

## Learning about sex

Unquestionably, HIV and sexuality are related; the most common way HIV is acquired is by sexual transmission. Still, in many HIV prevention programmes, knowledge about HIV and AIDS is imparted without any open and frank discussion of sex, sexuality and sexual relationships. Many young people lack the knowledge and skills to decide for themselves whether they would like to be sexually active or not. The messages about sex they receive from relatives, teachers, peers and the media are often conflicting, from 'stay abstinent until you marry' on the one hand to 'have sex as much as you can' on the other. What young people need is comprehensive sexuality education, which is being advocated by many organizations but is still unavailable in most schools. Talking and learning about sex is considered taboo almost everywhere, and especially for unmarried young people.

This issue of *Exchange* is about learning about sex. The first article describes the advantages of comprehensive sexuality education over abstinence-until-marriage education, while the second argues that sex education could be much improved if the language young people use to talk about sex would be explored in group sessions. This would encourage them to reflect on their own attitudes and stereotypes with regards to gender relations and sex-related issues. The third article sheds some light on the lack of counselling on sexuality for young people who are living with HIV and the fourth gives the outcomes of an online discussion on sexual rights of young people in Asia. Finally, in the last article, entitled *Our Sexuality, Our Stories*, an interesting initiative in Kenya is described, where women and men, most of them HIV positive, form collectives to talk and learn about sex.

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## Comprehensive sexuality education: recognizing the realities of young people's lives

**Today's generation of youth is the largest ever. While adolescence is a time for growth and learning, youth increasingly confront multiple threats to their health and well-being such as violence, early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. At the same time, youth are our greatest hope for the future and therefore need information and skills to protect themselves from harm and to make free, informed and responsible decisions about sex and reproduction. The time to entrust young people with the right, and equip them with the tools, to build a healthy and egalitarian future is now. Though the rapid physical and sexual maturation boys and girls experience during puberty is widely understood, discussing sexuality is still taboo in many countries. Youth today face, and are expected to process, conflicting messages about sexuality and sex in an increasingly technological and information-oriented society. They get information from a wide variety of sources including their peers, parents, popular media and websites. Some of this information is accurate, while some is not. Therefore misconceptions about sex can and do spread.**

Today, nearly half of the global population is under age 25. Many young people are already sexually active and vulnerable to STIs, HIV, unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and sexual coercion or violence. Research shows that in many countries, 30% or more of young men and women experience intercourse before the age of 15. For some, it occurs because sexual 'play' is common; for others, it takes place within marriage. And, while misinformation regarding the risks and consequences of unsafe sex among adolescents is often widespread, few young people have access to accurate information and services to

empower them to practise safer sex. As a result of inadequate attention to these issues, more than 25 years into the AIDS pandemic, the need to educate and protect those who are sexually active has never been so critical. According to UNAIDS, 6,000 new HIV infections occur among youth between the ages of 14 and 25 each day. Today, almost 12 million youth are living with HIV, and more than half are female. Because of the pandemic, youth face a shorter adulthood: life expectancy has fallen by as much as 20 years in countries where up to a third of the population is HIV positive.

In response, an increasing number of educators, policymakers and non-governmental organizations throughout the world are calling for comprehensive sexuality education programmes that strongly emphasize sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality. Providing complete and accurate sexuality education is about adding to teens' existing knowledge and correcting misinformation they might have in a safe and confidential setting. Curricula must treat sexuality as an important and positive part of social development, while teaching young people behaviour that is responsible, respectful and non-violent. This brand of education is

designed to help youth develop their identities and live healthy lives by giving them information, answering their questions, and providing spaces to discuss sexuality, relationships and their changing bodies.

At the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994, representatives of 179 countries agreed that adolescents have a right to information regarding their reproductive and sexual health. The compelling need for high-quality programmes and services has been reaffirmed in subsequent United Nations agreements reached, for example, at the Special Session on Children in 2002 and the High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS in June 2006.

