

"IN THE FUTURE"

Stories of Adolescents from key populations in China, Thailand, and the Philippines"



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YOUTH LEAD



Youth LEAD

Foreword

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Youth LEAD took a great step forward in 2016. We have reached out to the populations that are often forgotten and excluded from the HIV response.

In this first year of our three-year strategy, we have delivered on our commitment in responding to the needs of adolescent key populations including adolescents living with HIV. We have reached adolescents from three countries, China, the Philippines and Thailand, and documented their stories of both challenges and successes. These stories are the voices of those who have often been left out. They are often subjected to strict laws and discrimination relating to their age and behaviors, preventing them from accessing specific HIV information and services.

In this e-book, we have captured their important issues on treatment, care, education, social protection, growth, and development. We hope that this e-book will bring attention to the urgent needs for the adolescents' health and well-being.

On behalf of the board of Youth LEAD, we would like to thank our Youth LEAD teams from China, Thailand and the Philippines for their hard work and dedication. We sincerely thank the secretariat team, Jeffrey Acaba in particular, for his support in the whole process of coordinating the production of this book. We would also like to acknowledge the creative graphic work of Bikash Gurung for the design and layout. A great thank as well to UNICEF EAPRO for the support. In addition, grateful acknowledgement to all the participants from focus group discussions from the countries for sharing their stories.

We look forward to building on our achievements this year in bringing more voices of adolescents from key populations including adolescents living with HIV, creating more platforms for their participation, and building capacity to enable them to contribute to HIV response at national, regional and global level.

Introduction

In 2013, one in six new infections in Asia and the Pacific occurred among 15-19 year olds. In just a decade, AIDS-related deaths among 10-19 year olds almost tripled from 2,000 in 2001 to around 6,500 in 2013. More than their older counterparts, adolescents are more vulnerable to HIV infection due to low level of awareness and vulnerabilities from becoming victims of sexual violence.

Even if adolescents demand for services, age-related policy and legal barriers hinder them from accessing HIV testing and treatment. In Asia Pacific, only 10 countries have lowered their age of consent to allow those who are below the age of 18 to access testing and treatment independently.

There is still more to be done to better support adolescents living with HIV and to ensure their health and wellbeing. Along with the increasingly available evidence and calls in the recent year to re-focus the effort on adolescents, we need to listen to the stories of adolescents to understand their fears, needs, and aspirations.

With support from UNICEF EAPRO, Youth LEAD aims to surface the issues of adolescent key populations including adolescents living with HIV through their personal stories. This book presents seven stories of adolescents in three countries, namely, Thailand, China and the Philippines with an aim to inform ways to support and strengthen HIV programming and policy development in the region. Most importantly, these stories reflect realities of adolescents from key populations that may inspire other adolescents on how they are able to weather the storm and fight for their rights.



Youth LEAD



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Pete
17 years
Thailand

I am a young MSM from Krabi Province in the Southern part of Thailand. I am currently studying in a well-known school in Krabi. I used to be confused by my sexual orientation in my early life, I was in a relationship with my girlfriend for several years until I realized I was interested in men. There was one older guy at my school that took care of me very well and totally ensured my sexual orientation. I fell in love with him and realized that I had stronger feelings toward this guy more than a girl.

Coming out was one of the hardest decisions for me. I was very concerned that a group of my friends, who are mainly straight boys and girls, would exclude me out of their social circle. It took me quite a while until I came out to my friends. Initially, my friends were a bit confused whether they should accept it or be angry with me because it may have been considered that I was lying and took advantage of my previous girlfriend. Finally, I proved himself that I am a person good at heart and I got along very well with my schoolmates.

Coming out to my parents was the hardest decision ever. My grandparents who migrated from China mainland, where there is an existing strong culture and expectations from a single son. I was in much distress and almost once hurt myself because of guilt and self-pity. I consulted with my teacher at school who had gained my trust of coming out of my sexual orientation. My teacher advised me to pop the news to my parents slowly and one-step at a time.

