

Reflections: Young women researchers from three countries come together to reflect, share, and inspire!

18-21 August 2017, Chiang Mai, Thailand

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The regional youth action research meeting was a unique opportunity for young women from India, Indonesia, and the Philippines to interact with one another and engage in a process of collective sharing, reflecting, and co-learning.

ASPBAE hosted a Regional Meeting for partners in its Youth-led Action-Oriented Research (YAR) on basic skills education for young women. The purpose of the meeting was to share insights, findings, and recommendations from an action research conducted by ASPBAE's partner organisations in three countries – India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Young women from these countries were invited to share their experiences of leading the action research. The meeting was a unique opportunity for the young women to interact with their counterparts from other countries and engage in a process of collective sharing, reflecting, and co-learning.

After participating in the Regional Meeting, I would like to share three learnings from it. Before I proceed however, allow me to contextualise and 'embody' this report with some information about myself! I am a young feminist researcher from India. After completing my post-graduation in Women's Studies, I started working with an education and livelihoods programme for young women in Mumbai. Although not involved directly with the YAR, I have had the opportunity to be associated from a distance, observing and occasionally assisting Abhivyakti – the YAR partner in India – in the research analysis and reporting. I was invited to the Regional Meeting to support the young women researchers from India in their presentations, as well as to help them navigate a foreign land and language. From this unique vantage point of a participant-observer, here are my three reflections -

Prioritising the 'How' – The Importance of Process

While each of the three country groups shared findings from the YAR that were distinct and significant, equal significance was given to the process of *doing* the action research. All the groups shared that the process was both transformative and empowering. One of the features of action research is that there is no difference between the researcher and the researched. As the young women were inquiring into their own lives, they could simultaneously take action and find collective solutions to problems identified through the research. Through the YAR, youth researchers developed the capacities of critical thinking, teamwork, and problem solving, leading to their personal growth as confident and active young women leaders in their communities.



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This transformation was not only on a personal level, but also led to changes in their local communities. An example of this was given by the researchers from India, who call themselves '*Shodhinis*' or women seekers. While surveying the girls in their villages, the Shodhinis found that most girls liked to read but, due to lack of reading spaces and the unavailability of books, very few girls in their village had actually read anything apart from school textbooks. As a result, they decided to start '*Shodhini Libraries*' exclusively for girls and women in their villages, with Abhivyakti's support. Libraries were initiated in one

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missed by 'objective' researchers. The youth researchers' situated-ness in the action-research gave them a unique perspective, an 'epistemic privilege' through which they could bring out a more authentic representation of their lived realities, and a sense of ownership to that representation, which would have been unavailable to external and 'objective' researchers.

In addition to this, the youth researchers brought their creative and critical energy to the meeting. Words are quite drab and insufficient to illuminate the richness of their narratives, which they often accompanied with colours, pictures, and illustrations. This ability to express creatively was so infectious that it seeped into the adults' presentations as well!



Rika Yorozu of the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL) participated in the youth action research meeting in Chiang Mai and provided an overview and context of the event.

have one!" she replied, stunning her Indian friends into a complete loss for words and exhausting the possibility of a further line of questioning!

of the Shodhinis' homes, and continue to be operated from there. Further, these libraries became safe spaces for girls and young women to come together, share, and build a collective identity.

Reclaiming the 'Who' – Young Women's Critical and Creative Voice

The significance of the youth-led action research was underscored not only in the process, but also the way in which the youth shared the findings. The data they had collected was made more nuanced by their annotations in the form of questions and critical insights. As the data they had collected was linked to their own lives, the young women analysed it more critically, pointing out discrepancies and connections which would have been



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Reimagining the 'What' – The Need for Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Many findings and experiences from the YAR were shared across distinct cultural contexts: the gendered nature of domestic work, for instance, and its resultant pressures on young women. It was heartening to experience these commonalities across cultures as it gave us a sense of solidarity of struggle. However, certain aspects of the young women's narratives were very different, which led to interesting exchanges. For example, the researchers from India were shocked to find out that a youth researcher from the Philippines was a single mother. In their quest to know more, the Indians went to the Filipino researcher and enquired about the whereabouts of her husband. "I don't

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For the young women from India, the realisation that a girl “like us” could get pregnant, have the baby, and continue to live with her parents without having to marry or be socially ostracised was ground-breaking. It changed the way they saw society and the boundaries it had drawn around girls and women. Perhaps, it even led them to expand the realm of what was possible in their own lives.

Young women speaking for themselves and narrating their own stories not only brought out the truth of their lives, but sharing it in a cross-cultural space allowed this truth to be unpacked further – expanded, questioned, and reimagined. For the young women researchers, listening to each other and understanding the other’s contexts made them realise there were other ways of thinking, learning, living – even loving! – that were beyond the fixed confines of the familiar, but definitely possible.



ASPBAE Executive Council member representing the South Pacific, Peter-Clinton Foese, spoke of the education and learning opportunities of youth in the South Pacific.



ASPBAE also invited to the meeting its members who have started to embark on youth action research projects inspired by the ASPBAE experience, such as those in Nepal, Mongolia, and Myanmar.

Finally, the ‘Why’

Even though I was asked to share reflections on the Regional Meeting, I believe the journey to Chiang Mai – the venue – was just as significant! After the meeting, on our way back to the airport, I asked one of the young women from India what the highlight of the trip was for her. She said there were quite a few, but the biggest one was the day she left for Thailand. As she was the first person to visit a ‘foreign’ country from her village, a great number of people had gathered to see her off. She said she had never received that kind of attention and admiration before, and felt as if she was being “married and sent off”. Except that in this case, she was happy that her parents were proud of her, and wished that more girls got the opportunity to leave her village, not for marriage, but for something they had achieved on their own.

The YAR was aimed at building recommendations from the grassroots to improve policies for inclusive and gender-responsive education. However, the strength of the youth-led action research methodology has been in the transformative potential of its each step. Thus, even the Regional Meeting became an empowering experience for the young women, bolstering their recognition in their own communities and enhancing their negotiating power at home and in their villages.

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