US team promotes gender equality via digital storytelling

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A team of researchers from the University of Chicago is taking the digital storytelling route to promote gender equality and family planning in urban areas of Lucknow, especially among low-income groups.

The two-year international project is aptly named ‘Kissa Kahani’ for its reliance on multimedia storytelling methods to drive home the message about reproductive health issues.

Digital stories are short, first-person documentaries produced with music, images, and narratives of young people communicating their daily lives, hopes and dreams, especially in the urban slums.

The Chicago varsity students are simultaneously conducting research to develop such short, first-person documentaries. Collaboration with community organisations is a key feature of the project.

The Centre for Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Innovation in Sexual and Reproductive Health (Ci3) at the University of Chicago’s newly launched Transmedia Story Lab (TSL) is working in Lucknow on the ‘Kissa Kahani’ project. Recently they began the digital storytelling component of the project.

A TSL team and Ci3 researchers were here in January 2016 to meet and collaborate with their partners. During their six-week visit, research was conducted to develop the documentaries.

In mid-January, Seed Lynn, key project collaborator and founder of Storyographers, LLC, lead researcher for ‘Kissa Kahani’ Lucille Herbert and Ci3’s TSL director Marquez Rhyne travelled to Lucknow and met key partners in the community besides establishing a work space in the city.

"With particular focus on adolescents and women, our goal is to develop new research methodologies, evidence, intervention strategies, and novel solutions to advance human health and well-being," said Rhyne. Together, they trained 11 trainers from Mumbai and Varanasi and seven from Lucknow, all under 30 years of age. Although the trainers have taken over the work, the Chicago team will keep visiting the city off and on. The digital stories will complement the research data that will be returned to the community after post-production is completed.

"The team is already hearing beautiful and moving stories, some of which were tough for listeners as well as those courageously telling them. As we are still in data collection, our Indian colleagues will share these with the communities in May and hear the thoughts of parents, health care providers and community members," says Rhyne.

Besides lead institutional partner Operation Asha, the Chicago team works closely with several other community-based NGOs, including Project KHEL, a Lucknow-based organisation that uses sports and street plays to empower youth on issues of gender.

"This visit gave them confidence of having a local partner and ground support for their work," said Akshai Abraham of Project KHEL that provided four trainers for the digital storytelling.