At a time when I was suffering from my first heartbreak, I cried to my parents and took that opportunity to tell them that I was gay. My mom was more accepting, telling that I was being anything but a good person. Meanwhile, for my dad, it was taking longer to explain about being gay until I finally accepted the fact that I am his great son.

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Sex education in my school was very poor. Teachers were not doing a good job in explaining it in depth and some topics were even skipped. Besides, students were not allowed to ask any questions that would embarrass their teachers. A typical answer from a teacher would be “It is not the right time for you to know about this topic, or you are too young to learn about this, when the right time comes you will learn it naturally.” Luckily, there was one teacher who dedicated himself to teaching reproductive health to students properly. He used the model of male sexual organs to demonstrate how to use a condom correctly and use sex tape to teach about male/female body and sexual intercourse as well as teenage pregnancy and HIV prevention. Due to existing strong conservative culture in Thai society, that teacher was sued by the school board and forced to resign from his school.

Electronic gadgets are becoming must-have for adolescents these days. When I was certain about my sexual orientation, I started to browse the Internet on gay sexual relationships. I admit that there are good and bad information on this. Currently, it is very easy for young people to look for information from the Internet by themselves and without their parents’ consent.

HIV and AIDS never attracted my attention until I was 15 years old. I heard about a gay guy around my village that acquired HIV from a sex worker, which became a huge scandal in my village. The perception and things, which have been told by respective “adults”, was that I should keep distance from that guy, don’t talk, don’t socialize, have no physical interaction at all. I was very scared about HIV Infection too, so I decided not to have any encounter with that HIV infected person until he passed away. It aggravated to the negative media coverage at that time, which promoted HIV and AIDS in a very negative manner. Even now, although I have more knowledge on HIV and AIDS, at some point I still contradict with myself that people living with HIV will not be harmful to people with negative blood test. I know HIV can be prevented effectively by using a condom at all times. I learned about HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections from the Internet. There is a Thai series, which gave very good knowledge and raised awareness on HIV and AIDS in

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adolescents, called “Hormones: the Series”. Prevention programs that target adolescents can be adapted to young people interests e.g. TV series, games, cartoons, or short clips on social media.

With my strong aspiration to further his study in Bachelor degree in Bangkok, I would like to pass high school life with acceptance. I would like to explore the world where gay couple are common and welcomed in the society. My dream is to become an academic lecturer. I hope that I would be able to achieve my dream with support and without discrimination.



Film
18 years
Thailand

I am a young MSM from Singhaburi Province in Thailand. I am currently living in Bangkok. I am an only-child of a middle class family in which both my parents have to earn themselves for living. Because of the work schedule of my parents, I grew up staying with my grandparents most of the time. I knew I was not straight since I was very young but I chose to open up just to my friends at school. I chose not to talk about it with my family but I faced a difficult situation every time there was a family reunion and my relatives bullied me in front of my parents.

When I entered adolescence, I faced many difficulties at school as well. I went to school with friends who were wealthy and always up to date with new electronic gadgets e.g. iPhones, iPad, branded clothes, etc. According to my family and background, they were not able to afford such items, which my parents considered as “not necessary stuff”. I always got the blame from my grandparents and parents that I should spend my money more economically. Further, being among gay friends, gossip and envy are inevitable and quite common. The notion that “good looking” people will have boyfriends and whereas “ugly people” will not be able to find anyone made me want to have those gadgets and prove to my friends that I was not ugly.

I started to go on blind dates with random gay guys I met online. I started to realize that if I date a guy who is much older than me, I would have more financial power to afford all the electronic gadgets that I want. Once, I dated a gay guy from Hong Kong who wanted to do anal sex in exchange for 5,000 THB. I did not at all think about HIV or any related risks but the money to pay for my trip to an island with my friends. I continued doing this for some time and my social status at school became more acceptable. Now I have the gadgets I want and I can afford going to places I want with my friends.

