This past March, in preparation for the 45th Commission on Population and Development, the UN Secretary General released two reports focusing on adolescents and youth that outlined recommendations to ensure progress towards the implementation of the ICPD Program of Action, as it relates to adolescents and young people.

These Reports highlight the experiences of young people in relation to their right to make decisions on all matters that affect them, their right to access contraception, comprehensive reproductive health services and information, and their right to live free from inequality, stigma and discrimination. The Reports call for the removal of barriers to young people’s access to comprehensive and integrated sexual and reproductive health information and services, including requirements of parental or spousal permission to access services, disapproval from the family or the community, and negative attitudes among service providers. They also highlight the need for improved referral mechanisms between health and education systems, emphasize the importance of girls’ access to education and its impact on girls’ autonomy, and self-esteem, and underline the value of education as a means of reducing gender-based inequality.

In response to the Reports, the Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (YCSRR) released a statement highlighting a number of key areas that the reports fail to recognize as central components towards ensuring that the rights of young people are respected and protected. The YCSRR statement highlights the need for the elimination of laws that restrict or prohibit access to safe and comprehensive services, including abortion services, an acceleration towards the full implementation of the ICPD PoA goals, ensuring that youth and adolescents have access to services and information that are comprehensive, of quality and are integrated, and removing barriers to gender equality.

The statement also urges a steer away from a focus on population size, towards a rights-based approach grounded in people, rather than just numbers. Moreover, the statement urges states to recognize and uphold the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) youth.

Looking towards #CPD45, the YCSRR urges states to fully commit to the implementation of all of these recommendations, and most importantly demonstrate political will towards the protection and promotion of young people’s sexual and reproductive rights.

When the rights of young people, in particular young women and adolescent girls, including their right to access safe abortion services, are respected, they are better positioned to make decisions regarding their health, lives, and well-being.

The YCSRR continues to strongly advocate for the full protection and recognition of young people as rights-holders. Continue reading the #CPD45 edition of the YCSRR watchdog, for more articles from youth SRHR activists. The watchdog provides a platform for young people from across the world to share their stories, perspectives, calls to action and hopes for the future. We hope you enjoy!

Mari-Claire Price (UK) and Sarah Kennell (Canada), Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights
Why Comprehensive Sexuality Education?

In recent years, millions of young voices have united to explain to their governments the importance and urgency of implementing comprehensive sexual education for adolescents and young people. As a young human rights activist, I am a part of this global effort.

One of the main characteristics of human beings is that our concept of culture changes and evolves. The same happens when we try to understand the social world around us, and the way we collectively understand such concepts. This process of constant transformation and evolution is what has led humanity to undertake one of the most ambitious goals of the last century: the elaboration of a universal concept of human rights that recognizes the rights of all human beings. Human sexuality and reproduction has been a part of this transformation and re-conceptualization.

The way in which we understand and live sexuality and reproduction has changed drastically, particularly with the evolution of the human rights approach and the gender perspective. Closely related to these new perspectives on sexuality and reproduction is the concept of sexual education. Decades ago, the very notion of sexual education was unthinkable. However, over time it became clear that there was a great need to provide sexual education, especially for adolescents and youth, not only because of its positive impact on public health and economic development, but for its capacity to empower people (including adolescents and youth), so they can make decisions in a free and responsible way.

From this perspective, the ICPD Programme of Action (PoA) is key, as it is one of the first international documents that talks about the importance of sexual education, including sexual education for youth and adolescents. Despite the important advances achieved within the context of the ICPD PoA in the last 18 years, experience shows us that in order to guarantee the full enjoyment of our sexual and reproductive rights, we need to not only implement sexual education, but comprehensive sexuality education.

Comprehensive sexuality education seeks to address all of the fundamental aspects of human reproduction and sexuality, and therefore includes fundamental topics as: gender, sexual and reproductive health and HIV, sexual and reproductive rights, pleasure, prevention of violence, diversity and relationships.

