



#IASONEVOICE
THEN AND NOW SERIES

Youth engagement in HIV activism

This year marks the 18th International Youth Day (12 August), first observed by the United Nations General Assembly in recognition of young people as agents of change. In this Then and now series, six activists across generations share how living with HIV shaped their personal journeys toward activism. Three of them began their work in the earliest days of the epidemic, and they speak about the legacy of their advocacy. Three, new to HIV activism, share what drew them to the movement. Each person reflects on how to build and sustain the work of HIV activism. Here are their stories...

Gautam Yadav (28) was born in New Delhi, India. As an adolescent from a middle-class family, he was very confused about his sexuality and feels today that if he received more information regarding sexuality, gender, HIV and AIDS, he would likely not be HIV positive. Gautam became an activist at the age of 19, and is now the Programme Officer at the Humsafar Trust, India's oldest LGBTQ organization. He is also the board member of the UNAIDS Youth Advisory Forum representing the Asia-Pacific region, as well as a board member of Youth Lead Bangkok. This is Gautam's story ...



I never wanted to become an activist. Since I was a teenager, I thought my path would lead to the performing arts, doing musical theatre. But at age 18, I got tested for HIV and it changed my life forever: it was my first and last HIV test. Learning that I was HIV positive was devastating and it sent me into a deep depression.

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It took me a couple of years to find my way out of that despair and get back on my feet. That was when I decided to devote myself to HIV activism and LGBTQ advocacy. I realized that I didn't want to see more people become HIV positive at age 18. This work was and still is desperately needed in India, especially for young people.

I wish I could say that biomedical achievements make me hopeful about a world without HIV. But I still see people dying of AIDS. What's more, through my work, I also meet young people living with HIV and curable diseases like tuberculosis and even hepatitis C. To me, this means that the approaches to services and care are not working.

A recent case in point involved a transgender person in her 20s who asked me for help. She was living with HIV and also suffering from tuberculosis. Through my connection to a PLHIV support group, I was able to refer her to the hospital for a proper check-up and medication. She recovered in a few weeks. One day, I made a follow-up call to her to ask about her health. Her landlady answered the phone and told me that she has passed away just days before. TB and HIV did not kill my friend. She died at the hands of a neglectful health system and a society entrenched in HIV stigma and discrimination.

There is a long way to go before the advances benefit everyone equally. Stigma continues to put lives at risk. In India, there are still laws criminalizing gay sex. In 2009, activists in India achieved a success when Section 377 of the Indian penal code, which criminalized gay sex, was ruled unconstitutional. But four years later, our hard-won freedom and privacy was overturned when the law was reinstated.

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Although people in the West regard this 150-year-old law as a vestige of a bygone colonial age, it has contemporary consequences. Men who have sex with men are threatened and blackmailed. Similar to laws that criminalize HIV in Canada and the US, it impedes HIV prevention efforts. Why would I seek out HIV testing or treatment if my doctor is obliged to see my sexual practices as criminal?

The activism needed in India and across low- and middle-income countries is about universalizing healthcare and protecting the reproductive rights of women and girls, affirming LGBTQ people, reducing harm for drug users, and decriminalizing sex workers and people who inject drugs. Young people across Asia and the Pacific understand these challenges and can face them head on.

We have come so far. Yet there is a lot to be done by adolescents and young key populations. Young people need to be involved in the HIV response, from the top of the hierarchy to implementing policy decisions. More established activists from the old guard must help us ascend to leadership within civil society so that new frameworks we present can broaden the approach to human rights. They are the ground on which we build. Young people know their problems and have solutions. Our voices should be heard and be the starting point.

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Across the globe, young activists understand that the success or failure of the HIV response is directly linked to social justice in every form; women must be given access to education and paid an equal wage; war and the humanitarian crisis must end to prevent displacement and forced migration; climate change can no longer be denied; those engaged in sex work should be protected; and drug users and people living with HIV should not be criminalized for their health statuses. These are the challenges of the 21st century and beyond, and youth activism is the key to tackling them.