

Storytelling, games help young people discuss sexual health

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Students in India play games that address sexual and reproductive health in workshops led by UChicago's Ci3 lab. Credit: University of Chicago

For young people, discussing sexual and reproductive health can be awkward. In certain parts of the world, those conversations can be downright stigmatizing.

Through multimedia approaches, storytelling and innovative research,

the University of Chicago's Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Innovation in Sexual and Reproductive Health (Ci3) is helping [young people](#) find ways to tell their everyday stories.

Kissa Kahani is a multi-year international project funded by a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Challenge Grant as part of an initiative to better understand the role of gender in adolescent reproductive health. The project uses narrative and story-based data collection in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India to help young people discuss topics surrounding sexual and reproductive health that are often challenging to talk about.

Ci3's storytelling lab created digital stories with young people in which they told important stories about their lives focusing on issues of gender, street harassment and life aspirations. Over six weeks, nearly 30 stories were collected to learn more about young people and to help them gain skills in areas such as storytelling, photography and design.

The project is led by UChicago faculty and principal investigators, including Ci3 founder Melissa Gilliam, professor of obstetrics/gynecology and pediatrics and vice provost for academic leadership, advancement and diversity; and Alicia Menendez, associate professor in the Harris School of Public Policy and principal research scientist in the International Projects Department at NORC at the University of Chicago.

"The goal of Kissa Kahani is to use narrative-based research techniques to understand the role that sexual and reproductive health plays in the daily lives of youth in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh," said Gilliam. "Insights from the formative research will be used to create a youth-informed intervention to address the problems we identify."

The program included several workshops focused on storytelling and games. In one, young boys and girls from age 17-22 focused on

menstruation hygiene, family planning and [reproductive health](#). Ireashia Bennett, an audio/visual production specialist from the storytelling lab, said the workshop was a success, in particular giving the girls a chance to openly share their experiences.

"Many of the young people shared how liberated they felt and how enriching it was to hear their voices and stories in the audio recordings," said Bennett. "As some recounted their experience to the wider group, I noticed their eyes lighting up and lips curling into a smile. It was as though something in their inner self had significantly shifted—as if they had seen themselves for the first time and were satisfied by their own reflection."

In the game workshops, young people worked on several topics. In one game, a group of players were put in the position of young girls trying to make their way to and from school, avoiding local harassers and maintaining good grades. In another, players acted as school administrators charged with increasing school attendance by creating a safe and hygienic space for young women experiencing menstruation. Players hired new staff, built facilities and worked to combat stigma in school with a goal to achieve the highest attendance rate.

"The students played assiduously and were sorry to see the games end," said Gilliam. "We were very pleased as these games are cornerstones of the project and we were not certain if adolescent boys would enjoy playing a game educating youth about menstruation. In fact, the students did not want to leave the classroom after the workshop."

The team worked closely with the Indian government to understand how to implement the strategies learned into the country's newly launched adolescent health strategy, as well as with India-based design and curriculum firms in Delhi.

"The aims of the evaluation are twofold," said Menendez. "We will first evaluate the rollout and implementation of Kissa Kahani paying special attention to each of the components. From this pre-test we will learn and adapt to improve the intervention. We will then conduct a pilot study to evaluate the impact that Kissa Kahani has on youth, and we will, of course, continue monitoring very carefully the implementation of the overall intervention."

After pilot-testing the intervention and refining the games, digitally animating the stories collected, and creating comic books and a curriculum, Gilliam believes the program will be ready for larger growth.

"If all goes well, the intervention will be scaled in India. That is the final goal," said Gilliam.

Provided by University of Chicago

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