### The failure of abstinence-until-marriage

International leaders confirm that sexuality education could have a dramatic impact on curbing the AIDS pandemic, decreasing the number of unwanted pregnancies and resulting complications, and empowering girls and women to exercise their right to sexual and reproductive self-determination. However, conservative ideology, fear and religious values often prevent the implementation of this type of education. Some argue that an 'abstinence-until-marriage' approach to sex education is the way to prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancies among teens. In the United States, billions of dollars are funneled annually to fund abstinence-until-marriage programmes domestically, as well as in countries hardest hit by the AIDS pandemic through PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief). PEPFAR mandates that at least 33% of all funds for global HIV prevention be directed to this approach.

However, two independent reviews of PEPFAR have found little evidence that abstinence-only can stand alone as an effective HIV prevention measure.<sup>1-2</sup> An independent analysis of US domestic abstinence-until-marriage programmes found no evidence that these programmes increased rates of sexual abstinence: students in the abstinence-until-marriage

programmes had a similar number of sexual partners as their peers not in the programmes, as well as a similar age of first sex.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the claims of abstinence-only advocates, there is also no proof that comprehensive sexuality education programmes promote promiscuity.

While there are no findings supporting the claim that abstinence-until-marriage programmes delay sexual activity or promote abstinence, studies have found that comprehensive sexuality education reduces risky and coercive sexual behaviour among

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adolescents. A 2005 analysis studied the outcomes of 83 adolescent sexuality education programmes in developing and developed countries.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the study found strong evidence that comprehensive sexuality education programmes improve knowledge about HIV and STIs, and lead to increased condom use and communication among partners. It also found that core characteristics of these programmes – creating a safe environment, assessing the needs of young people they were targeting and encouraging preventative behaviour – were effective in both community and school settings, and in developing and developed countries.



Students at a FESADE-led sexuality education session



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Sexuality education at schools can assist young people to develop self-esteem and to understand and care for their bodies

### Recognizing the realities of young people's lives

It is time to ensure that unbiased, complete and intelligent information that addresses the needs and experiences of young people will be available to them. Recognizing the realities of young women's and men's lives – particularly their need to know about their bodies and their sexual rights and responsibilities – is imperative during this formative stage and must be reflected in sexuality education curricula. Sexuality and relationships education should begin early and intensify and adapt as youth get older, and must take place in a variety of settings, including schools, health centres, communities and families.

**Curricula must treat sexuality as an important and positive part of social development, while teaching young people behaviour that is responsible, respectful and non-violent**

This is not unexplored territory: several organizations and agencies are dedicated to changing prevailing approaches to sexuality education and providing new thinking and materials on this issue. The challenge is not a lack of materials: the task is getting them to the people who need them. With this insight, the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) compiled *Positively*

*Informed* (2004), a resource guide on developing and implementing gender-sensitive, rights-based comprehensive sexuality education. The guide includes culturally-adaptable lesson plans and materials from organizations and agencies such as the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey.<sup>5</sup> Educators and non-governmental organizations throughout the world have used these lesson plans and materials to develop and implement sexuality education programmes in diverse settings, and the demand for this information remains high.

Non-governmental organizations have demonstrated that these programmes can be successfully implemented in even the most conservative settings. In Cameroon in April 2007, IWHC's longtime partner Femmes, Santé, Développement (FESADE – Women, Health, Development), launched a sexuality education curriculum endorsed by the Minister of Health and supported by the Ministry of Primary Education. The curriculum is unlike any other in Cameroon because it was developed with the input of young people. It does not just give young people biological information about their health: it teaches them what respectful, rights-based relationships are and how to achieve them. It also educates young people

about communication, boundaries, decision-making and how to say 'no' and fosters positive sexuality. The curriculum helps young people to develop self-esteem and to understand and care for their bodies. It empowers the youth to protect themselves and each other in an age when HIV infections continue to rise.

Youth today face challenges beyond the imaginings of prior generations. It is the obligation of schools, communities, parents and government leaders to prepare young people for a rapidly changing, and often perplexing, world. Youth need information, not ignorance, to pass safely into adulthood, and it is our moral obligation to ensure that young people in every community and nation have the opportunity to build better and healthier lives for themselves and their families. ■

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