

Forum: Youth Assembly

Issue: Promoting comprehensive sexuality education

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INTRODUCTION

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a teaching process based on a curriculum that aims to educate young people about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality, which empowers them to develop respectful social, as well as sexual relationships, as they will be able to comprehend how their choices can impact their own well-being and that of others. Furthermore, CSE includes learning about safe sex practices, contraception as well as forms of abuse and coercion linked with sexuality.

CSE refers to reproductive health topics such as sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), contraception, puberty, menstruation, sexual and reproductive anatomy as well as physiology.

CSE can be provided in formal and non-formal settings, that is in school or outside school. It is based on scientific research, medical accuracy, facts, and evidence which are taught at an early age, according to the developmental level and age of learners, thus promoting developmental diversity by taking learners' cognitive and emotional differences into consideration.

Many parents around the world, especially in religious and/or traditional communities consider CSE to be unnecessary and -in extreme cases- unethical, as it is common belief that children must learn everything from their parents or elders, which is the main cause for stigma and shame surrounding sexual intercourse. Without CSE, children are extremely prone to misinformation that can later build unhealthy expectations and standards when it comes to sexual intercourse and relationships.

When CSE is being taught to children that have not entered puberty yet, sexual intercourse is not the primary topic that is discussed. For instance, CSE for younger age groups includes learning about body development, feelings, and emotions. Children also engage in discussions regarding family life and the several types of relationships, to be able to form healthy ones as they grow, as they are also taught how to deal with bullying, violence, or any kind of abuse.

In many regions, CSE is not directly addressed as a form of sexual education, for instance it is introduced as "respectful relationship programming" or "life skills education," which can sometimes be misleading as it can affect how it is perceived by children's parents or children.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)¹

“A curriculum-based teaching process that aims to educate children under the age of 18 about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality.”

Consent

Agreement or permission expressed via spoken affirmative words towards a second party

Contraception

Artificial methods to prevent pregnancy (e.g. birth control pills, condoms)

LEDC

Least economically developed country; a nation whose economy's development is inadequate

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

An infection in the genital organs that is transmitted through unsafe sex

Gender based violence

Violence directed towards an individual due to their gender assigned at birth (e.g. domestic abuse, physical attacks)

Gender Equality

“[T]he act of treating women and men equally; [It] does not imply that women and men are [exactly] the same, but that they have equal value and should be accorded equal treatment.”²

Stigma

“[A] strong feeling of disapproval that most people in a society have about something [...]”³

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "What is Comprehensive Sexuality Education?" Toolkit Sections | Comprehensive Sexuality Education Implementation Toolkit, csetoolkit.unesco.org/toolkit/getting-started/what-comprehensive-sexuality-education

² Cambridge Dictionary. "Gender Equality." Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gender-equality.

³ Cambridge Dictionary. "Stigma." *Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/stigma.

Conservative

“Not usually liking or trusting change, especially sudden change”; generally supporting the more “traditional” way of life, a person considered conservative may adhere to traditional values.⁴

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH)

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) refers to research, hygiene and health-care sectors that focus on sexual intercourse, sexuality and STIs, among others.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

History of Sexual Education

During the 20th century, social norms established from the Victorian era would start to fade. The number of divorces would rise rapidly, as birth rates started to decrease. However the greater dangers were the high prostitution rate and the increased venereal diseases that affected middle-class men, which allowed a hygiene movement to be created to regulate sex work. This hygiene movement was the earliest form of sexual education ever to be formed and was specifically addressing young white men, to teach them about the health risks of sexual intercourse outside of marriage such as diseases, aiming to emphasize how sex is only appropriate between married couples.

In 1914, the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) was formed to abolish the Victorian norm of purity and abstinence from sex, as its leaders considered those to be the main cause for increased STI's. Even though this is an early step of sexual education advocacy, many of its members incorporated unhealthy sexual and social norms in its educating programs. They believed that women only saw sexual intercourse to reproduce and thus only informed men and young boys about the risks of unsafe sex, as they held them responsible for the rise in STI's. Today, the organization is called “American Social Health Organization” and advocates for the importance of sexual education globally.

After WW2, Family Life Education (FLE) programs had gained popularity as they had become part of most school curriculums in the US. Those programs mostly functioned as preparation for marriage and parenthood, as they strongly advocated against premarital sex. Furthermore, racist, and traditional gender roles were strongly supported in these programs, even though the goal was to promote equality within marriage.

By 1983, sexual education had become a part of school curriculums across the U.S., which did not only increase wanted pregnancies, but it also guided young people through the AIDS crisis in the mid 80s, as they were being taught how to protect themselves from STI's.

