

Forum: HEALTH & YOUTH (Conference Special Committee)

Issue: The Question of sexual education to all teenagers in school

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Introduction

Sexual education, also known as sex education or sex ed, is the instruction of issues relating to human sexuality, including but not limited to sexual activity, reproduction, sexual health, consent and birth control. Comprehensive sexuality education enables young people to protect and advocate for their health, well-being and dignity by providing them with a necessary toolkit of knowledge, attitudes and skills. It is a precondition for exercising full bodily autonomy, which requires not only the right to make choices about one's body but also the information to make these choices in a meaningful way. And because these programmes are based on human rights principles, they advance gender equality and the rights and empowerment of young people.

Since it is considered that CSE is most effective when taught over several years through the gradual introduction of age-appropriate education, schools play a vital role in allowing this to happen in a controlled way. The importance of sexuality education has been recognized by numerous international agreements, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS.

A lack of CSE has notably negative effects upon young women, since unwanted pregnancies can lead to girls dropping out of work or education. CSE is largely opposed on religious grounds, or due to traditional stigmas.

Definition of Key Terms

Teenagers: People aged from 13 to 19.

Comprehensive sex education: (CSE) is a sex education instruction method based on curriculum that aims to give students the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values to make appropriate and healthy choices in their sexual lives.

Abstinence-only sex education: A form of sex education that teaches not having sex outside of marriage. It often excludes other types of sexual and reproductive health education, such as birth control and safe sex.

Abstinence: Sexual abstinence or sexual restraint is the practice of refraining from some or all aspects of sexual activity for medical, psychological, legal, social, financial, philosophical, moral, or religious reasons. This is separate from asexuality.

STIs: Sexually transmitted infections, also known as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), are infections that are spread by sexual activity, especially vaginal intercourse, anal sex and oral sex.

UNFPA: The United Nations Population Fund. Formerly the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, this is a UN agency aimed at improving reproductive and maternal health worldwide.

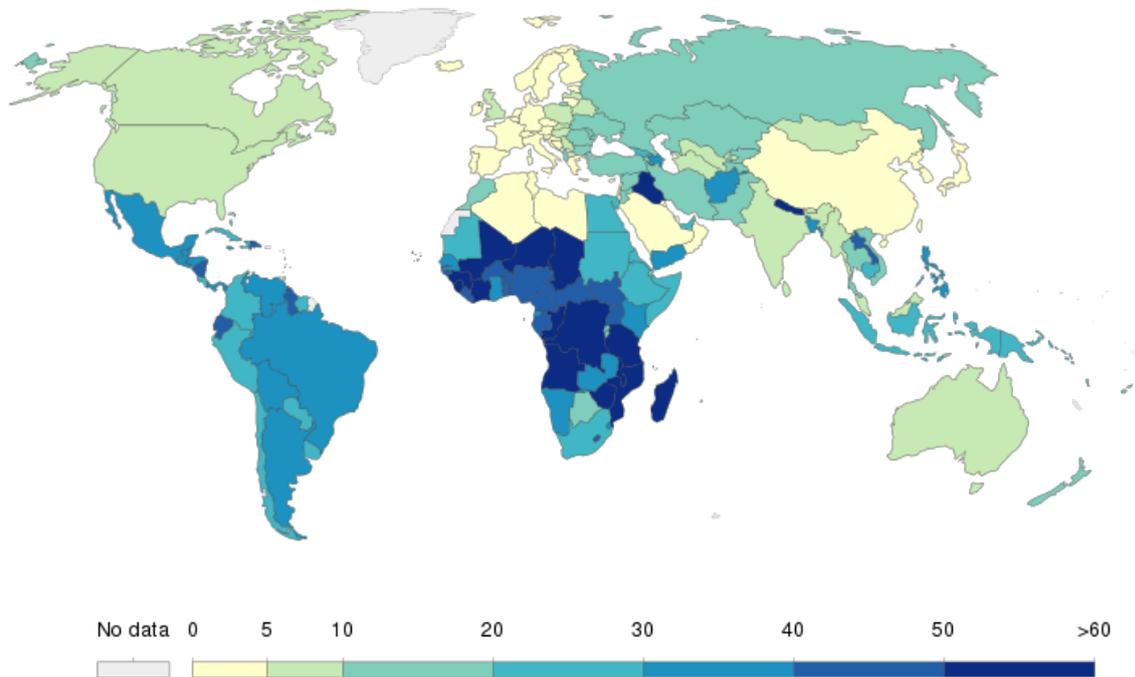
UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. A specialised agency of the UN aimed at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences, and culture.

