




## Does sexuality education and comprehensive sexuality education matter? An inaugural statement on global policy, progress, and challenges

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**Abstract** – This inaugural statement explores the significance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in promoting gender equality, preventing gender-based violence, and improving the health and well-being of adolescents. It underscores the importance of inclusive, school-based sexuality education that equips learners with the knowledge, skills, and values needed for informed sexual and reproductive health decisions. Drawing on global research and policy developments, the statement highlights progress and persistent challenges in delivering quality CSE across various education systems worldwide.

**Keywords:** Comprehensive sexuality education, School-based sexuality education, Sexuality education

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### I. COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

OVER the past several decades, there has been significant progress in developing sexuality education curricula both globally and locally.

As CSE evolves, it reflects a holistic, inclusive, and rights-based approach to sexual development essential for equipping young people to lead safe, informed, and healthy lives. Sexuality education programmes are typically categorised into two main approaches: Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and Abstinence-Only or Abstinence-Only Until Marriage (AOUM). This division traces back to the global response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the late 20th century, which underscored the urgent need for formal sexuality education in schools (Irvine, 2004; Kee-Jiar & Shih-Hui, 2020). Faced with a growing public health crisis, even conservative voices that had previously opposed any form of sex education began advocating for programmes that aligned with their moral and cultural values, giving rise to the AOUM industry. These programmes promote abstinence as the sole method of prevention and often exclude critical information about contraception, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

In contrast, CSE is grounded in evidence, human rights, and inclusivity. According to UNESCO (2023), CSE is designed to equip young people with accurate, age-appropriate information to help them make informed, responsible decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. Unlike AOUM, CSE includes a broad range of topics: the benefits of abstinence, contraception, STI and HIV prevention, consent, healthy relationships, gender equality, and sexual diversity. Kee-Jiar and Shih-Hui (2020) emphasise that the fundamental distinction between CSE and AOUM lies in their underlying principles, while AOUM is prescriptive and morality-based, CSE is learner-centered and focused on empowerment and harm reduction.

Public opinion research also supports the shift toward CSE. Astle et al. (2021) indicated that, regardless of political ideology, most U.S. adults favoured a balanced approach to sexuality education, precisely what CSE offers. More recent data from the Guttmacher Institute (2024) confirms that over 75% of American parents support school-based sex education that includes information on both abstinence and contraception. In addition, CSE curricula have become increasingly

inclusive, addressing the needs and realities of LGBTQ+ youth, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups.

### II. WHY COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION MATTERS

Recognising these challenges, leading international organisations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have emphasised the importance of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that is grounded in human rights, gender equality, and scientific accuracy. According to UNESCO's Revised International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (2023), CSE should not be treated as an optional or supplemental subject but an essential component of quality education. The guidance outlines the inclusion of critical topics such as human rights, gender norms, consent, sexual and reproductive health, sexual diversity, and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence. Importantly, CSE is not merely informational; it is transformational. It uses participatory teaching methods to build learners' communication, decision-making, and critical thinking skills. It also fosters safe, inclusive, and empowering learning environments, particularly for girls and marginalised youth, thereby contributing to broader goals of educational equity, gender justice, and youth empowerment. Furthermore, programmes that integrate youth advocacy and civic engagement promote active citizenship by enabling young people to become agents of change in their communities. UNESCO (2023) notes that CSE's cultural adaptability ensures its relevance and effectiveness across diverse social and educational contexts.

### III. POLICIES ON SCHOOL-BASED SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Since its emergence in the early twentieth century, school-based sexuality education (SBSE) has been the subject of intense debate, particularly around its inclusion in public schools, its objectives, and the content of its curriculum. These debates often reflect deeper tensions about cultural values, educational priorities, and the role of the state in shaping young people's understanding of sexuality. As a result, there is significant inconsistency in SBSE policies across different countries and even within countries, particularly in federal or decentralised education systems. This uneven implementation has led to a fragmented

distribution of knowledge about sexual health, gender, consent, and relationships. These disparities contribute to educational and social inequities, where access to accurate, rights-based sexuality education is uneven, resulting in long-term impacts on health, equality, and empowerment. In contrast, others are left uninformed or misinformed, leading to detrimental and divisive societal outcomes.

#### IV. GLOBAL PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING CSE

While some countries have made notable progress in advancing CSE, significant gaps remain in ensuring equitable and effective delivery. CSE plays a vital role in supporting children's and adolescents' well-being by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and values they need to make healthy, responsible choices about their sexuality throughout life. Drawing on global perspectives, recent evidence suggests growing momentum toward integrating CSE into national education systems. Many countries now have laws or policies that support sexuality education, especially at the secondary education level. However, fewer countries have mandated CSE at the primary level, despite research emphasising the importance of early, age-appropriate instruction (UNAIDS & WHO, 2021).

Crucially, the presence of policy frameworks does not always translate into comprehensive content or strong implementation. While most countries report having sexuality education curricula, further analysis reveals that many lack the depth and breadth needed to address key topics such as gender equality, consent, and sexual diversity. Moreover, despite evident efforts in teacher training, studies show that many educators feel unprepared or uncomfortable delivering sexuality education due to insufficient training and support.

Students, too, report dissatisfaction. In an extensive regional survey of young people aged between 15 and 24 years old from Asia and the Pacific, only 28% of respondents believed their schools provided effective sexuality education (UNAIDS & WHO, 2021). Many young people expressed that they received the information too late and would have preferred to start learning about these topics earlier in their schooling (UNAIDS & WHO, 2021). Additionally, opposition to CSE, often based on misinformation or cultural misconceptions, remains a significant barrier in many regions.

Despite these challenges, the involvement of communities, including parents, educators, religious leaders, the media, and young people, has fostered a more supportive environment for CSE implementation in several countries. To sustain and expand progress, UNAIDS and WHO (2021) recommend that governments establish clear mandates and adequate funding for sexuality education programmes, invest in curriculum reform and teacher training, and strengthen monitoring systems to ensure quality and accountability in CSE delivery.

#### V. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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