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Sexual Rights: Giving Young People a Voice

Sexual health matters – sexual rights even more

It is time we demystify sexual taboos and misconceptions

By Carine Weiss

Young people are sexual beings. They have sexual needs, desires, fantasies and dreams. There is a common misconception that young people are not, or should not be, sexual beings with the exception of certain groups, such as young people who are married or above a certain age. Too often, young people are excluded from exercising their sexual rights because of restrictive sexual and gender norms motivated by social, cultural and religious views and beliefs. Why? Because of sexual taboos and the denial that young people are sexual beings whether they are sexually active or not.



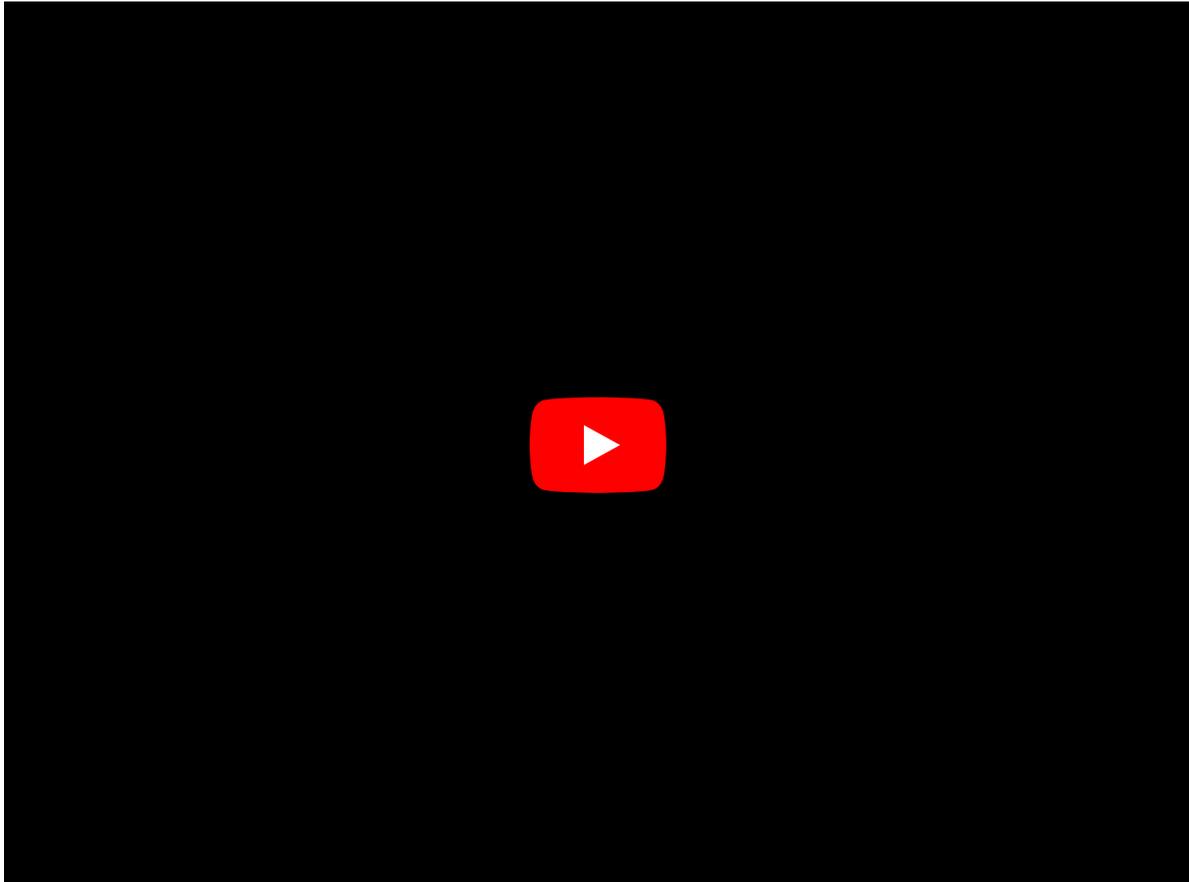
Photo by Devin Avery on Unsplash.

The world of public health is not yet prepared to talk about pleasure

At the MMS/aidsfocus.ch Conference I was blown away by the strength and power the young speakers demonstrated in their desire to fight for the sexual rights, health and pleasure of young people. Should, and do, young people enjoy having sex? Of course! Imagine a young girl in rural Asia who will be married off before the age of 18 and who is suddenly faced with sexual intercourse while not knowing anything about it. Stories like this trigger powerful feelings in me. Concentrating on pleasure may seem frivolous compared to child marriage, but there is evidence that teaching girls and women about pleasure empowers them to take control of their own sexuality (Hirst, J. et al. (2017) Initiatives to support the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and sex education work with young people). The pleasure-based approach taught at Love Matters emphasises placing pleasure and love at the heart of sex education while The Pleasure Project aims to put “the sexy into safe sex”. They promote safer sex by focusing on the real reasons most people want to have sex: satisfaction, desire and pleasure (Knerr, W. et al. (2011). Strange bedfellows).