Background Information

Map Illustrating Adolescent Birth Rates Around the World

Adolescent birth rate in women aged 10-19 years, 2016

Number of livebirths per 1,000 women aged 10-19 years (defined as the adolescent fertility rate).



Source: Institute for Health Metrics & Evaluation (IHME)

Overview

Until the 'progressive education' movement (or the 'New Education Movement' in Europe), the discussion of sexual issues was largely considered taboo. And, if at all, the informing of youth about these issues was left to the parents of a child.

In 2015, a Global Review was conducted by UNESCO, in consultation with the UNFPA and the UNAIDS Secretariat, across 48 countries. The report shows that almost 80% of assessed countries have policies or strategies in place that support CSE. In the Asia-Pacific region, 21 out of 25 countries' national HIV strategies referenced the role of education, in West and Central Africa, most countries had a policy on life-skills based HIV and AIDS sexuality education, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, health and education ministers signed a declaration affirming a mandate for national school-based sexuality and HIV education.

About two thirds of evaluations show that CSE leads to reductions in targeted risky behaviours. About 60 percent of programmes had a positive effect on at least one behavioural or biological outcome, such as increased condom use or reduced unplanned pregnancies. Numerous studies in peer reviewed literature, including a comprehensive study by the World Health Organization (WHO), have demonstrated that sex education programs that teach young people about both abstinence and contraception do not increase sexual activity nor lead youth to engage in sex at an earlier age.

A key driver in the movement for global CSE is the UNFPA, which works to empower young people to shape the lives they want. That means mitigating adolescents' risk of developing harmful behaviours, while promoting positive, protective actions and attitudes.

Approaches in Different Countries

According to data from the World Bank, European countries tend to have the lowest rate of teen pregnancies. Italy, Germany, and Switzerland, among others, had fewer than 4 teen births per thousand babies born. This may be due to the less politicised or more secular approach of these countries when concerning CSE. On the other hand, the U.S. reported around 30 teen births per thousand. Sex-Ed in the U.S. tends to veer toward repressive and cautionary teachings. Many states rely on abstinence-only curriculum, which prevents students from learning about pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

In Belgium, what could be considered a very progressive stance is taken. The Belgian site 'Alles Over Seks' (All About Sex) was criticised for "teaching seven-year-olds explicit sex positions".

In China, sex education is often very reductive or even completely absent. Sex education is not compulsory in China, which leads to great gaps in children's knowledge as they enter adulthood.

In India, similarly, sex education is not compulsory in schools. Allegedly, 53% of children from 5-12 have been subjected to sexual abuse. According to The Times of India, more than 50% of girls in rural India are unaware of menstruation or what it means.

In Indonesia, sex education is considered an "extra-curricular" activity. Many young couples are forced to wed due to accidental pregnancies.

In Malaysia, the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry in Malaysia has called for better sex education. Currently, sex education is integrated into subjects such as Moral and Islamic studies, science and biology. The basis of the sex education revolves around abstinence.

In the Netherlands, a liberal approach is taken. It is compulsory for all children aged four and older to receive age-appropriate sex education. One of their first lessons is on consent. As a result of their extensive programme, the country's teenage pregnancy rate is very low.

In New Zealand, sexuality is one of the seven 'key areas' in the Health and Physical Education curriculum. It is compulsory for primary and secondary schools to teach up until year 10. It has been taught since 1999.

In Uganda, the Ministry of Health declined the proposal to distribute contraceptives to those aged 15 and over in Uganda on moral grounds. The Ministry claimed the proposal would encourage promiscuity.

In the UK, whilst sex education is compulsory in all schools, the approach is less liberal than other European countries.

In the US, programmes vary widely in different schools and states.

Timeline of Events

1870s

In Britain, the **social purity movement** led to a wider crusade aimed at the moral regeneration of British society, which included the belief that it was necessary for parents, rather than schools, to give children healthy and moral information about sex.

