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to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Rutgers, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Rutgers works in more than 29 countries on research, advocacy, and promoting public support. We do this to improve access to sexuality education and information, contraception and safe abortion services, and to prevent sexual and gender-based violence. We have had special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2004.

The Transformative Potential of Sexuality Education

The right to education's transformative potential and multiplier effect is widely recognized. The same potential applies to sexuality education. However, this is often met with resistance and taboo, despite this right being supported by international law standards. This means that regardless of the country they live in, young people have the right to access information about relationships, intimacy, and identity. Although it takes a lifetime to learn about these topics and to shape one's attitudes, beliefs, and values, it is essential to teach children and adolescents early on because it will shape their relationships, self-esteem, trust in others, and communications for the rest of their lives. In addition to teaching children and adolescents, sexuality education should be taught to young people older than fifteen because this is when they become more romantically active and start having sexual experiences. In other words: it should be taught throughout the whole school career of young people. In this statement, Rutgers will touch on both classroom-based sexuality education and on providing information about sexuality online.

The Positive Effects of Classroom-based Sexuality Education

Research has shown the positive social outcomes of evidence-based, comprehensive sexuality education in preventing and reducing gender-based and intimate partner violence, reducing harmful gender stereotypes, reducing unplanned pregnancies, and young people making more conscious decisions when it comes to their intimate relationships, such as using contraceptives. Sexuality education provides young people with the tools to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections through safe sex practices, such as negotiating condom use, and to identify when their rights are being violated, such as cases of sexual abuse or denial of health services.

Young People Want to Learn About Love

Classroom-based sexuality education often focuses on the human body, reproductive elements, and disease prevention. But this is just a small fraction of what children need to know and understand about relationships, intimacy, and identity. Curricula tend to be risk-based, which can even disempower young people during an age where they crave agency. Sexuality education should move towards a participatory and learner-centered approach that meets young people in their need for agency. Research shows that young people need and want information about gender and sexual diversity, communicating about boundaries and desires, dating, intimacy, sexual pleasure, love, online communication, and sex in the media. In other words: sex-positive and comprehensive sexuality education.

When working on sexuality education, it is vital to pay attention to the inclusion of young people who differ from cultural 'normalcy', for instance, if they are not heterosexual or if they are transgender, or when they do not conform to dominant cultural notions of being a so-called 'good girl' or 'real man'.

Rutgers also wants to stress the importance of a safe school environment as young people navigate and learn about relationships, intimacy, and identity. This

requires a teacher who understands their own sexuality and gender and what effect those have on classroom dynamics. They also need to be able to navigate which questions can be answered publicly. Teachers have to take young people seriously and encourage them to form their own judgments. Schools need a policy on dealing with bullying and sexually transgressive behavior. Besides the school and teachers, parents are also instrumental in confronting these kinds of behaviors. All in all, schools have to acknowledge that the delivery of sexuality education requires special attention and training.

Finding Information About Sexuality Online

The embeddedness of young people in their cultural and social environment and their relationships with family and friends influence how they position themselves in relation to concepts of sexual identity, desire, and practice. Young people learn from their family and friends, who also access online platforms and communities for information about relationships, intimacy, and identity. Online spaces cannot be seen as separate as it trickles into all aspects of our daily lives. More and more online platforms and communities have started providing information about sexuality. Here young people can connect with peers, learn about relationships, intimacy and identity and ask questions anonymously. Young people need to know where they can get scientifically accurate and evidence-based information because many websites are not scientifically accurate, which can have profound implications if they spread misinformation.

Classroom-based sexuality education also increasingly makes use of interactive online modules where students are not solely dependent on their teachers as a source of information.

Innovation and technological change have propelled the possibilities for girls, young women, and gender non-conforming women to learn about relationships, intimacy, and identity. However, it is important to note that in low- and middle-income countries girls are more likely to be denied access to smartphones, computers, and the internet, plus that it requires digital literacy to do so. In addition, girls are more vulnerable to (online) sexual and gender-based violence, including the sharing of their intimate photos without their consent. Bridging this gender gap requires extra attention.

Recommendations

We are calling on the Commission to acknowledge the positive outcomes and multiplier effect that sexuality education has on the lives of young people, and we recommend the following: Member States should:

- Commit to accelerate efforts to scale up comprehensive sexuality education in primary and secondary schools;
- If this is not the case already, make sexuality education part of the government policy on education and include it into the mandatory curriculum;
- Spend lessons on sexuality education throughout young people's whole school careers;
- Consider integrating comprehensive sexuality education into a broader curriculum than biology, for instance, in civic education or social sciences;
- Commit to delivering comprehensive and sex-positive sexuality education because young people need and want information about gender and sexual diversity, communicating about boundaries and desires, dating, intimacy, sexual pleasure, love, online communication, and sex in the media. Sexuality education

materials and websites should accommodate and address people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions;

- Provide teachers with sufficient materials, budget, education, and training to provide a safe space and accommodate young people's varying sexual identities, relationships, and sexual cultures, for example, on inclusive terminology;
 - Finance non-formal sexuality education that is delivered by civil society and community-based organizations;
 - To pay special attention to the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education to youth and adolescents with intellectual and physical disabilities, youth living in youth care facilities, (mental) health care facilities, and youth with diverse cultural backgrounds, including refugees and asylum seekers.
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