Approaches like this can empower a girl from a rural area (or anywhere else in the world) to say no to marriage; to discuss the use of contraceptives with her husband; and even to delay her first pregnancy.

The aspect of pleasure is not yet mainstreamed in sex education. Public health discourse and campaigns tend to ignore sexual pleasure and desires and instead regard sex as a major contributor to the spread of disease, which therefore should be controlled or suppressed. The good news is that the World Health Organisation and the World Association for Sexual Health have now recognised sexual pleasure as a key component of sexual health (Knerr, W. et al. (2011). *Strange bedfellows*).



The pleasure project - putting the sexy into safer sex.

Let's get the definitions right

Young people are especially vulnerable to the violation of their sexual rights. During the preparations for the MMS/aidsfocus.ch Conference, I was confused by the terms 'sexual and reproductive rights' and realised that we often talk about these rights without knowing exactly what they mean. Obviously, there are overlaps between these two terms but they are distinctly different. For example, deciding on whether or not to have children is a sexual right as well as a reproductive right. However, not all aspects of sexuality are aimed at reproduction.

Sexual rights relate to a person's sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual behaviour and sexual health; whereas reproductive rights relate to a person's fertility, reproduction, reproductive health and parenthood (Exclaim! Young people's guide to "Sexual rights: an IPPF declaration", 2011) (Starrs, A. et al. (2018). Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all). (Download the handout to see the correct definitions).

Why do we struggle so much to accept that every human being is a sexual being who wants to have pleasure? Why do we still face so much shame, discrimination and stigma when it comes to sexuality?

There are 1.8 billion people aged between 10 and 24 in the world today. Young people around the globe need to be able to explore, experience and express their sexualities in healthy, positive, pleasurable and safe ways. This is only possible if sexual rights are assured and comprehensive sex education is conducted in an open and relaxed way by eliminating messages and attitudes that promote shame or fear about sex, sexual preferences and pleasure (Philpott, A. et al. (2006). Pleasure and Prevention: When Good Sex Is Safer Sex). We are missing the point if we talk about comprehensive sex education while ignoring the needs of this younger generation just because we have our own doubts and uncertainties when we speak about sex.

Let's talk about sex: why do we need good sex education? (The Guardian)

Listen to the podcast

The screenshot shows a Guardian article page with a dark blue header containing navigation links: News, Opinion, Sport, Culture, Lifestyle, and More. Below the header, there are sub-navigation links for Education, Schools, Teachers, Universities, and Students. The main content area features a section titled "Small Changes" under "Global development" with the article title "Let's talk about sex: why do we need good sex education? - podcast". A short introductory text is followed by a list of links: "Read the podcast transcript", "Sex education lift off in Nepal", and "How to listen to podcasts: everything you need to know". Below this is a podcast player interface with a waveform, a play button, and a progress bar. To the right of the player are two smaller article thumbnails. At the bottom of the page, there is a "Your privacy" notice with a "I'm OK with that" button and a "My options" link.

We cannot deny that young people's sexuality is complex. Each young person develops at their own pace and needs different information and guidance at different points in time. It is a challenging balance to simultaneously protect and empower young people. Young people are naturally curious to talk and learn about sex and sexuality (Hirst, J. et al. (2017) Initiatives to support the inclusion of pleasure in sexual health and sex education work with young people).

Therefore, we need everyone from policy makers and researchers to families, parents, teachers, young people themselves and their communities to break the taboos around sexuality and to fight against discrimination and stigma.

Turning towards politics

It feels like we are going backwards! Governments in some countries are becoming more and more conservative. For instance, in Paraguay the government passed a resolution to “prohibit any debate in schools on the theory or perspective of gender and sexuality”. At the 63rd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 63) this year, US negotiators found themselves aligning with countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia. These countries consistently seek to undermine agreements on women's rights at the UN, specifically around sexual and reproductive health and rights. They are supported by the Holy See of the Catholic Church, which makes active use of its special status as a UN observer and does not hold back from disseminating its values and views concerning sexuality.

Our conference has shown us that we need to step up and empower young people even more. They also empower us: the power and confidence of the young speakers on the conference stage spoke for itself. I take my hat off to them! The future is theirs and we must keep our vision of a world free of discrimination, stigmatisation and violence always in our hearts.

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