

The need for comprehensive sexuality education

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With the introduction of the ‘New Education Policy’, the debate on Comprehensive Sexuality Education has knocked the doors of young scholars, academicians, parents and diaspora. Every young individual will one day grow up into being an adult who will then have to decide on their sexual and reproductive health. It is, however, widely believed that the majority of youngsters lack the knowledge required to make those decisions responsibly, exposing them vulnerable to coercion, sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancy.

Comprehensive sexuality education empowers young people to protect their health, well-being and dignity. These programmes are based on human rights principles, they promote gender equality and the rights of young people.

The concept of Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum that encompasses a rights-based and gender-focused approach to sexuality education leading to the process of creating awareness and knowledge providing insights into the emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. Programmes that expand over several years, provide age-appropriate information consistent with the evolving capacities of young people. It equips children and young people with education that aims to create a holistic environment where they will be empowered about their sexuality; decisions of wellbeing and dignity; development of social and sexual relationships and protect their rights throughout their lives.

Comprehensive sexuality education involves scientifically backed information about human development and reproductive health, as well as details about contraception, childbirth and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

Going beyond the pursuit of information helps the young generation to explore positive values regarding their sexuality, sexual and reproductive health. This education includes discussions about family environment, relationships, gender and roles culture, and also takes into account human rights, gender equality, and concepts of discrimination and sexual abuse. When taken together, these programmes aid young people in the process of developing self-esteem and life skills that encourage, clear communication, respectful behaviour, critical thinking and responsible decision-making.

The need for comprehensive sexuality education

More often than not, young people encounter confusing and conflicting information about sex and relationships, as they grow into adulthood. When delivered efficiently and effectively, it responds to the demand of children for reliable information, enabling young people to make knowledgeable decisions about relationships and sexuality empowering them to traverse a world where gender inequality, early and unintended pregnancies, gender-based violence, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) pose a serious threat to their health and well-being. Similarly, lacking high-quality, developmentally appropriate sexuality and relationship education may expose children and young people to the vulnerability of harmful sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation.

It empowers young people to know and demand their rights. The rights to education and health are also embedded in many international agreements, including the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1994.

Sex education provided to the children in schools have resulted in a delayed first experience of sexual activity among adolescents. A decrease in the frequency of intercourse, unprotected sex, the number of sexual partners and a surge in the use of condom and contraceptive use and knowledge of human anatomy, sexuality, and behaviour.

Some lesser-known facts about CSE are as follows:

1. It does not lead to riskier sexual behaviour or early sexual activity.
2. These programmes reduce risky behaviours.
3. Studies about abstinence programmes are either indecisive or prove abstinence-only education to be ineffective.
4. Adequate training and support is a prerequisite to deliver high-quality comprehensive sexuality education.
5. Addressing gender and power issues has proved to be resulting in better health outcomes.
6. Essentially, the curricula must be customised to a specific context, age-appropriate syllabi and needs of young people.

7. Also, engaging parents and communities as part of this education are critical in the overall development and success of these programmes.

A matter of human rights

The decisions about sexual and reproductive choices by young people can have a trickle-down effect on their human rights. Teenage pregnancy, for example, can lead girls to drop out of school, which deprives them of their right to education. Poor understanding of gender equality can lead to discrimination. Every day we encounter reports of rape, sexual abuse, rise in the number of STDs', teenage pregnancies, and remain oblivious to the fact that children are exposed to all sorts of situations where adequate and appropriate information about sex education will, most likely, result into helping them to make the right decision.

Importance of Sex Education in Schools

Adolescents are curious about their bodies and bodily urges. At this stage of life, if they do not receive information about what they are going through or why they are feeling all those emotions, they inevitably explore on their own. The workshops in schools are structurally confined to the difference between good-touch and bad-touch. This topic is important but only sheds light on one aspect of sex education. Parents are reluctant to talk to their kids about sex and sexuality. Likewise, adolescents would rather like to hear it from a third party individual or group than their parents. The scenario makes the importance of schools to step in, the need of the hour. Backing the above said, the following statistical data proves the need for CSE:

1. In research done by The Guttmacher Institute, it was seen that students who were given Sex Education in Schools, waited longer to have sex for the first time than those who weren't given any information.
2. In a study on Child Abuse in India, a shocking 53% of children between the ages of 5 and 12 have been subjected to sexual abuse.