These topics are addressed from a human rights-based perspective, which seeks to equip young people and adolescents with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to decide freely over their sexuality.

If the international community wants to address the real needs of youth, it is clear that we must recognize and implement comprehensive sexuality education.

As a young person attending this 45th Session of the CPD, I urge governments to do so!
Let’s learn to speak out!

CPD, CSE and homophobia in schools

The ICPD PoA declares that “full attention should be given to… meeting the educational and service needs of adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality.”

My younger brother was born two years after the high-level gathering in Cairo in 1994, when the ICPD PoA was agreed upon. Reflecting on the past 18 years, I ask him whether he’s getting the comprehensive sexuality education he needs to deal with his sexuality in a positive and responsible way.

Jochem: “In biology class, we discussed the chapter on human sexuality. There was this one image of people that were either gay, lesbian or bisexual. This little attention to sexual orientation in the biology book get’s compensated elsewhere. I get bullied on a day to day basis. Kids at school ask whether they can have the anal dildo out of my handbag. I have neither of the two. Or I hear: “Guys, let’s move - there’s a gay entering the room.”

According to UNESCO, these experiences are all too common. In the United States, 90%+ of LGBTI students say they’ve been subjected to homophobic harassment; in New Zealand 98% of LGBTI students say they’ve been verbally or physically abused at school. This homophobic violence: “violates the rights of young people to education and safe learning environments…As a result of stigma and discrimination at school, young people who are subjected to homophobic bullying are more likely to drop out. They are also more likely to contemplate self-harm, commit suicide, and engage in activities or behaviours that pose a risk to their health.”

While many schools in The Netherlands include varying forms of sexuality education in their curriculums, it is not yet obligatory to do so. Consequently, it is up to the school to decide whether a child receives sexuality education and what form it will take. Luckily, in recent years, political support for sexuality education in schools grew, resulting in the inclusion of obligatory sexuality education in primary and secondary school curricula. Information on sexual diversity and sexual orientation has been included as core goals of the new curriculum. If all goes to plan, schools will be teaching sexuality education as of August 2012.

While this is a great step forward for The Netherlands, I continue to reflect on the reality that many young people will not receive sexuality education in their schools, including curricula related to sexual diversity and gender equality. This reality is fueled by teachers not being able to speak up, schools not being able to provide adequate measures against homophobic harassment, and governments allowing this to happen.

This CPD provides a great opportunity for governments to uphold the sexual and reproductive rights of young people, in order to ensure that we are not marginalized and stigmatized based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

It’s time for us to speak out and support young people to deal with their sexuality in a positive and responsible way, by providing them with evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education.

In the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon:

“Some say that sexual orientation and gender identity is a sensitive subject…but I learned to speak out, because lives are at stake and because it is our duty under the United Nations’ charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to protect the rights of everyone everywhere.”

Bibliography


Jochem Vink, 16, (The Netherlands), Student, and Wieke Vink, 21, (The Netherlands), Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights)
SRHR and Intervention by the Catholic Hierarchy

Despite the clear need for comprehensive sexuality education and access to sexual and reproductive health services among Mexican adolescents, the Catholic Church hierarchy seeks to restrict their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and thereby limit their overall development.

Recent examples include the conservative backlash to the decriminalization of abortion in Mexico City, spearheaded by the Catholic Church hierarchy and its political allies. As a result, half of the states in the country have fast-tracked constitutional reforms to protect life from the moment of conception, in an effort to criminalize abortion in all cases and limit other reproductive rights, such as access to Emergency Contraception.

In 2009, the Church hierarchy successfully joined with conservative groups to demand that the federal Ministry of Health cease distribution of the National Health Card for Adolescents because it included information on SRHR. Other such efforts include advocacy to remove information regarding sexuality from public school textbooks, once again limiting young people’s access to information and reducing their capacity to make informed decisions about their lives and bodies. However, this extreme rejection of SRHR does not represent the majority of Mexican Catholics. In fact, most Catholics are convinced of the importance of sexual and reproductive rights, and are in favor of the Church modernizing its teachings to promote the exercise of these rights.

