Druk Youth Initiative of Sexual Advocacy (D-YISA) has so far conducted offline programs within Thimphu district, precisely within the city only. From henceforth, we are planning to carry out activities and programs outside Thimphu as well.

Samtse is one of the 20 districts in Bhutan and is situated in the southern foothills of the country. D-YISA identified an indigenous and poor village of the district called Ngawang Dramtey. The village has more than 160 girls and women. Ugyen Dema organized and arranged a program in this indigenous village. For this, Wangchuk Dema and Ugyen Dema travelled almost 8 hours one way from Thimphu to visit the village on 25th January morning for the program.
89 girls and women turned up for the program as seen below. The registration of the participants (along with their signatures) was done by Tarayana officer of the NGO called Tarayana in the country. She helped us with the mobilization of the participants as she lives in the village.
We had girls from schools to very old women come to the program and few men also represented their households as women from those households could not make it. The sensitization program on abortion laws in the country lasted for an hour because it was not very easy to talk on the issue of abortion to this community because we could sense that they never talked about it and was considered a taboo amongst them.

Before we started sensitizing the mass, we quickly asked the Tarayana officer if she knows of any abortion issue in the community and she made us aware that there are many instances of women/girls buying abortion pills from the border (with India) or asking someone to get it for them. It was not unexpected to recognize disdain when she talked about the issue and we felt the need to speak out on importance of safe abortion and existing abortion laws in the country even more. Tarayana officer informed us that it is definitely a sensitive issue, corroborating the known.

The program was conducted in our national language, Dzongkha. We had difficulty conveying messages in Dzongkha especially the jargons related to abortion and rights. The Tarayana officer introduced the topic to be discussed as ‘taking out the baby and throwing it’ and we had to intervene that we do not refer to it as baby when it is not delivered, and that in English we call it as ‘fetus’. When everyone was asked what could be the appropriate way to refer it in Dzongkha, Tarayana officer asked us in return, ‘is it like a soen (seed)?’ and we thought it would make more sense to the participants to simplify abortion as ‘removing the soen (seed) from a person’s body when they do not want to be pregnant’ and they could follow a bit.
We were not able to touch upon feminism and gender but we did indirectly create awareness that girls and women are people just like boys and men and that we are equal, and no one should say otherwise. Few of them nodded their heads and many of them looked confused but we started feeling hopeful for at least breaking out the truth to them.

When asked if they know anything about abortion laws in the country, they did not say anything but when asked if they thought abortion is bad, they said yes. When further asked if they thought abortion is illegal in the country, they said yes. Then, they were informed that many women are dying because of unsafe abortion especially by crossing the borders to India and getting unsafe abortion services and wrong information on abortion. This is why it is important to ensure that woman have safe abortion which is in fact a woman’s right.

The participants were told that while almost every one of us have wrong information that abortion is illegal in the country (just like them), we do have abortion laws reflected in the penal code of Bhutan that allow safe abortion in following four conditions:

1. In the cases of rape
2. Severe mental illness of the mother
3. Mother’s life is at risk
4. Fetal deformity

It was shared that these abortion laws are critical to save women’s lives and to prevent girls/women from giving birth to their rapists’ children (if that is something they do not want at all) and spare them of humiliation from the society. It was not easy to communicate the essence
of each of these abortion laws to the girls and women who attended the program but we tried our best to give them simple and correct information.

Since this was the first time ever that the community had a talk on abortion, we did not want to overwhelm them by delving more into the issue. So, we limited ourselves to the existing legal abortion laws in the country and the simple talk on importance of safe abortion, this is also due to lack of translation of abortion related terminologies from English to Dzongkha. We did not receive any questions from the participants but after the talk ended, we had few participants (women) come to us and ask personally on the four legal conditions again and that whether it was really true. We clarified that these are 100% true and that they could ask anyone who knows about it like lawyers. Also, we had to share about the four conditions properly so they could understand.
The indigenous communities are usually not regarded as a minority in the country and are mostly left out of the sensitization programs such as this. To have been able to reach out to indigenous girls and women for sensitization program on abortion in the country is a first step in include them in the larger discussion and movement on safe abortion and hence, complete legalization of safe abortion in the country.

We were told by the Tarayana officer that she felt very grateful for an eye opening program. She was also unaware about abortion laws in the country and that now she has new and right information. She welcomed us to come to the community again in the future and we said we would love to visit again.