Sexual Education in the 21st Century

A common misconception about CSE and sexual education in general, is that its focus is only sexual intercourse. However, in the 21st century, sexual intercourse has been developed in a way that does not only make it inclusive of other crucial topics such as puberty, sexual identity and forming healthy relationships, it is also a means of teaching young people

⁴ Cambridge Dictionary. "Conservative." *Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/conservative.

how much their decisions can affect their own as well as others' lives when it comes to relationships. To achieve these results, many sexual education programs globally contributed, such as the "Teens Prevention Education Program" (PEP), in which high school students discuss sexual health, intercourse and contraception methods amongst their peers or even educate younger students, to create a comfortable environment.

Furthermore, sexual education of the 21st century refrains from using abstinence as a means of approaching the topic of sexual intercourse and reproduction, compared to earlier forms of sexual education, seeing as many books have been written that are used in schools' sexual education programs, such as "It's Perfectly Normal" by Robie H. Harris or "Consent: The New Rules of Sexual Education" by Jennifer Lang, MD. Lastly, sexual education of the 21st century also explores the topic of sexuality along with sexual identity, to abolish misconceptions regarding homosexuality and sexual orientation.

Types of CSE

Formal CSE

Formal CSE is the type of CSE that is taught in schools or training institutions as part of the curriculum or an extra-curricular activity. Formal CSE is more effective than informal CSE, as it is approved and mandated by a country's education ministry. However, it must be noted that CSE delivered in schools can be negatively affected by parental involvement, since many parents object to their children receiving any type of sexual education due to personal or religious reasons.

Informal CSE

Informal CSE is delivered outside of schools, usually by practitioners like social workers, youth organization members and youth workers. Informal CSE does not abide by any school curriculum which does not guarantee its quality or medical accuracy. Lastly, even though informal CSE may not be considered as effective as formal CSE, it is important to understand that it can reach children and young people that do not have any access to any education whatsoever.

Conditions that affect CSE quality

One of the many conditions that impact CSE delivery globally, is parents' reluctance or objection to allowing their children to receive sexual education of any sort, as they deem the concept to be unnecessary or shameful, especially in extremely religious communities. Moreover, many children around the world have limited access to education which results in them having minimal or zero access to sexual education programmes. Lastly, children who receive CSE are often prone to misinformation, as it is quite common for CSE developers to deliver inaccurate information that does not correspond with medically accurate definitions.

Stigma behind CSE

Sexual education in general is considered a highly controversial topic and is usually dealt with ignorance and an emphasis on abstinence, meaning that parents will neither try to educate their children about topics included in CSE nor encourage them to receive education on sexual activity.

The main factor behind this is conservative religious norms. In most religious communities, purity is considered one of the most valuable traits a girl or young woman can possess before getting married, which creates immense pressure to strongly refrain from participating in any sexual activity, especially before marriage, as it is considered shameful. Moreover, it is still a common belief that premarital sex is a sinful act, which is why young girls must remain innocent until marriage, meaning they must refrain from learning about, and partaking in, sexual activity.

Furthermore, since CSE instructs students about sexuality as well, it is a common fear among extremely religious parents and lawmakers that their children could be “influenced” by these discussions, straying away from traditional norms.

Impact of CSE

CSE consists of multiple topics that become combined with learning objectives appropriate for children’s age and level of maturity. Thus, when properly executed, a CSE programme is and must always be proportional to students’ cognitive abilities. Regardless of students’ age or level of maturity, a CSE programme must be able to comprehensively teach at least some of the following topics: relationships, values, attitudes and social skills, culture, society and human rights, human development, sexual behaviour and sexual/reproductive health (SRH). This contributes to a better understanding of the consequences and decisions that sometimes come with engaging in sexual intercourse.

CSE can thus have a positive impact on SRH while also contributing to STI’s, such as HIV, and unintended pregnancies reduction. Research conducted by UNESCO⁵ has proven that CSE is linked with knowledge and self-esteem enhancement and attitude shifting towards gender and social norms. In addition, CSE does not aim to encourage unsafe sexual activity, instead, it teaches consent and safe sex practice. However, CSE on its own is not sufficient to protect the SRH of young people if they do not have immediate access to it or are exposed to misconceptions regarding sexual intercourse, family, or gender roles.

CSE curriculums include gender equality and lean towards progressive approaches when it comes to sexual activity and the topic of sexuality, which can sometimes result in confusion if children are being raised according to traditional gender and societal norms.

CSE learning environment

Stigma and Prejudice in CSE Environments

The main issue with CSE delivery, both in and outside schools, is the prejudice surrounding the topic of sex, which can have a significant impact on the environment, in which students are being taught about such sensitive issues. A hostile and sometimes shameful environment prevents students from wanting to be educated, as they believe that they will be engaging in something harmful and shameful. Teachers and educators are also most likely to avoid teaching in such environments, especially in highly religious communities where the topic of sexuality is not discussed at all or looked down upon.

⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "What is Comprehensive Sexuality Education?" Toolkit Sections | Comprehensive Sexuality Education Implementation Toolkit, csetoolkit.unesco.org/toolkit/getting-started/what-comprehensive-sexuality-education

A safe learning space for students of any age includes protection from diseases, discrimination, or harassment of any type. Regarding CSE, learning environments also need to act as safe spaces for children, as many might feel ashamed when they are being taught about sexual intercourse. To prevent shame, it is crucial to involve social workers or psychologists.

Creating a friendly environment requires parental engagement, updated curriculum models and cooperation with health, as well as education ministries to ensure that the CSE delivered is factually and medically accurate.

Gender inequality

With CSE teaching about respectful relationships, gender-based violence and consensual intercourse, it can prevent the involvement in abusive relationships, as students will be able to recognize abuse and when their rights are being violated. Thus, it is crucial to discuss about harmful gender norms to promote gender equality and increase awareness.

CSE is a powerful means to tackle harmful gender norms that were a result of limited access to education, seeing as gender inequality is more widespread in areas with limited CSE programmes.

Gender norms, which traditionally suggest a binary notion of gender (the perception that someone can either be a woman or a man, with both genders having predefined features and qualities that their members must abide by) roles promote masculinity as a source of power, with men dominating public spaces, decision-making, and resource management, while women are expected to care for their families, having established relationships based on submissiveness and obedience. These roles, among other causes, are the cornerstone of gender-based violence.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Armenia

In Armenia, the public's perspective and understanding of sexual education are flawed, as it is considered a taboo (forbidden) subject. Misconceptions about sexual intercourse and education still exist to this day, causing young people to refrain from wanting to be educated on such matters. However, after 2002, the Armenian legal system adopted a plethora of frameworks and laws that encourage and oblige schools to incorporate CSE as part of their curricula or as an extracurricular activity.

India

CSE in India is impacted by instability, balancing progressive educational perspectives with deeply rooted cultural norms. The need for CSE programs in India has been increasing dangerously annually, as studies have proven⁶ that young people can only rely on their peers for knowledge regarding sexual intercourse and health.

Furthermore, the education gap between men and women indicates once again that India needs sexual education programmes for all children. There have been a few attempts of

⁶ Siddiqui, Mariam, et al. "A systematic review of the evidence on peer education programmes for promoting the sexual and reproductive health of young people in India." *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2020, National Library of Medicine. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7887991/.

incorporating sexual education in school curriculums to become socially accepted. Especially with more awareness about the sexuality spectrum and sexual abuse.

South Africa

Since 2000, South Africa has combined sexuality education with the Life Orientation subject. CSE has thus been part of the South African Curriculum for more than 20 years. In 2015, the Department of Basic Education conducted scripted lesson plans to support teachers with delivering comprehensive sexuality education.

These plans, after being incorporated into most school curriculums, provided detailed instructions for activities, materials, and key points, aiming to allow teachers to ensure consistency and efficiency when it came to executing CSE both as a school subject or extracurricular activity.

USA

Each state in the U.S. has legislation for sex education. Currently, 39 states and Washington, District of Columbia (D.C.) require that HIV and/or sex education be taught in school. However, the quality of said education is not always guaranteed and can sometimes have negative effects on students due to misinformation and lack of medical accuracy.

In the states in which sexuality education is mandatory, it is not required to be medically accurate, which has made several states to adopt an abstinence-based, conservative approach towards sexual intercourse.

More specifically, after the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, women's federal abortion rights were abolished, resulting in most sexual education school programmes to become eradicated or transformed into abstinence-approach only. Until now, 29 out of 50 U.S. States are in urgent need of CSE or any type of sexual education in general as increased discrimination towards LGBT+ individuals are a result of lack of education.

This can be seen in the number of teen pregnancies, which has grown significantly after the decision by the US Supreme Court (SCOTUS), proving once again the importance of CSE in schools.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

In its International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, UNESCO and other UN partners have set criteria for quality CSE that promotes well-being, safe sex, respect for human rights and gender equality, and empower young people to lead healthy, safe, and productive lives. An online interactive toolkit was developed by UNESCO to guide the design and implementation of CSE programmes at national level, as well as at local and school level.