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I think that I know about HIV and AIDS very well because I read everything about it online. I was quite conscious about protection every time I had sexual relations with my partners. Once I fell very sick and could not even lift my body up and go to school for several days. My friends were threatening me and spreading the rumour that I may have gotten infected with HIV because some of them knew that I always switched sex partners. At that time, I was very scared that I acquired HIV. So I decided to see a doctor, not to test for HIV but to get medical treatment for high fever. HIV testing is still something very far from my comfort zone. I would rather protect myself from having risky sex or just take care of my health and maintain fit than having an HIV test. I believe HIV and AIDS can be prevented by not knowing my status. I mentioned I am no longer selling sex and trying to go back to being “a good person”. One day when I grow up and I am mentally ready, I would definitely go to have an HIV Test. But for now, I am still too young to know if I am living with HIV and I think I will not be able to cope with the result.

As an Internet user to learn about HIV and AIDS from a website, it should be able to deliver the key message that the host organization wants to communicate with the audience directly. Young people themselves can deliver information targeted for young people. “Hormones the Series” is a good example of that. Sex education in school is not very sufficient; therefore secondary sources should be able to support young people.

I found it very difficult to talk to someone about HIV and AIDS and the risky behaviour until now. I think the society is not ready to open and embrace what they actually consider as the “Dark Side” of Thai society. It is very hard to change people’s attitude, especially the attitude that they think it exists for more than 20 years. The key to success is the young people or next generation of the society.



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Lisa
17 years
Philippines

I am a 17-year-old college student from Quezon City, Philippines. My mother works as a maid; my father passed away a couple of years ago. I am the youngest among four siblings. I am a working second-year college student taking up Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. I refer to my job as “rampa” (a slang term for sex work).

I started doing sex work at the age of 15 after my father passed away. My family had financial problems and I wanted to finish studying but due to those instances, I got into sex work that my friend suggested. I voluntarily worked as a sex worker, but deep inside I was concerned about how my family would react if they found out about my “job”.

Occasionally I engage in sex work without protection. Some are protected using condoms; some are not. I was not familiar with HIV but I guess HIV can be transmitted through sex.

Throughout my sex work, I use protection only two out of five sexual partners, on an average. I am scared of acquiring HIV but I have not thought of having an HIV test before, because I fear that if I do, I may find out that I am infected at an early age.

Since two years, my mother still does not know what kind of job I am doing and where all my money really comes from. Instead she tells me that it is coming from her boyfriend.

Up until now, I never encountered any life threatening experiences in sex work, but some of my friends experienced being forced to do some sexual acts that they were not comfortable with. I do sex work three times a week and usually at night or weekdays, but weekdays are my schooldays so sometimes I fall asleep during classes. My work has helped me financially by providing enough

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money for my school as well as my nephew's. But occasionally I feel that my health is affected as I experienced painful urination on one occasion.

The first time I engaged in sex work, I felt really emotional and I repeatedly asked myself why I was doing this kind of work. I convinced myself that I am doing this to finish college, but my fear remains that someday my mother might find out that I am doing sex work.

I feel bad about what I am doing and I wish to change my path because it is physically and mentally tiring. I plan on quitting sex work when I finish college.

I don't know what to say to other young people who are into sex work. It's hard. But I think, as long as it is for the good...but if there are other alternatives then they should not do it.

Ella
15 years
Philippines



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I am a 15 year-old transgender from Paranaque, Philippines. Both of my parents are at home and I am the fifth among seven siblings. All of my older siblings quit going to school and are now working. I also quit studying because of financial problems. I currently work as a 'pick-up' girl (slang for sex work) in the streets of Paranaque.

I engage in oral and anal sex; although I use condom during sex, I do not do it consistently because there are times that my customers or I did not have condoms and lubricants. I once had rocks being thrown at me, while working in the streets. I was very afraid that some of my customers might physically hurt me. Despite these, I think that my sex work will enable me to study soon.

