



A student making a sign of “sex” in sign language

## Sexuality education in Vietnam: benchmarks for sign language

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About 250 million people world-wide have hearing-impairments and four million of them are Vietnamese. The hearing-impaired people in Vietnam are some of the most disadvantaged individuals in society and their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs have long been neglected.<sup>1</sup> Currently, there is no official data on their SRH problems. The combination of social discrimination against these people and the precariousness of essential social and health services, however, means that hearing-impaired people are often more vulnerable to SRH problems such as unplanned pregnancies, sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) and sexual abuse, than others. SRH education is therefore an important means to addressing these problems.

### Education for hearing-impaired children

In Vietnam, hearing-impaired adolescents, as well as other disabled people, have the right to go to school. However, educating the former requires teachers to have special skills and knowledge. Students with hearing-impairments who complete their primary schooling in rural areas soon discover that only secondary schools in urban areas have the necessary facilities for them. Yet rural learners rarely have the necessary resources to relocate to the urban areas and so have to remain in the

rural areas where secondary schools are not well-equipped to meet their needs. Those who complete schooling soon join the labour force equipped with limited life-skills, especially SRH knowledge.

Sign language has also been a problem for the hearing-impaired. Up to now, there has been no national standard sign language system in Vietnam. The languages differ from region to region, and even among schools in a given region or area. As result, students with hearing impairments have limited vocabulary and find it difficult to

communicate with disabled adolescents in other regions or areas.

However, there are some efforts to redress this situation. For example, early detection, intervention and education for hearing-impaired individuals are some of the seven priority areas identified in the Biwako Millennium Action Framework, that aims for an integrated and rights-based society that does not create barriers for disabled people. The Commission Biwako Millennium Action Framework's fifty-eighth session adopted a resolution in May 2002, on promoting an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society for people with disabilities in the Asian and Pacific region in the twenty-first century. It also extended the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993-2002) by another decade (2003-2012).

Education programmes under this framework are designed and implemented according to the needs of the hearing-

## Lessons learned

- Students with hearing-impairments who complete their primary schooling in rural areas soon discover that only secondary schools in urban areas have the necessary facilities for them.
- Parents cannot provide the necessary SRH information to their children at home as they lack sign language skills.
- Teachers who have not been trained sufficiently to convey SRH information through sign language cannot effectively internalise reproductive health knowledge from textbooks and convey it to students.
- There is no standard sign language and teachers are not equipped with a specific SRH education curriculum for hearing-impaired students that can also be delivered through sign language.

impaired as well as their surrounding community. The framework recognises that any learning content applied to other children can also be relevant for the hearing-impaired ones, with the aim that both have an independent life after graduating from high school<sup>2</sup>; and can fully access resources, learn new life-skills and build high self-esteem.

## Teaching sexual and reproductive health

The basic aim of teaching SRH for adolescents in general and the hearing-impaired in particular, is for them to become physiologically mature and mentally ready to deal with the emotions that characterise their development. This enables them to be aware of the consequences of sex. Hearing-impaired children and adolescents face many challenges due to their lack of SRH knowledge. The situation is compounded by lack of access to correct and adequate SRH information; lack of special SRH, HIV and AIDS education programmes in schools, as well as specialist teachers and counsellors. Yet parents cannot provide the necessary information to their children at home as they lack sign language skills.

Vietnam's hearing-impaired students face two main difficulties in getting SRH-related information. There is an absence of a standard sign language and teachers who are equipped with a specific SRH education curriculum for hearing-impaired students that can also be delivered through sign language. Also, sexual and reproductive

health materials targeting secondary school students, the highest learning level that hearing-impaired students can achieve so far, simply contain male and female bodily physiology, body hygiene or signs of puberty. Other essential SRH issues such as sexuality, pregnancy or delivery are not included.

Besides, SRH vocabulary in sign language is also rare, since it caters only for simple words such as "girl" or "boy". Therefore, teachers, especially those who have not been trained sufficiently in SRH teaching methodologies, content and skills to convey SRH information through sign language, cannot effectively internalise reproductive health knowledge from textbooks and

convey it to students. This is compounded by an acute shortage of teaching aids for subjects related to SRH.

## The Xa Dan schools experiment

Since April 2007, World Population Foundation (WPF) has conducted an SRH educational intervention in Xa Dan schools (Hanoi city, Vietnam) for hearing-impaired students. The intervention has three components: developing an SRH (including HIV and AIDS) curriculum for deaf students; creating the first SRH sign language glossary in Vietnam, and providing SRH knowledge and teaching skills for teachers. A comprehensive study is also being carried out to assess the real situation of Vietnamese hearing-impaired students' SRH knowledge, attitudes and practices, and to gauge the effectiveness of current SRH education models for hearing-impaired students in Vietnam. More than 300 students and 40 teachers from the seven main schools for the deaf around Vietnam have been interviewed as part of the study. The research data has not yet been analysed, but all the respondents (students and teachers) expressed the need for a comprehensive SRH education programme.

