

RISE UP

YOUTH CHAMPIONS INITIATIVE

Sapna: Advancing the Health and Rights of Pakistan's Transgender Community

Youth Champions Initiative Case Study



SAPNA AN AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY SHORT
a film by Ali Rizvi

ABOUT YOUTH CHAMPIONS INITIATIVE

Youth Champions Initiative invests in powerful young leaders ages 18-30 who are leading the sexual and reproductive health and rights movement in Ethiopia, India, Pakistan and the United States. In collaboration with the Packard Foundation, this externally validated model enables young leaders to create large-scale change through leadership development, technology, innovation, and advocacy.

ABOUT RISE UP

Rise Up advances health, education and equity for girls, youth, and women everywhere. Since 2009, Rise Up's powerful network of over 500 leaders has directly reached 7 million girls, youth, and women in addition to advocating for the passage and implementation of over 100 laws and policies impacting 115 million people globally. Rise Up invests in visionary leaders, local organizations, and innovative solutions to achieve large scale change through leadership development, advocacy, funding, and storytelling. Rise Up unifies the power of [Let Girls Lead](#), [Champions for Change](#) and the [Youth Champions Initiative](#) to create a better future for girls, youth, and women in Africa, Central America, South Asia and the United States.

Sapna rises from her bed, looking both defeated and defiant. As the film begins, Sapna dresses, fixes her makeup, and begins her walk down the narrow road near her home in Karachi, Pakistan. Children cluster around her shouting insults as Sapna knocks on doors, asking for spare change. Sapna is a transgender woman, an outcast in Pakistan.

In his award-winning documentary short, Youth Champion Ali Rizvi, from Pakistan, captures the indignities that Sapna faces every day shines a light on the challenges facing the transgender community in Karachi. According to Ali, transgendered people “are ridiculed, they are physically abused, assaulted, and recently there have been a lot of hate crimes against them and I think a huge part of it is a lack of awareness”. There are an [estimated 500,000 transgender people in Pakistan¹](#), with approximately 70,000 in Karachi alone. While transgender people are legally recognized as a “third gender” and are supposed to be guaranteed equal rights under a [2012 Pakistani Supreme Court ruling²](#), prejudice and stigma against them are rampant. Transgender people are excluded from most job opportunities and are forced to earn a living panhandling at hazardous intersections, dancing at male-only events, and through commercial sex work, where they often suffer from [discrimination](#) and violence that leads to long term negative consequences for their sexual and reproductive health.

Discussions of the transgender community – or any topic related to sex and sexuality – are strictly taboo in Pakistani society. But Ali knew from his previous experience working with youth on sexual and reproductive health issues that change happens once people begin talking openly. During YCI, Ali realized that film could be the ideal medium to begin these discussions: “I came up with the idea to make films to create awareness about [sexual and reproductive health and rights] issues, about marginalized communities, especially the transgender community in Karachi because it doesn't have any representation.”

1 Mustafa, W. (2017, January 9). Pakistan counts transgender people in national census for first time. Reuters World News. Retrieved January 24, 2017, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-transgender-census-idUSKBN14T1XK>

2 Zaman, Q. (2012, September 26). Ensuring equality: Transgenders equal citizens of Pakistan, rules SC. The Express Tribune. Retrieved January 24, 2017, from <http://tribune.com.pk/story/442516/ensuring-equality-transgenders-equal-citizens-of-pakistan-rules-sc/>



Participating in YCI has provided Ali with benefits that go beyond the California-based incubator. Ali has had enriching opportunities for networking at international forums, including the 2016 International Conference on Family Planning. Perhaps the most impactful network, however, is among the Youth Champions themselves:

“We are constantly in touch, all of us, from the USA from Ethiopia, from India, Pakistan...we share ideas, ask for ideas and criticism, so this is how we keep on improving our work and the sharing of ideas.”

Ali Rizvi
Youth Champion, Pakistan

One key advantage of film, he says, is that it can be shown numerous times to different audiences, and also integrated into sexuality education curricula.

Ali credits YCI with the decision to integrate sexual and reproductive health and rights and film. His collaborators feel that YCI had an even greater impact on Ali's life: “When he went [to the YCI Incubator], he was exposed to so many different people and so many different ideas, and he made a lot of friends there who had similar interests. It has actually given him more ideas on what he can do with the skills he has and how to utilize them” says Sarah Ahmed, who worked on Ali's SRHR Ehsas Films Project. “But I think he has gained a lot of confidence in the fact that he knew he had support, so he wasn't afraid to just go out there and do his best. Otherwise it's very hard to talk about such subjects – you need support and experience. He gained a lot of that through YCI.”

Creating the film brought several challenges. Ali recalls that initially it was difficult to recruit volunteers for the film project because “people were nervous, they were scared to come with me on the shoot [or] help me out with it in public.” Facing the realities of Sapna's day-to-day life also proved trying. Ali recalls shooting one scene of Sapna and other transgender women performing at a wedding dance, which he calls “difficult and challenging... We went to a real wedding where people were pushing them and pulling them and kissing them without their consent, and they were there to dance. So that was very challenging.”