1890

Geddes and Thomson's *The Evolution of Sex* was an important work in providing ways of talking about "the birds and the bees". It approached the topic of sexual reproduction via forms of life remote from humans, including amoebas, plants, insects and animals before finally moving on to human beings.

1910s

In the UK, from 1913 to 1916 a Royal Commission heard evidence that the solution to the UK's huge VD (STD) problem was sex education. The National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases organised courses for teachers, parents and youth workers and visiting speakers for schools.

1912

In the US, the National Education Association called for teacher training programs in sexuality education.

1944

In the UK, the 1944 Education Act gave lip-service to the need for sex education in schools. However, it was an extremely laissez-faire situation, with individual schools being allowed to choose how they wanted to approach the subject, and there was little government support.

1953

The American School Health Association launched a nationwide program in family life education.

1960s

The 'sexual revolution' (or time of sexual liberation) occurred throughout the US and the developed world.

1976

3rd January: The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights becomes effective. It is a multilateral treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly.

1981

June: In the US, the first incident of AIDS is officially reported. By year's end, there is a cumulative total of 337 reported cases of individuals with severe immune deficiency in the United States—321 adults/adolescents and 16 children under age 13. Of those cases, 130 are already dead by December 31.

1986

U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop issued a report calling for comprehensive AIDS and sexuality education in public schools, beginning as early as the third grade.

1987

The Sex Education Forum was established in England. The Sex Education Forum was established as an independent charity in April 2021.

1990

2nd September: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child becomes effective. It sets out civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.

1991

In Thailand, Anand Panyachun was appointed as prime minister and adopted policies of promoting public awareness of HIV and safer sex. According to a 2005 study by the World Bank, an estimated 7,700,000 lives were saved and, according to UNAIDS, there was a 90 per cent decline in new infections due to these unique and innovative approaches.

1993

In the UK, the 1993 Education Act stated that only the biological aspects of STIs and human sexual behaviour could be included in the National Curriculum. Parents were also given the right to withdraw their children from sex education.

1999

In the UK, the new Framework for Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) was published. This included SRE: 'sex and relationships education'.

2005

The 2005 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Right on the Rights of Women (also known as the Maputo Protocol)

2008

The 2008 Latin American Ministerial Declaration articulated a commitment by all countries in that region to provide sexuality education, including the Conference on Population and Development (CPD).

2011/2012

Resolution on Adolescents and Youth in New York.

2019

UNFPA launched an initiative for out-of-school comprehensive sexuality education specifically targeting frequently left-behind young people, which was adapted for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

In 2018, UNESCO published the 'International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach'. The International Technical Guidance is a voluntary set of international standards that is based on the most current evidence on the impact of sexuality education programmes on sexual behaviour. It is a global template that can be adapted to national needs which takes a comprehensive approach to sexuality education – and includes attention to human rights issues and gender. The development of the Guidance was motivated by the urgent need to address the knowledge gap on HIV prevention amongst young people. The Guidance lays out clearly what works in programming for HIV prevention or sexual health for young people and provides evidence to demonstrate that CSE does no harm – critical in many advocacy efforts.

The Guidance also provides the 'how'; recommending that sexuality education should start at age five, building on basic concepts in a building block approach, and continue through childhood and adolescence. The Guidance gives a clear framework for the kind of learning objectives that are needed and the key concepts that should be covered in any set of curricula, for specific tranches of age.

UNESCO and UNFPA have also developed a range of other tools to support the development, scale-up or review of sexuality education programmes including:

- Cost & Cost-Effectiveness Study (UNESCO): ground-breaking multi-country study showing that sexuality education can be highly cost-efficient, when coupled with youth friendly services.
- Scaling-Up Sexuality Education (UNESCO): analysis of effective approaches to scaling-up sexuality education including five case studies of country experiences in scaling-up.
- "It's all One curriculum": Guidelines and activities for Young people in the Education Sector.

International agreements over the past decades, such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994; the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995; and the World Summit on Children in 2002, have extended the scope of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by affirming the right of all children and adolescents to receive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information, education and services in accordance with their specific needs.

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