What Are The Government's Initiatives?

The Indian education system needs Sex Education in Schools to be able to provide children with scientifically backed information which leaves them less susceptible to gaining the same information from an unverified source. Knowledge about sex and sexuality will only solve problems, contrary to the popular belief that it leaves the young generation vulnerable to the early onset of sexual desires and relationships. Sex education in India has always been a controversial topic. Similarly, Indian values and talking about sex do not necessarily consort.

The timeline can be narrowed down to the following:

1. In 2005, CBSE formulated the course structure of Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health Education (ARSH).
2. In 2007, Union Health Minister Harshvardhan openly condemned sex education in schools, which resulted in banning the sex education course as suggested by HRD in states such as Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Goa.
3. In 2010, NCERT came up with a conceptual framework that recognizes adolescents as a positive resource and focuses on the transformational potential of education in a rights framework.
4. According to NEP (National Education Policy) 2016, sex education will be implemented in schools as part of their curriculum.
5. NEP (National Education Policy) 2020 talks about providing "equitable quality education" to girls and transgender students. The policy describes the socially disadvantaged groups based on gender identities such as, "particularly female and transgender individuals."

The government formulates policies and programmes for the inclusion of sex education in its curriculum. However, the level of resistance makes the process of these policies resulting in a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum difficult and the day they will likely see light is even farther away. Educators and parents must come together and concur to fight for the right to give holistic education to their children. Sex education in India is taboo even after the 'modernised education and adoption of westernised ideology' because it is seen as an opportunity to promote sex, which is not even close to the truth. Let the teachers teach the science of sex and reproductive health while the parents can inherit morals and values. With morals and education in place, a brighter and healthier future is not as far as it seems.

The evidence and CSE

There is significant evidence on the impact of sexuality education on children. It highlights that:

1. Sexuality education has positive effects on the development of children, including improving their attitudes related to sexual and reproductive health and behaviours and an increase in young people's knowledge.
2. Sexuality education does not increase sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behaviour or STI/HIV infection rates.
3. Programmes that promote abstinence as the only option are ineffective in delaying sexual initiation, reducing the frequency of sex or reducing the number of sexual partners. Programmes that combine a focus on delaying sexual activity with other content are effective.
4. 'Gender-focused' programmes are substantially more effective than 'gender-blind' programmes at achieving health outcomes such as reducing rates of unintended pregnancy or STIs.
5. Sexuality education has the most impact when school-based programmes are complemented with the involvement of parents and teachers, institutions and youth-friendly services.

For Comprehensive Sexuality Education to deliver the positive results it promises, the following must be kept in consideration:

1. Comprehensive sexuality education needs to be medically accurate, evidence-based, and age-appropriate and should include the benefits of delaying sexual intercourse, while also providing information about normal reproductive development, contraception to prevent unintended pregnancies, as well as barrier protection to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
2. It should begin in early childhood and continue through a person's lifespan.
3. Programs should not only focus on reproductive development, prevention of STIs, and unintended pregnancy, but also teach about forms of sexual expression, healthy sexual and nonsexual relationships, gender identity and sexual orientation and questioning,

communication, recognizing and preventing sexual violence, consent, and decision making.

4. Obstetrician–gynaecologists can serve parents and communities by supporting and assisting sexuality education, developing evidence-based curricula that focus on clear health goals and providing health care that focuses on optimizing sexual and reproductive health and development. They have the unique opportunity to act “bi-generationally” by asking their patients about their adolescents’ reproductive development and sexual education, human papillomavirus vaccination status, and contraceptive needs.

New Education Policy and the concept Gender equality and inclusivity

NEP 2020 envisions expanding the plans of digital literacy and online learning for the students. In a country that is still struggling to ensure safe and equitable access for minority communities, a focus on digital and online learning reflects the misplaced priorities of the government. In a policy document, the usage of words often reflects the underlying priority of the drafting committee. A word search of the document of NEP shows that the word "online" appears 50 times, "digital" appears 36 times. In contrast, communities like lesbian, gay, bi-sexual find no mention in the policy.