According to the 2010 Survey of Catholic Opinion in Mexico carried out by Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, 82% of Catholic respondents agreed that the State must continue guaranteeing individuals’ right to decide in a free, responsible and informed manner the number and spacing of their children, as established in the Mexican Constitution.

In regards to adolescent SRHR, the majority of Catholic men and women – seven in 10 –consider that sexuality education for public school students should begin between the ages of nine and 12. There is also a broad consensus in favor of the inclusion of diverse content on sexuality education in the free textbooks distributed by the Ministry of Public Education, as eight in 10 Catholics state that they accept that the textbooks contain information on condom use to avoid sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and AIDS, and regarding young people’s right to make decisions concerning their bodies and their sexuality.

Seven out of 10 Catholics are also in favor of these textbooks addressing the circumstances in which the law permits abortion. Moreover, 74% of Catholics consider that health services should provide contraceptive methods as well as counselling to adolescents who request these services.

Contrary to the fundamentalist stance of the Catholic Church, there is a clear rejection among the Catholic population of the total prohibition of abortion. 74% of respondents approve of a woman seeking an abortion if her life is in danger, while 70% approve if her health is at risk. Likewise, seven out of 10 Catholics support a woman’s decision to have an abortion if the pregnancy is the result of rape, while six out of 10 Catholics approve of abortion when the fetus has severe congenital defects, whether physical or mental.

These results show that Catholics recognize the moral autonomy of Catholic women and adolescents to make decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive lives, in accordance with their conscience, even though these decisions may go against the moral teachings of the Church hierarchy. As such, we demand an end to the illegal and inappropriate interference of the Catholic Church hierarchy in public policies regarding SRHR and we will continue working to promote a more compassionate Church that truly understands and responds to today’s realities.

Jenny Barry, 28, (Mexico), Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide)
Why do we need to talk about abortion and young women?

The most common reason to choose an abortion among all women, from any social condition and region of the world, is having an unwanted pregnancy. The number of unwanted pregnancies in young women and adolescent girls is strongly linked with gender norms and inequity in education and work opportunities. In many cases, as adolescent girls and young women, we are not allowed to have control over our bodies, we are often not allowed or it is very hard for us to make decisions, and it is difficult for us to have control over household resources.

Unwanted pregnancies among young women happen because:

- We don’t have access to comprehensive sexuality education
- We don’t have (sufficient or complete) access to modern contraception
- We have unplanned, and therefore unprotected, sex
- We have non-consensual sex, (almost 50% of sexual attacks in the world happen to women under 16), therefore we have unprotected sex
- We don’t have access to counseling on contraception, therefore we don’t use it correctly or consistently
- Contraceptives are not 100% effective

According to the WHO, between 2.2 and 4 million young women around the world choose to have an abortion every year and near 35,000 young women under 25 die due to complications related to unsafe abortions. In developing countries 70% of all unsafe abortions happen among women under 30, that’s why we need to think about age when we try to understand barriers for access to services and contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Many times, a young woman or adolescent girls’ first attempt at accessing a reproductive health service is in the case of a miscarriage or for an abortion. This often makes it hard to determine if the procedure is being done in safe or unsafe conditions. Young women and girls are more exposed to having unsafe abortions even when it is legal because we have less access to information, less access to education which includes decision making skills, we have a smaller social network for support, there is no respect for our right to confidentiality, there are limited services available and medical staff often have negative attitude towards young women and adolescent girls.

In countries where abortion is heavily restricted or is completely against the law, young women and adolescent girls are left with only two options: to have a backstreet abortion, that could be unsafe, or to continue a pregnancy that we didn’t choose or plan for. Both options bring social and health consequences that demonstrate ongoing inequality between women and men.

