

Expedition fund's travel report for:

Prevention programme for sexually transmitted diseases in Sri Lanka 29th June – 10th August 2015

Linda Markova, 2nd year Global Health BSc

5th December 2015

Introduction

Pursuing a degree in Global Health, I wanted to dedicate my summer to something meaningful and relevant to my studies that would enable me to deepen my knowledge and gain some valuable real-life experience. Volunteering internship under AISEIC Colombo South in Sri Lanka therefore proved to be a great opportunity for me to participate in. Thanks also to the expedition fund offered by Queen Mary, I was then able to embark on 7-week-long, super-adventurous journey to Sri Lanka which has definitely given me much more than a few nice memories and a spoonful of applied academic experience.



Picture 1 Training at the Ministry of Health

The project

The project I took part in was called Heal a Nation. Its main aim was to raise awareness about sexually transmitted diseases among Sri Lankan students and local communities. That was done by visiting local schools and hospital and organizing various talks and workshop to engage with the local people. Before conducting workshops ourselves, we had to undergo multiple trainings organized by organized by the project coordinators. There were three trainings in total – one conducted by local NGO working on HIV/AIDS prevention, one by physicians in local public hospital and the last one was a two day training conducted by the Ministry of Health. It was during these training sessions when I began to understand that promoting sexual health in Sri Lanka will probably be a bigger challenge than I initially anticipated.

So, where was the issue? Coming from Europe, I am very used to openly debate about sexuality and sexual health. That was not the case for Sri Lanka. Quite frankly, I was prepared to encounter generally low awareness of sexually transmitted diseases. What really shook me though was how much can our understanding of sexuality differ in different cultural environments. My colleagues and I were really surprised when we were specifically instructed by the Ministry of Health not to promote condom use at secondary schools or even say the word condom or sex in general. The ideals of coming to Sri Lanka



and make a significant impact just by visiting schools and talking to children suddenly seemed rather distant. I understood the significance of culture when designing prevention programmes and projects or any kind of policy. This has been a great lecture in my studies of Global Health.

Living in Sri Lanka

Me and the other participants all lived in the same house on the suburbs of the capital city of Colombo, in a district called Moratuwa. The house was a home to a small family of 3 living in the ground floor,

whilst we – visiting participants – were sharing the first floor. The house was small and still partly under construction. Yet in spite of the modest conditions we all felt warmly welcomed by our guest Nayomi and her family. Living in somebody's home meant we got real insight into Sri Lankan culture, habits and lifestyle. Although it was challenging at times, it certainly was a great opportunity.

There was 13 of us in the project, all girls. I felt a bit skeptical upon arrival, knowing that my university course is all girls as well and imagined the sweet morning fights over one small bathroom and whole bunch of other issues. However, I couldn't be more wrong. They were all the most amazing, enthusiastic and kind people coming from all part of the world. Just to name some their nationalities–

we had people from China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Poland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Canada, Vietnam and Czech (me and one other participant, not to forget). This gave the project a truly global feel as everybody brought their own unique perspective into our work, but also the project in general.



Travelling

During our 7 weeks in Sri Lanka, we also got to travel a lot around the entire island. Sometimes we travelled for our work, to conduct workshops or visit universities, sometimes we travelled to discover the island in our free time. Sri Lanka is a beautiful country with lots to offer for everyone. There are exotic beaches that will make you feel like in paradise, safari, wide plains reminding Africa, mountain regions that will make you feel like you're in a different country and beautiful tea plantages. I am



very glad to have seen the country from the eyes of the tourist but still having an experience of living there like a local. Living with locals, eating what they eat (spicy food is taken to the new level), how they eat (forget about cutlery while eating your curry) talk to them, smile with them.



Challenges

However, there were also challenges I encountered during my stay. It was really difficult for me to get myself accustomed to the different understanding of time flow and generally the different pace of things in Sri Lanka. Living in London, I am used to living fast, having things done immediately, always running somewhere. However, that wasn't the case there. I knew I was going to developing country, but I was still surprised how the constant waiting for

something completely threw me off in the first weeks. It was great in terms of improving my patience though. Lastly, unfortunately, about three days before leaving Sri Lanka, I got robbed while getting off the bus. I lost all of my money, my phone and both of my credit cards. The only thing that I have left was luckily my passport. Getting myself back home safely and dealing with everything I has to deal with (police, insurance company, airlines, etc.) I am now sure that if I keep my head calm, I can survive all kinds of different situations.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country and I am so glad that I had the chance to discover its culture and people while doing something that was truly relevant to my course. I am now able to apply the knowledge and skills I gained there onto my course and my personal life. Looking at the question of culture and its relationship to sexuality, I decided to include my experience in one of my assignments, designing it as a research proposal. I love that now I am able to understand some things in my course more clearly and can relate to the difference between theories on paper and the actual realities of things. From all sides, it was a truly great experience.