I don't know what HIV is; all I know is HIV can be transmitted through sex and weaken the immune system. I also knew that HIV test could be accessed at the Social Hygiene Clinic in my neighbourhood.

Even if I do sex work, I sometimes feel dirty and guilty while doing it because I might be having sex with some father of a child or husband of a wife. Three weeks ago, I had an HIV test and I tested nonreactive. After that, I decided to quit selling sex because I fear being tested positive for HIV.

I was seven or eight years old when I came out to my family and friends about my sexuality; they accepted it gladly. Although at times, I experienced being bullied by guys. I don't know, but I am convinced that I am a girl.

To my fellow young sex workers, you have to be vigilant in choosing your customers to avoid HIV.

Lovi
15 years
Philippines



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I am a young transgender from Tramo, Paranaque, Philippines. Currently, I am not studying. My parents are separated and I live with my mother who is a housewife. I work as a 'pick-up' girl in the streets of Paranaque at the age of 13. I get 'picked-up' by my customers by hailing taxis at night and waiting for them is they want some service. I only engage in 'blowjob' though and do not use condom when doing oral sex. I am also not aware of HIV; all I know is that it is a disease that may make you weak.

Almost a year ago, while I was in the streets doing my usual routine, I was approached by health care providers and was forced to HIV testing. I did not pick up my result because I had to go back to the streets. Although I am interested to get an HIV test in the future, I am afraid that I might find out that I am HIV positive. I think as long as you have no anal penetration and just oral sex will prevent the transmission of HIV.

I was six years old when I realized that I am different; my parents and friends accepted me immediately. But there are some guys who bully me for being like this. If you ask me, I am convinced that I am a female.

I started sex work at age 13, joining some of my older friends until I decided to do the same thing they were doing. I have experienced getting no payment from my customer before. So, I learned to choose my customers to avoid my previous encounters.

Doing this work do not have any effect on my education and health. What I earn for sex work is usually spent in buying new dresses and clothes. Although I think that selling sex is bad for my health, I feel happy when I am with my friends who are also in sex work. But in the future, I would like to be a storeowner.

Mei Mao
21 years
China



CLICK ME - HOME

Youth LEAD

I have involved in Yunnan Pingxing since 2012. Before I was involved into this community-based organization, I did not know how to protect myself. I should say that I suffered from many of health problems and diseases, such as anal fissure, and frequent cold. I felt so sick when I got anal fissure and did not know where to see a doctor. Instead I bought a drug from a pharmacy store. Even though I eventually recovered, this experience made me feel so depressive and scared.

When I found out that my health condition has deteriorated, I was so worried about the possibility of being infected with HIV, since I had unprotected sex with different persons many times. I then called one of them (my partner) to ask if he had any other sex partners before. But he just laughed and said, "What do you think?" His response made me more anxious. I was even sure that I must have been infected with HIV and would die very soon.

I joined a singing contest organized by Yunnan Pingxing in 2012. As time went by, I learned a lot from Pingxing and other peers. Now I know how to protect myself, and even try to help others. I also advocate against discrimination to people living with HIV. I have some friends who are living with HIV. They feel uncomfortable and scared to face their situation, but I still strongly suggest them to see doctor at Provincial CDC and get prescribed. I encourage them not to stop their treatment for at least half a year, so they would not infect others and can even get married and have babies. I referred them to officials in Pingxing.

We often attended lectures organized by Pingxing, where the trainer explained to us the three elements of real love that people should enjoy physically being with their lovers and match each other mentally as well. Moreover, we should

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undertake responsibility for our lovers, which is very important. I work with Pingxing because I wanted to open up and engage in charity work as much as possible.

I encouraged myself to have an HIV test because I really wanted to take the responsibility of my partners. I also worried about my HIV status at the time due to several times of unprotected sex. I never felt so close to death before the result turned out negative. I decided to educate people in any way I could, and have more peers understand the situation and have knowledge to protect themselves. I feel it was significant to work with Pingxing. I work on knowledge dissemination and anti-discrimination.

