Young people across the world have been given a voice in education and sexual health services through research led by the University of Brighton’s Education Research Centre in collaboration with Panos London and funded by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF).

Dr. Vicky Johnson has been working with an international NGO to realise youth sexual rights and improve young people’s access to sexual health services in developing countries. Her work is based on research she led in Benin, Kenya, Nepal, and Nicaragua, and has resulted in IPPF deciding to reconceptualise its youth programming to put young people’s views at the centre.

Dr. Johnson designed the methodology in which researchers in the different countries interviewed young people, adults, and service providers. She also worked with young peer educators and trained them to carry out their own research. They successfully encouraged the most marginalised young people — from young people working in hard labour to sex workers and transgender people — to depict their lives in photographs, and to tell their stories about access to sexual health services and to share their feelings about their sexual rights.

Findings from the youth-led research showed that young women in a mountainous region of Nepal were scared to say what was happening to their bodies. They described themselves as feeling like ‘trees with no leaves’ because they could not show their emotions due to gender violence and discrimination. Young peer educators took a picture of a rose coming into bloom to illustrate how young people of the ‘third gender’ should be able to be open about their sexual identity.

Young people appreciated the mobile health units funded by IPPF, which travel to poor rural areas and now include a separate space where young people can talk and access contraception confidentially. Service providers were trained to be more user-friendly and the focus was on building healthy, respectful relationships rather than illness.

Following the research, Dr. Johnson and the peer educators presented their findings to local, national, and global staff and decision-makers. The Programme Specialist for Adolescents and Young People at the South Asia Regional Office of IPPF, Manish Mitra, discussed how the research had illustrated positive change in Nepal as a result of IPPF’s interventions and that this had informed local funding decisions to continue services for vulnerable young people: “The life-changing impact the project has made in the lives of the young people in FPAN (Family Planning Association Nepal) in particular presents impactful learning for all our Member Associations (MAs) across the region. The assessment research has brought out excellent examples of MAs’ work in promoting and advocating for provision of comprehensive sexuality education in the national curriculum of Nepal.”

Although the programme is over, the journey is not. It will have an enormous impact on our strategic thinking in IPPF, influencing our work with over 20 million adolescents and young people in 152 countries. It will have implications for IPPF’s approach to communication and management.

Doortje Braeken, IPPF’s Senior Advisor on Adolescents