The organization has created a toolkit, allowing for nations to more easily assess their educational systems and how they tackle CSE, and gives them the ability to host CSE classes both inside classrooms and outside educational institutions. Even though there have not been any reported updates from their actions, it is important to note that they have played a significant role in increasing access to CSE globally.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

<i>DATE</i>	<i>DESCRIPTION OF EVENT</i>
1914	The American Social Hygiene Association was founded in New York
1960-1980	Attacks on sexuality education by conservative parties and groups
January 22, 1973	The Supreme Court delivered a verdict in favour of Roe that held that women were entitled to abortion
1980	Advocacy for sexuality education increases as AIDS crisis continues
November 20, 1989	Adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by UN General Assembly
2009	Publishment International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education by UNESCO
November 8, 2016	After Donald Trump was elected President of the U.S., he appointed three conservative judges to the Supreme Court to ensure conservative majority
2018	UNESCO publishes guidelines for CSE delivery
June 24, 2022	The Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade with a 5-4 vote, leading to abortion bans across the U.S.

March 2023	Publishment of Compendium on CSE
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RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a legal framework of major importance, being one of the few globally ratified treaties on the topic. Although sexual education is briefly mentioned in the education section, the UNCRC is designed with children's right to accessible education without gender or racial discrimination in mind.

Although it protects children's right to be educated, it has been proven to be ineffective, since many schools around the world refuse to incorporate sexual education into their curriculum. To enhance its effectiveness, more Member States need to sign and ratify the Convention.

International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education

The International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education was developed in 2009 by UNESCO to enhance education and health authorities' work in developing and incorporating formal and informal CSE programs around the world. This document provides the characteristics of CSE programmes and includes essential learning objectives and topics that must be included in such programmes.

Furthermore, it guides through the stages of CSE according to every age and intellectual needs of children by including comprehensive paradigms, anatomical illustrations, and accurate LGBT+ definitions. Although this initiative does not immediately increase CSE provided in schools, it provides the criteria it must follow by evaluating previous sexuality education programmes that had been implemented. Also, it helps coordinate global CSE programs, both formal and informal. Thus, it contributes to the quality of sexual education delivery.

Compendium on Comprehensive Sexual Education

In March of 2023, the United Nations Special Rapporteur published a Compendium on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), based on the right to mental and physical health that is legally enjoyed by everyone, with the aim of establishing global CSE and abolishing discrimination and inequity when it comes to sexual education.

The compendium advocates for the right to sexual education for all and suggests feasible solutions of tackling gender-based discrimination regarding sexual education, such as the creation of legal frameworks that protect the right to education for all. Moreover, it urges all Member states to renew or develop policies and legislations that safeguard the rights to abortion and LGBTQ+.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU)

The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) was established in 1933 by Swedish journalist Elise Ottesen-Jensen. At that time, Sweden was stricken by poverty and unemployment, resulting in many unwanted or failed pregnancies. Contraceptives were considered unethical and taboo, so people refrained from discussing the topic altogether. Once the organisation was founded, it started providing the public with contraceptives and - later- engaged in international initiatives.

The organization's scope is to advocate for sexual and reproductive health as a means of protecting human rights, a goal which has been reached mostly in Sweden as, after the organization's initiative began, many people's traditional mindsets shifted with the prejudice surrounding sexual intercourse being transformed into acceptance and comprehension of these topics.

Adolescence Reproductive and Sexual Health Education (ASRH)

The organization "Save the Children" created initiative programmes known as Adolescence and Sexual Health Education (ASRH) that target adolescents from ages 10 to 24 in countries where formal CSE is restricted, to educate them about social norms, their sexual as well as reproductive health.

"Save the Children" mostly operates in LEDC's, where education is often limited and aims to establish new healthy gender norms by instructing young people about human rights via interactive materials that are easy to comprehend such as illustrations.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

UN resolution creation specifically to address the lack of CSE in LEDC's

Most UN resolutions aim to limit the lack of general education without addressing CSE specifically. For Member States to implement and vote for a resolution that aims to enhance CSE presence globally, it must include feasible ways of how it will be provided. Furthermore, such resolutions should be based on evaluations or research conducted on countries where CSE is either considered controversial or does not exist at all, to offer a clear understanding of what hinders CSE presence.

Mandating sexual education in school curriculum models globally

To ensure that CSE is incorporated as part of global school curriculums, governments and judicial bodies should aim to create legal frameworks or mandates, that obligate schools to provide students medically and factually accurate sexuality education, especially in countries where sexual education is not included in school curriculums. If necessary, education ministries should cooperate with judicial bodies to establish legal penalties for schools that refuse to include CSE in their curricula.

Member State cooperation with organizations such as UNICEF and UNESCO to enhance CSE out of schools in LEDC's

In Least Economically Developed Countries (LEDC's), education is hindered by the lack of funds and resources, meaning that CSE is almost non-existent. Cooperating with NGO's and humanitarian organizations will not only allow children to become educated, it will

also provide sexuality education that will be delivered by specialists. Member States should attempt to cooperate with humanitarian organisations as a means of providing informal CSE to children of all ages by creating initiative programs in which sexual education will be the primary focus in countries where education is limited or lacks funding.

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