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Oriana López Uribe, (Mexico), Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Pobreza, embarazo y maternidad en la Adolescencia, El desafío para la gran transformación

Actualmente en el Perú la población mayoritaria la constituyen las y los adolescentes quienes representan un 20% de la población total, constituyendo un grupo que sobrepasa los 5 millones de personas según el Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI, 2008). Ante este grupo de personas nuestras autoridades electas han adquirido retos y compromisos históricos que deben cumplir, compromisos como el Programa de Acción de la Conferencia Internacional sobre Población y Desarrollo - CIPD y los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio - ODM desde los cuales se insta a los Estados a respetar y garantizar los derechos humanos (incluyendo dentro de estos a los derechos reproductivos) de las y los adolescentes. Para el Estado peruano esto aún constituye un gran cont.d’ on p6
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desafío y a la vez una oportunidad para hacer posible esa Gran Transformación que se ha trazado como meta y la cual muchos creemos posible.

En estos 2 compromisos internacionales el Estado Peruano se ha comprometido con acciones en específico referidas a garantizar el desarrollo de este grupo poblacional a través de su salud sexual y reproductiva: Reduciendo embarazos no deseados, casos de VIH/sida, muertes por causas relacionadas a la maternidad, brindando servicios de salud e información sobre su sexualidad, eliminando obstáculos jurídicos, etc. Sin embargo las condiciones actuales son muy preocupantes si tenemos en cuenta que en la población adolescente más pobre, el embarazo llega a un 22,4% (INEI, 2011), y en zonas de la selva peruana como Ucayali y Loreto es del 30% (INEI y UNICEF, 2011).

Paralelamente esta situación ha llegado a originar una realidad más que delicada al experimentar la maternidad en la adolescencia, con un impacto que puede llegar a ser negativo en el desarrollo personal de las adolescentes. Según el INEI del total de estas mujeres jóvenes en el país sólo el 5,8% de ellas que viven en el área rural y el 17,0% del área urbana asisten al colegio, el porcentaje restante ha dejado el colegio limitando así sus posibilidades de desarrollo personal, incluyendo el acceso a un empleo digno y bien remunerado; así lo demuestra esta misma institución quien nos señala que las mujeres que fueron madres en la adolescencia realizan trabajos menores en un 66.6% como trabajadoras del hogar, trabajos en agricultura, pesca o minería, y un 19% en trabajos familiares por los cuales no reciben remuneración (INEI, 2010). En general las mujeres adolescentes peru-wanas que son madres viven enfrentando obstáculos que contribuyen al que el círculo de la pobreza no se rompa. El embarazo y la maternidad constituyen situaciones con alto contenido de stress, pudiendo llegar a constituirse en una causa de mortalidad materna, sobre esto el Ministerio de Salud ha identificado como una causa indirecta de la muerte materna en adolescentes al suicidio con un 39% de incidencia (MINSA, 2011).

Con estas cifras de embarazo y maternidad en la adolescencia es y será muy difícil hablar de reducción de la pobreza en el Perú; por tanto es urgente revertir esta situación a través de la implementación de políticas y recursos públicos suficientes para brindar una educación integral en sexualidad dentro de los colegios y servicios de salud sexual dirigidos a adolescentes los cuales empueren en la toma de decisiones y posibiliten el desarrollo de un plan de vida desde esta etapa para alcanzar metas a largo plazo en beneficio ellas, ellos y nuestra sociedad; de igual forma es urgente que a nivel legal se eliminen las barreras legales que actualmente restringen en esta población el acceso a estos servicios de salud y a esta información. Estas acciones constituyen compromisos pendientes de alcanzar como parte de los OMD (5b) y la CIPD que tiene como plazo final el año 2015, por tanto deben constituir una agenda clara del actual Gobierno y una muestra específica de su preocupación y trabajo en favor de este grupo poblacional.

Esta es una de las formas más urgentes de combatir las inequidades que vive nuestro país y que el actual presidente Ollanta Humala ha manifestado que eliminará, incluyendo a las y los adolescentes dentro del desarrollo de nuestro país y siendo parte de la Gran Transformación que todos esperamos.

Bibliografía

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