

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Sexuality education for youth is an issue that touches upon fundamental convictions of persons, communities, and populations, and it is natural to have a diversity of opinions about what should be taught at what age. However, public debate has oftentimes been infused with misconceptions, stigma and prejudice. Groups opposing the implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as a public policy argue that it constitutes a violation of children's rights. This resistance is often an illustration of a broader opposition to the full realisation of the human rights of specific groups, in particular of women, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons.

After issuing a call for inputs to the IE SOGI Report on Gender Equality, many submitters repeated verbatim a list of 14 supposed "harms" of CSE, including that it sexualizes children, "normalizes" and "promotes" sexual pleasure and non-procreative sex acts, and undermines parental rights. Some have even equated it to pornography and linked the subject to paedophilia. No credible evidence exists to support any of these claims, while the health benefits of CSE are well documented.

Contrary to concerns elicited in anti-gender narratives, studies have demonstrated that comprehensive sexuality education programs can reduce the rates of sexual activi-

ty, sexual risk behaviors (for example, number of partners and unprotected intercourse), sexually transmitted infections, and adolescent pregnancy. CSE is an indispensable tool to promote gender equality, because the lack of access to that wealth of information is particularly damaging to girls, as they are the group most at risk of suffering serious or lifelong setbacks, including unplanned pregnancies and injuries during gestation or childbirth.

On that account, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has urged States to adopt comprehensive gender and sexuality-sensitive sexual and reproductive health policies for youth, emphasizing that unequal access to such information, commodities and services amounts to discrimination. In its General Comment N. 20, the Committee recommends that "all adolescents should have access to free, confidential, age-appropriate and non-discriminatory sexual and reproductive health services".

Furthermore, to dispel concerns about what information is shared with youth, it's important to establish participatory and culturally sensitive approaches that are appropriate to the student's age. To that effect, UNESCO has indicated that sexuality education has the most impact when school-based programmes are complemented with the involvement of parents and teachers, training institutes and youth-friendly services.

"CSE aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives."

International Guidance
on Sexual Education, UNESCO



Fostering inclusion

The IE SOGI recalls the findings of treaty bodies that schools are important sites for fostering inclusion. Comprehensive gender and sexuality education is the main tool to deconstruct stigma that lies as a powerful root cause for violence and discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. It has the power to promote the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, as well as deconstructing stereotypes about sex, sexuality, pleasure, and prevent gender-based violence.

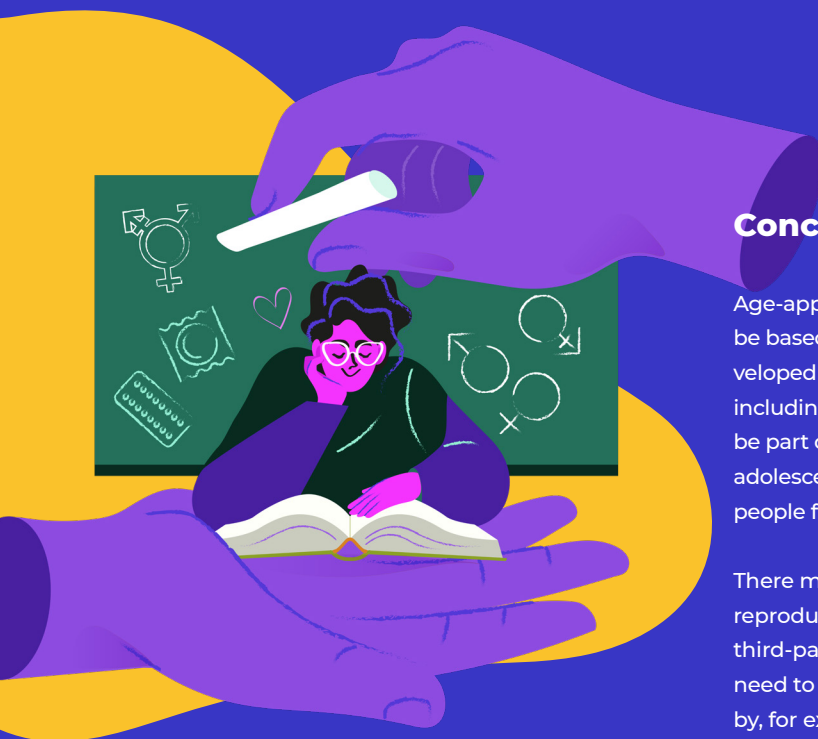
A safe learning environment where LGBTI youth feels supported by their teachers, parents and fellow students has a direct impact on indicators of education and mental health for key populations. Conversely, the IE SOGI has been able to observe in his fact-finding missions that the lack of inclusive sexuality education can negatively affect students and deprive the State of knowledge about the needs and well-being of LGBTI pupils in primary and sec-

ondary education, the abuses and challenges they face and the impact on their educational achievements.

The negative impact caused by non-inclusive sexuality education was also addressed by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women:

“Schools perpetuate and reinforce social prejudices, often as a result of the poor implementation of policies by school governance bodies, as well as irregular enforcement of non-discrimination policies by teachers, principals and other school authorities. Limited education and cultural taboos are among the factors that prevent lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex students from achieving social mobility and increase their vulnerability to violence”.

CEDAW, General comment N. 36 (2017), para. 45



Conclusion

Age-appropriate, comprehensive gender and sexuality education must be based on scientific evidence and human rights standards and developed with the participation of as many involved parties as possible, including parents, children, the community and youth itself. It should be part of the mandatory school curriculum, and reach out-of-school adolescents as well - always being taught in a way that makes young people feel comfortable and safe.

There must be no barriers to information on inclusive sexual and reproductive health and related rights, such as requirements for third-party consent or authorization. In addition, particular efforts need to be made to overcome barriers of stigma and fear experienced by, for example, adolescent girls, girls with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex adolescents, in gaining access to such services.

CSE stimulates discussions about family life, relationships, culture and gender roles, and also addresses human rights, gender equality, and threats such as discrimination and sexual abuse. It can help build societies that are better equipped to acknowledge and address gender-based injustices, laying the foundation for a world that is more diverse, free and equal.