Working for anti-discrimination has an intensive influence on me. For instance, I found my job through my own efforts. Even though my competitors had better resumes than mine, such as many certifications, English and computer skills, which I'm not good at. But when I was interviewed by the human resources of this company and have already signed a contract, she asked me about what I've learned through my university study. I frankly said that I could not promise doing fancy work such as system building or management and etc., which I wasn't taught at the university. However, my volunteer experience in Pingxing makes me treat everyone equal and non-discriminated.

When I was a kid studying at elementary school and high school, I used to think classmates who performed poorly were bad people and I did not want to play with them. But not anymore - I would like to judge people on different merits. Good performance at exams is good, but different direction of self-development opens another window for everyone. Everyone has their merits on defiant aspects, personality, skills, characters, talents and etc. Regardless of people's SOGI and HIV status, everyone should be considered as a human being. We deserve to live a marvelous life equally. Hence, I stated that "everyone, in my point of view, is equal, no matter he/she has high position is as leader or common co-worker. I just do what I think it's right, and I will convey my thought openly." This is what I realized during my studies in

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university. I think what I said really impressed the HR and I was selected for the role. My classmate failed even though he had better academic record than mine.

Pingxing is one of the most important parts in my university life and even my whole life; they help me to reshape my character, my health awareness, and even my social network in friendship and intimate relationships. I am grateful for my experience with Pingxing.

I feel lucky to be a part of the Pingxing family and undertake a bunch of volunteer work; I won't say the ones who are not into any kind of charity or NGO are not lucky as me, but it is good to have this experience when you are still young. Just to give an example, when I have a chat with a classmate, my points and angles of discussion are different as well.

Working at a CBO like Pingxing was an eye-opener and it freed my mind from conservative views toward homosexuality, heterosexuality, transgender, or people living with HIV.

Mu Lingling
17 years
China



My parents divorced when I was aged 7 and my grandparents raised me. My grandparents were not rich at all. I still remember when I was at grade one of middle school; I wanted to buy a toy doll, my grandparents asked for money from my mom with no success. I just thought it was impossible for me to have any additional money from my family's daily expense like food.

I know some of my classmates have bad families, given that if we had good families with a lot of money and social connections, it would be easy for us to go to a better high school but this was not the case. I was enrolled in my school thanks to a tuition waiver policy where the officials came to my middle school for recruiting students and I was attracted by this policy since my parents do not even support my high school education. The score requirement is also quite low and many Kunming city students never consider to study here; only students like me living in the sub-urban areas prefer studying here.

I started selling sex when I began high school. At that time, I was supporting my daily needs with very limited subsidy from school. A sister who was from my hometown suggested selling sex. After a short while, having sex with clients became my part time job. I go to clubs every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, and stay with mates until Sunday midnight.

I am neither feeling shameful nor good about my work; but I am sure that I will not continue to work as a sex worker forever. I will try to save some money and graduate from high school and consider opening a small business like a clothes shop. Many people look down upon sex workers and I will not say that I am so proud of being a sex worker, as I also know my peers, family and classmates would not approve. But in fact I had no choice but tried my best to survive at the very beginning. Therefore, being a sex worker is somehow more

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acceptable from my point of view.

Given that I am not a very educated person with a high education degree, I assume it is impossible for me to find a good job in the future. My plan is to have a shop for selling clothes, shoes, decorations etc. I think all young girls and women would like it. I would like to have a very fancy shop that attracts a lot customers dropping by.

I have already created a bank account to save money, and I hope to save the right amount until I graduate from high school. I have a classmate who shares the same plan as me and I want to have her as my partner so that we can work together and earn money.

I could have a boyfriend maybe one or two years later. I do not know what kind of a person he should be, but I hope he will be rich and handsome, so I can lead a simple and easy life in the future. I do not like very young boys and prefer to have an older one since he can take care of me in both economic and mental aspects. If I find a younger one, maybe younger than me, I would have to look after him, which I wouldn't want to.

Youth LEAD



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