The idea of inclusion, which empowers people by a way of respecting and appreciating their differences in terms of gender, caste, age, religion, sexual orientation, education, disability and nationality. NEP 2020 does, however, talks about providing "equitable quality education" to girls and transgender students. The policy describes the socially disadvantaged groups based on gender identities such as, “particularly female and transgender individuals,” but completely ignores the ones included from LGBTQIA+ (T already included) community. Located on an entire spectrum of gender and sexuality, these gender identities do not fall under a binary and hence makes the whole idea of inclusion ‘vague’. Gender issues are not necessarily specific to the transgender community or the females. Children discover their sexuality and gender throughout their adolescence and sometimes at a late stage in life. It is crucial to provide specific importance to LGBTQIA+. It is known that schools absolve society norms and act as potential institutions to reproduce norms that aim at equality and inclusion.

A policy document that claims to transform the educational arena of the country must provide specific measures for making schools safe and inclusive, especially for the underrepresented minorities. The dire need for inclusivity can be understood with the following data set:

1. A 2018 UNESCO study found that out of 400 LGBT+ youth, approximately 60 per cent of students were physically bullied in middle schools.
2. 43 per cent of students were sexually harassed in their primary school, based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

This physical or sexual bullying had drastic consequences for the students, with lower academic performance, low concentration in studies, a high proportion of students suffering from depression and anxiety, reduced social interactions, and some of them untimely dropping out of school. The government through the policy can no longer leave it for the schools to interpret how the inclusion and safety of all groups can be ensured. There is, now more than ever, a need to lay down concrete measures to handle the instances of bullying and victimisation, to ensure gender sensitisation of the school staff, and to contribute towards a healthier environment in schools. This policy, like others, highlights a silent approach to sexuality education. The crucial aspect of sexuality education leading to addressing gender issues cannot be undermined. It, possibly, reduces gender stereotypes to a great extent, enables students to understand the diverse gender identities, and can prove crucial in combating high dropout rates among the vulnerable groups. Statistical data to back the need and demand for CSE is as follows:

1. India has high rates of teenage pregnancies and sexual abuse. About 11 per cent of the world's teenage pregnancies, which numbers 16 million pregnancies, happen in India.
2. As per the recently released NCRB report, 109 children are sexually abused every day in India.
3. As per the National Family and Health Survey 4 data, around 27 per cent of girls in India get married before 18 years of age.

NEP 2020 was expected to incorporate programs that would help students expand their understanding of gender sexualities and relationships. It is crucial to start sex education early on. Previous studies have highlighted that starting sex education as early as kindergarten reduces the chances of sexual abuse of children. At kindergarten levels, the conversation can be about body parts, good touch, and bad touch. Normalising the conversations around sex and sexuality can help in reducing the cases of bullying, discrimination, and social isolation in the schools due to one's distinct sexuality.

The policy has, undoubtedly, become more gender-inclusive than before. With the inclusion of transgender and the usage of terms like “gender”, a landmark has been made in society. However, it forgets to incorporate the other minority communities, like the LGBQIIA+ and

leaves them susceptible to vulnerabilities of society. It is crucial to understand that education is needed to generate employment as well as to construct a world free of discrimination for all.

To conclude, it is an ideal context and time to raise awareness about the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women, including access to modern contraceptive measures and safe abortion. Existing sexuality education curricula has completely excluded LGBTQIA+ people and issues. The non-binary youth frequently face bullying at school and are at higher risk of falling prey to depression and anxiety because of non-conformation and rejection of their sexual orientation. Like all other children, they should be provided with sexuality education that meets their needs. Therefore, sexuality education must include information that is relevant to them, scientifically accurate and age-appropriate. This means helping children to understand sexual orientation and gender identity and dispelling common myths and stereotypes about LGBTI persons.

Discussions over the topic 'sex' continue to be taboo in India. It is often met with a plethora of hesitation and discomfort in the public discourse, especially regarding children and young people. It has been argued that education about sexuality is a personal matter and it goes against Indian culture or, in one way or the other, leads to immorality and promiscuity amongst adolescents. When efforts are made in the direction of sex education, they are limited to an abstinence-based and disease-prevention approach, covering information about the genitals, risks of sexual intercourse, menstrual health for girls, risks of sexual intercourse, including teenage pregnancies.

Comprehensive Sex Education will solve its purpose only if it is accepted by people, institutions and governments with open arms or at the very least with an open mindset. It will result in a lowered number of sexual interactions, teenage pregnancies, Sexually Transmitted Infections(STIs') including HIV and a holistically developed and knowledgeable young generation.