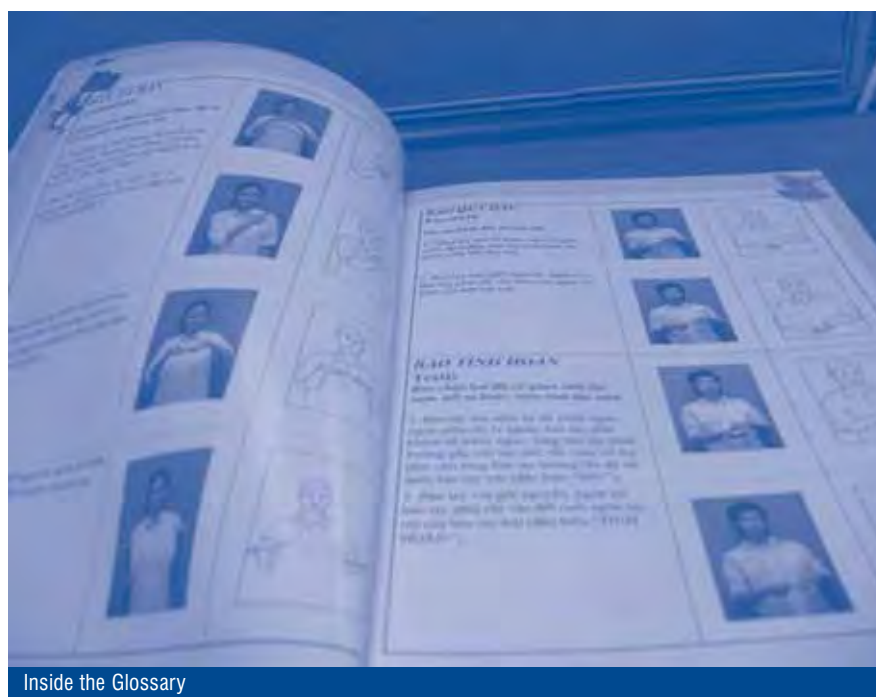
A major outcome expected from the project is an appropriate SRH training package



Students in Xa Dan School sing their national anthem

developed specifically for hearing-impaired students. In early 2008, an SRH curriculum consultant from the Ministry of Education and Training adapted the content and methodology from a WPF SRH curriculum book for hearing high school students, based on comments of teachers from Xa Dan School. The adapted book was then reviewed by an international consultant and WPF's project officers. The book was pre-tested among Xa Dan School teachers in November and finalised by the end of the year. The development of the SRH glossary involved a group of consultants from the Ministry of Education and Training, WPF, teachers and Xa Dan School students. The new curriculum, together with the sign language glossary and the teaching aids, has been in use since January this year.

The SRH curriculum comprises 16 topics with 54 class hours that cover almost all aspects of reproductive health, such as body change at puberty; contraception, and HIV testing. This is the first time for



Inside the Glossary

Photo: WPF, Vietnam

language is applied by teachers to accurately transfer the SRH knowledge provided by the new education programme to hearing-impaired students. There are about 400 words in the glossary which supplement the SRH vocabulary of students.

A series of training courses on SRH, basic HIV and AIDS knowledge and SRH and HIV counselling are provided to teachers who work with hearing-impaired students to ensure that they are fully equipped with the necessary knowledge. A counselling room is available in each school. The room, which is equipped with SRH videos, leaflets and books, is also used for providing friendly and confidential counselling in sign language for hearing-impaired students.

### Recommendations

Although this pilot education intervention is only 50 per cent complete (it will be completed by the end of 2009), it has attracted significant attention from the relevant authorities and from the affected communities. The research will evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and make recommendations to the Vietnamese government for changes, if needed. About 50 students drawn from grades six to nine at Xa Dan School aged above

11 years are participating in the pilot programme.

Research will be carried out to gauge the knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) in SRH among Vietnamese hearing-impaired students at Xa Dan Secondary School, with the aim of assessing the impact of the programme. Recommendations will be made for scaling up the project nationally if the project succeeds. The World Population Foundation and Xa Dan schools expect that the intervention will open a new chapter in SRH education for Vietnam's deaf students. ■

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Photo: WPF, Vietnam



Sexual and reproductive health curriculum for hearing-impaired students

Sexual Reproductive Health Glossary in sign language

SRH to be taught as an independent learning subject in Vietnam. Extra-curricular activities are great opportunities for hearing-impaired students to practise knowledge, attitude and skills acquired from this curriculum. The SRH glossary in sign

1. United Nation Population Fund. 2007. Emerging Issues: Sexual and Reproductive Health of Person with disabilities. UNFPA.
2. Beatriz C Warth Raymann. Providing educational services for children with hearing impairment; Community Ear and Hearing Health, 2004. 1; 1 – 16. Issue No 1.