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Review article

Sexuality Education: Emerging Trends in Evidence and Practice

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 A B S T R A C T

The International Conference on Population and Development and related resolutions have repeatedly called on governments to provide adolescents and young people with comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Drawing from these documents, reviews and meta-analyses of program evaluations, and situation analyses, this article summarizes the elements, effectiveness, quality, and country-level coverage of CSE. Throughout, it highlights the matter of a gender and rights perspective in CSE. It presents the policy and evidence-based rationales for emphasizing gender, power, and rights within programs—including citing an analysis finding that such an approach has a greater likelihood of reducing rates of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy—and notes a recent shift toward this approach. It discusses the logic of an “empowerment approach to CSE” that seeks to empower young people—especially girls and other marginalized young people—to see themselves and others as equal members in their relationships, able to protect their own health, and as individuals capable of engaging as active participants in society.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is gaining acceptance globally. CSE is most effective when it highlights a gender and rights perspective. An empowerment approach to CSE promises to empower young people to protect their own health.

In response to young people's needs for information and skills to protect their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and lives, the global community has taken a series of measures to establish a policy framework for such education. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development's (ICPD) Programme of Action, often referred to as the Cairo agenda, explicitly calls on governments to provide sexuality education to promote the well-being of adolescents and specifies key features of such education [1]. It clarifies that such education should take place both in schools and at the community level, be age appropriate, begin as early as possible, and foster mature

decision making. ICPD+5 reinforces and further specifies the commitment of governments to provide formal and nonformal SRH information as part of promoting the well-being of adolescents.

These agreements also specifically aim to ameliorate gender inequality. For example, the ICPD Programme of Action articulates that programs address not only SRH and sexuality but also gender relations and equality, and violence against adolescents. ICPD+5 reinforces the call for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as part of “promoting the well-being of adolescents, enhancing gender equality and equity as well as responsible sexual behavior, to protect them from early and unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases including human immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV)/AIDS, and sexual abuse, incest and violence” (para 35 [b]) [2]. In 2009 and 2012, the Commission on Population and Development reaffirmed this, approving resolutions that called upon governments to provide young people with comprehensive education not only on human

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sexuality and SRH but also on gender equality and human rights, to enable them to deal positively and responsibly with their sexuality [3,4].¹ Similarly, other international agreements such as the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion articulate the effects of underlying or enabling conditions on health [6]. These documents reflect the interrelatedness of sexual health problems (such as sexually transmitted infections [STIs]/HIV), gender inequality, and human rights violations (such as intimate-partner violence) and clarify that the goals of sexuality education must inherently integrate these domains.²

The two decades since ICPD have seen efforts to clarify the definition of CSE and to implement, evaluate, and improve the quality of programs. This article reviews progress in each of these areas. Because the approach to gender has been particularly salient in each of these areas, this issue is highlighted throughout this article.

Defining Sexuality Education

In recent years, international agencies, such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and numerous researchers and practitioners have, as part of promoting CSE, reiterated the call for emphasizing social context—especially gender and rights—within programs. For example, to clarify all the elements that constitute CSE, UNFPA (2014) specifies the following in its operational guidance for CSE [10]:

- (1) a basis in values and human rights of all individuals as a core component, not an add-on;
- (2) thorough and scientifically accurate information about human rights, gender norms, and power in relationships, (including consent and decision making, sexual coercion, intimate-partner and gender-based violence, and sexual diversity); the body, puberty, and reproduction; relationships, communication, and decision-making; and sexual health (including STIs/HIV and AIDS, unintended pregnancy, condoms and contraception, and how to access health and other support services);
- (3) a gender focus (gender norms and gender equality) as a stand-alone topic and also infused across other CSE topics; moreover, such gender content dovetails with efforts to keep girls in school and to promote an egalitarian learning environment;
- (4) a safe and healthy learning environment;
- (5) effective teaching approaches that are participatory, help learners personalize information, and strengthen their skills

¹ See also the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women Platform for Action, which states that “Actions to be taken by Governments, international bodies including relevant United Nations organizations, bilateral and multilateral donors, and nongovernmental organizations [...] (k) Give full attention to the promotion of mutually respectful and equitable gender relations and, in particular, to meeting the educational and service needs of adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality” [5].

² These policy commitments have also been highlighted in various regional and high-level documents, including the 2005 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol [7]), and the Latin American Ministerial Declaration [8] articulating a commitment by all countries in that region to provide sexuality education. In 2010, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Education [9] further emphasized that sexuality education should “focus on gender norms, roles and relationships.”

in communication and decision making and in critical thinking;

- (6) youth advocacy and civic engagement in program design but also in empowering learners beyond the curriculum, as agents in their own lives and leaders in their communities;
- (7) cultural appropriateness, tailored as needed for distinct subpopulations.

Other international agencies such as UNESCO and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) also advocate for a CSE approach that recognizes and promotes human rights; gender equality; and the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for HIV prevention and sexual health [11–13]. The International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE): Volume 1 [14], which carries the logos of UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS), UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, and World Health Organization (WHO), within one of the characteristics of effective programs, notes gender in its description of a key curriculum characteristic: “In order to be effective at reducing sexual risk behavior, curricula need to examine critically and address these gender inequalities and stereotypes” (Vol.1, p.20, ITGSE).

This emphasis is not simply a topic add-on. Rather, it rests on the view that sexuality education seeks explicitly to empower young people—especially girls and other marginalized young people—to see themselves and others as equal members in their relationships, able to protect their own health, and as individuals capable of engaging as active participants in society. Although the mandate to emphasize underlying or enabling conditions affecting health is articulated in such documents as the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, ICPD, and other international agreements, the sexuality education field has only gradually, and sometimes unevenly, begun to integrate this approach. Indeed, relatively few CSE programs address empowerment or gender equality in meaningful, consistent ways [15,16].

How to succinctly characterize such programs in ways that reflect and reinforce the evolving shift has been a challenge. Unfortunately, terminology has remained imprecise. Although CSE is clearly contrasted with “abstinence-only” education (abstinence-only refers to programs that exclusively promote abstinence and do not provide information about condoms and contraception, whereas CSE provides accurate information about condoms and contraception, sexuality, and reproduction), the other elements encompassed by the CSE label varies. Many international documents—including documents by the authors of this article—have resorted to somewhat awkward add-ons to the CSE label, such as “gender sensitive,” “gender-and-power-focused,” “gender-transformative,” “critical-thinking-oriented,” “rights-based,” “citizenship-oriented,” and “empowerment-oriented” to specify that these elements are included. Because it is useful to distinguish between CSE programs that do and do not address gender/power, for this article, we use the term “conventional CSE” to refer to programs that address condoms/contraception but fail to emphasize gender/power. Borrowing from Gutierrez et al. [17] and from numerous on-the-ground programs, we refer to an “empowerment approach to CSE” to refer more explicitly to sexuality and HIV education programs that do emphasize gender/power, to explicitly name the most neglected or poorly understood elements identified in the ICPD, and to more fully

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