Sapna received the Best Short Documentary Award at the 2016 Travel South Asia Film Festival and has been screened more than 24 times in Pakistan and abroad, with over 300 DVDs of the film distributed. After each screening, Ali leads a discussion to help audiences process the film and examine their own beliefs about the transgender community. One screening at the Pakistan Medical Association provided an opportunity for doctors and medical students to engage in an open dialogue about transgender issues. According to Ali, “In Pakistan, even doctors don't accept this third gender – they only see people male and female, so that screening instigated a very heated debate. A doctor who helped me organize the screening was able to bust so many taboos and so many myths about the transgender community at that screening.” With little comprehensive sexuality education in Pakistan, some viewers have initially had difficulty distinguishing transgender sexual identity, a legally-recognized category in Pakistan since 2009, from homosexuality, which is strictly illegal. *Sapna* provides an opportunity for audiences to correct their misconceptions and reflect upon their prejudices.

The film has been featured twice in Dawn, Pakistan's premier English-language newspaper, and has generated significant engagement on social media. Many comments praise the film for bringing a little-discussed issue to light. With the help of two Indian Youth Champions, Ankita Rawat and Rahul Kumar Dwivedi, *Sapna* has been screened in India as well.



Supporters draw attention to the rights of the transgender community.



"May mard na sahi aurat na sahi lakin my b tou insaan hun. Mujhy adhura na samjo my b insaan hun". Sapna
Ali Rizvi its very difficult to write something, i personally had ignored them a lot . i got scared when they put their hand on my head for prayers I am embraced ali. I realized it now you have done an incredible job... I feel proud that i know you. 😊 good wishes 🙏 #mustwatch #loverrespectcare #theyarehumanstoo #loveforhumankind #youmaybeareason to makesomeoneelsesmile #alirizvifilms

Viewers provide feedback on the impact of Sapna.



Supporters build awareness about the rights of transgender Pakistanis by holding up signs of solidarity at busy intersections.

In June 2016, the film was also screened at the International LGBT Film Festival Week at the University of Colorado, Pueblo in the United States. Across diverse audiences, Ali says, reactions have generally been very positive. Asked about her reaction to first seeing the film, Sarah responds, “Ooh, I cried! After I watched Sapna, I thought, ‘We make them go through hell, and they don’t deserve this. They are no lower than us, and they shouldn’t be treated that way. We can’t deprive them of basic human rights because they were born a certain way.’”

Sapna is truly a youth-led effort, with students from Habib University serving as volunteer actors, crew, and screening facilitators. In addition to film screenings, Ali and the group have participated in a road-safety campaign at busy traffic intersections, where transgender people and allies draw awareness to the hazards transgender people face. The campaign caused drivers to positively interact with transgender individuals in ways that they had not done before. The student volunteer group remains close with Sapna herself and recently held a joint iftar meal with members of the transgender community during Ramadan. Sarah says, “A lot of people from our friend groups – even my family – we didn’t ridicule [transgender people], but we were scared of them. We used to be cautious, roll up our windows [at traffic stops]... But slowly perception is changing... When Ali started this whole movie, it made a huge impact, especially for us.” While Ali previously had difficulty finding volunteers, now he says more than 50 people have volunteered to help at different screenings and public events, which he considers a measure of the film’s success. As for Ali, he says the experience has taught him “the importance of a good team, and to do proper homework before you go out in the field to shoot a film or carry out a public campaign.”

Ali has several other initiatives in the pipeline for SRHR Ehsas Films Project. He plans to collaborate with fellow Youth Champion Ankita Rawat on SRHR animations for children, leveraging the linguistic and cultural similarities between India and Pakistan “a great opportunity to capitalize.” Through Bindiya Rana, the first transgender woman to run for office in Pakistan, Ali connected with an organization working with men who have sex with men and people with AIDS in the Sindh province. He has already completed some snapshots which he plans to develop into a documentary highlighting the population in this region, which comprises half of all registered AIDS cases in Pakistan. Finally, Ali is hoping to secure registered entity status for SRHR Ehsas Films Project to increase fundraising, encourage media coverage, and amplify their message.

While there is still much work to be done for the transgender community in Pakistan, the situation is gradually improving, and Ali’s work is making a difference. In June 2016, a group of 50 Pakistani clerics declared that transgender people have full marriage, inheritance, and funeral rights under Islamic law.³ One province has allocated \$2 million in its most recent budget plan for job training and support for the transgender community. Universities in Pakistan are beginning to employ transgender individuals in their cafeterias and administrative offices. “Things are changing,” Ali says, “but very slowly and gradually.” Awareness is an important first step, says Sarah, “the biggest challenge is changing people’s perception. It makes us want to do more, to do similar projects in the future where we keep youth involved [and] where we could make a difference.”

³ Khan, M. Z., & Marszal, A. (2016, June 27). Pakistani clerics declare transgender marriages legal in Islam. The Telegraph. Retrieved January 24, 2017, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/pakistani-clerics-declare-transgender-marriages-legal-in-islam/>

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