

Newsmaker Interviews: Kalpana Jain XVI International AIDS Conference August 16, 2006

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JACKIE JUDD: Kalpana Jain, thank you for joining us today.

KALPANA JAIN: It's my pleasure entirely.

JACKIE JUDD: You've covered a couple of other AIDS conferences. What so far – we're midway through – stands out for you about what's different here in Toronto?

KALPANA JAIN: You know, I remember, well, Durban was really my first conference and when I went to Durban the whole tone was set by the political leadership there because President Mbeki just refusing to accept that HIV causes AIDS and that was a big controversy at that time. And that sort of set the whole tone for the rest of the conference and that set out a message to the rest of the world and there were believers and nonbelievers.

Bangkok again, which I covered, was the political leadership setting the tone. But here, you know, the political leadership was really missing, we know. But what is really interesting is one finds new leadership emerging in this conference.

JACKIE JUDD: The Bills.

KALPANA JAIN: The Bills.

JACKIE JUDD: Bill Gates and Bill Clinton.

KALPANA JAIN: And that's very interesting because these are the leaders that will have a lot of influence over

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other governments. It's a completely - Perhaps we can say it's a neutral leadership. Governments listen to them. There's no politics involved there, so perhaps they can be more effective in being future leaders and leaders of change.

JACKIE JUDD: And in terms of India, what have you heard, learned about the epidemic in India that you think will have real resonance at home?

KALPANA JAIN: You know, this conference is huge. There's so much happening here.

JACKIE JUDD: So much, mm-hmm.

KALPANA JAIN: And this is not really to take away from the effort of the conference or everything that's going on but as I think I about home and think about, you know, Indian people I think of, what am I going to take back from here? We talk about one world, one hope. And when I think about India I think the real issues are not getting addressed here.

JACKIE JUDD: Are not getting addressed.

KALPANA JAIN: Are not getting addressed, they're just not coming up here. The issues that have been talked about here, you know, the broader issues, is the pill, is circumcision, is the new drug. Are they relevant for us? Circumcision is certainly not relevant for us. The pill, you know, we already haven't been able to put people on antiretrovirals. There are only about 60,000 in India on antiretrovirals out of a total of 5.2 million who are infected.

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And India, it's largely, it's getting to be a rural epidemic, which means 58-percent of the infected people in India are really from the rural areas. Now, those issues out there are so difficult, it's reaching health services.

I've been into villages where HIV is spreading and we still have these practices where one injection, one syringe is being used to inject an entire village. Someone is sick, they come to the doctor who's usually the quack, but he's providing the health services and he uses that one injection without sterilizing it. So we don't know what's going on there.

We talk about all these issues of needle exchange programs which is good, but you know here are simple solutions. Here is a problem, for all we know, we can have an entire village infected by the virus. What are we doing about all these issues? We have a big problem of trafficking in India. I don't see trafficking coming up as an issue here at all.

JACKIE JUDD: Drugs? Sex?

KALPANA JAIN: Drugs. Sex. I mean all of it.

JACKIE JUDD: Although the issue of sex workers does seem to come up over and over again in terms of making sure treatment and prevention messages are targeted to that group.

KALPANA JAIN: You know, the basic issue is trafficking. When young girls are coming in and you know they are being forced into sex work. We know the issue of sex workers keeps coming in, provide them condoms and you know give

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them whatever facilities, microbicides in that context. But I think a very important issue in context of India is really trafficking. Why can't we see those issues coming up here?

JACKIE JUDD: On behalf of Kaiser, you work with many journalists in India in trying to instigate more coverage of AIDS. What on the ground are some of the obstacles that journalists in India have?

KALPANA JAIN: I'll sort of begin with a slight background and which is for a long time we've neglected public health issues in India. It's really not been very high on our political priorities to address public health issues even though they're so crucial and so important. As a result, it's sort of reflected in the media and media hasn't taken up public health issues in a very serious manner. There have been a few individuals who have been sort of push it all entirely as their own effort but as a media where it sort of felt, we need to do these issues.

It's always, when I was on the health beat, I was always, it was sort of message, sort of an unwritten one, which was, it's not going to take your career anywhere. It's the political beat that gets you somewhere. Now, with that background and with way little coverage of health issues, with the editors being not much sensitive about these issues, when we go to editors and want to talk about HIV/AIDS, there's a lot of cynicism. And usually the reaction is -

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JACKIE JUDD: Even now there's cynicism?

KALPANA JAIN: Even there's a lot of cynicism. And the reaction is, "Well, we have a lot of other issues so why HIV/AIDS?" And it's mostly seen as a donor driven kind of an issue. So it's not really our issue but because donors are pressing for and therefore we're expected to take it up. That's the kind of signal that editors send out. It's very, very difficult to start getting them to cover HIV in a serious manner. I find, it's more than the editors. The reporter gets current links and if the reporter really sees that there are stories out there, really sees what's happening around, what's happening to people, really the people related stories, the human interest stories, stories in the interiors of villages, how people are dying. That's what really moves the reporter and changes things for us.

JACKIE JUDD: And so, beyond suggesting to reporters what may be the really great stories to cover in AIDS, what strategies do you share with them in terms of getting passed the gatekeepers who are cynical?

KALPANA JAIN: Well, this is what I try and do which is what I think transformed my coverage of HIV/AIDS and this is what I try and do with reporters: Take them to do the real sites - and by sites I don't mean really projects run by NGOs. But, you know, I'll just go out as a reporter into the villages where I've never been there before and I'm going there as a

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journalist to see what's going on there and I take these journalists with me.

And we're all looking at the issue, I'm sort of talking to them as journalist to journalist and they're free as reporters to make their own assumptions on what they see. My experience so far has been that when they see the reality that's really you know the ground level. They come back completely, completely transformed. And then they have the power to change the thinking within their newsrooms.

JACKIE JUDD: Thank you very much, Kalpana Jain.

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