agency and was implemented through local voluntary organizations.

Under the project, voluntary organizations in districts like Warangal, Anantapur, Khammam, Nalgonda, Karimnagar worked with high risk groups such as sex workers, MSMs (Men having Sex with Men), transgenders, etc. For starters, they brought them together and increased their awareness about HIV/AIDS, started special health clinics for them, provided advocacy and legal help, established drop-in centres so as to help them meet one another and share their experiences and problems with each other.

When I met these people and spoke to them about their conditions, their experiences and their problems, what I heard just blew my mind. These people, who lived among and around us, lived in a world apart from ours - a world shrouded in pain and helplessness, hidden and obscured.

Moreover, I was stunned to observe that there were more MSMs in these districts than sex workers or transgenders. I was especially pained to hear how these people had to hide their sexual orientation from their family, friends and society each and every day.

Through this project, the voluntary organisations had facilitated these people to form into Community Based Organisations (CBOs). They set up committees for advocacy, for running the drop-in centres and clinics. They also conducted capacity building programs on critical issues like health and rights. In this way, the organisations had worked really hard to help them out.

Identifying these people was an incredibly difficult task for the organisations. Most of these people were too ashamed to reveal their identity and were going through feelings of isolation, identity crisis and depression. I really felt like standing up and applauding the voluntary organisations and their staff for what they have achieved.

Generally, the places selected by the sex workers to do their businesses are called hotspots. It is quite awkward for other people to be seen in these hotspots. But the staff of voluntary organisations went there as much as they could to convince sex workers to form into a group and meet once a fortnight in the drop-in centres. On the other hand,

the troubles the staff had to go through to go to find gay people were a whole another level and cannot be explained in words.

I and my colleagues went to a drop-in centre in Ananthapuram district to discuss with some MSMs about the benefits they got after forming into a group, the sort of programs they want from the project, etc. When we reached there, around 15 people in the age group of 20 to 30 years were already assembled and sitting in the room. Some of them were doing private jobs, others were working in tea stalls, bike servicing centres, hotels, etc. Upon talking to them I found that except for those in the room nobody else, including their immediate family, friends, knew that these people were gay. Some of them were even married.

Soon after we started talking, I asked them for some water. A youth sitting in front of me immediately got up and volunteered to get it for me. When he got up to get me the water, I heard the tinkling of anklets from underneath his jeans. After taking the glass from him, I smiled a thanks and paid his anklets a compliment. He replied proudly that he had a collection of different types of anklets but said wistfully that he could only wear them when he came to the drop-in centre.

Thoughtfully, I proceeded on my task. According to these people, the biggest gift that the project had given to them was the a little bit of safe space for them to be themselves for some time. Just a little place in this huge country.

This experience gave me some deep insights about the confusion these people have towards their identity, and how the insults and rejection meted out to them by society change these people. But most importantly, it also taught me once again about what benefits collectives can achieve through bringing people with similar identities together.

@ Bharathi Kode