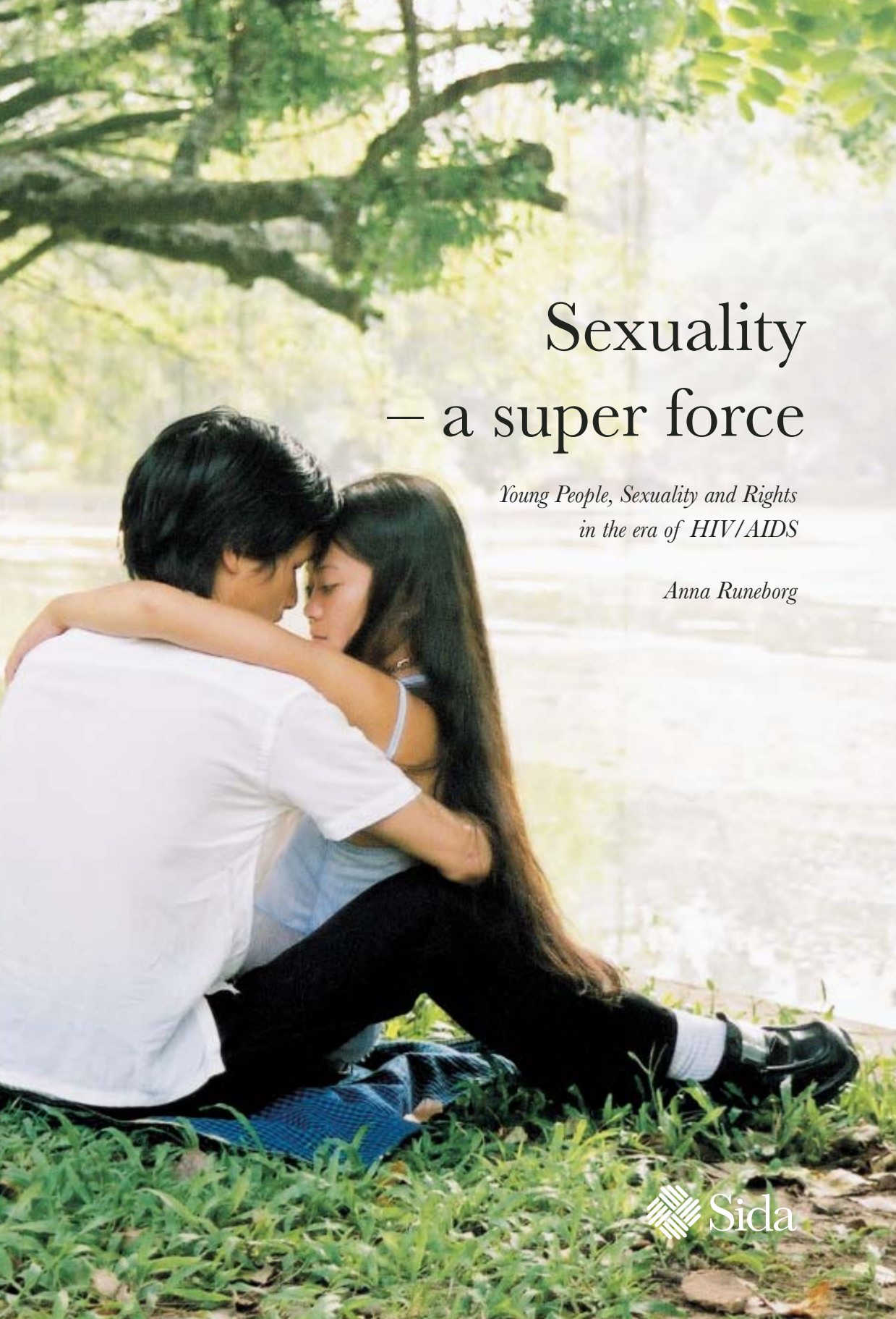


A young man and woman are sitting on the grass, embracing each other. The man is wearing a white t-shirt and the woman is wearing a light blue top and black pants. They are outdoors, with a large tree and a body of water in the background.

Sexuality — a super force

*Young People, Sexuality and Rights
in the era of HIV/AIDS*

Anna Runeborg

Sexuality – a super force

The views and interpretations expressed in this document are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

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Author: Anna Runeborg

Editor: Olle Wängborg

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Prologue

Present reports estimate that up to 40 million people are living with HIV or AIDS and that the epidemic is still growing. In this tragic situation it is frightening to see that many young people are still deprived of their right to information about sexuality and how to protect themselves and each other from catching this deadly disease. As a consequence, more than half of all the new infected people are below the age of 24.

It is a fact that adults including politicians and planners tend to be more concerned by young people's *problems* than by their *needs* for positive development – except, probably in the case of their own children. Unfortunately, in this process adults are more guided by their own inhibitions and judgements – than by letting the young participate and express their own feelings and needs. This is contrary to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, in which every child and adolescent has an individual right to their own free expression of will. It is well known that since times immemorial the young generation thinks and behaves differently from their parents. They try to acclimatise to the present times – as well as the parents themselves most often did, but easily tend to forget.

The obvious and frightening question is then, what will happen with our future if so many of our young ones are infected? Looking at the HIV/AIDS pandemic in this way highlights the desperate need for a radical change in the present situation of shame and taboos surrounding death and sexuality in general and as related to young people's sexuality and HIV/AIDS specifically.

There is no way around combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic but starting right now to be more open around sexuality and facing the real facts of life that are confronting adolescents and young people. Children and young people have to be immediately taken in as partners in development to safeguard their needs and rights for health, development and peace as well as for a dignified sexuality and a healthy and satisfactory life.

If presidents, policy makers and planners would enforce all the documents their countries have ratified much would be looking differently. There is a great challenge for countries, having ratified the Con-

vention of the Rights of the Child, CRC (all countries but Somalia and USA); the Convention on the Eradication of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW; the World Programme of Action for Youth to the year 2000 and Beyond; and having subscribed to the Cairo and Beijing Plans of Actions, to join hands in enforcing these international agreements. No more conferences or plans of actions are needed but merely *enforcements and implementation*.

Time has come for everybody to act more up front around sexuality and the force it holds; UN organizations, national governments, donors and researchers as well as the corporate and private sector. This implies working with one's own values around sexuality and young people, and if need be have them clarified. This is true for donors, UN staff and public officials in recipient countries alike.

The way forward is to speak out, to provide factual information on sexuality, prevention, and sexual behavioural change. A more balanced power and gender relationship is a prerequisite for building of self-esteem. Obviously, consideration has to be given to different cultures and to varying environments and stages of development, when programmes and messages are developed. However, the respect for the young and their abilities in development and nation building must never falter.

Many books, guidelines, manuals and statistical documents have been written about young people's health and development, and increasingly even on young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights. However, frank and factual information on their sexuality is less frequent. This document will therefore concentrate purely on young people's sexuality and rights. It is written for presidents, politicians, policymakers and youth serving professionals, as well as for other donors. The aim is to provide the readers with an open discussion around these sensitive issues in order to influence, help and motivate the readers to act in a more straightforward and bold way in their work. Hopefully it can inspire new ideas and greater insights, or at least serve as a point of departure for future discussions.

Anna Runeborg
Stockholm, 2002

Introduction – Young People’s reality in the

The general situation

A little more than 20 years ago the first cases of HIV were reported over the world. Since then the HIV/AIDS epidemic has evolved into one of the biggest challenges for the world to tackle. The disease now exists in almost all countries of the world and approximately 60 million people have been infected with the virus, of whom 20 million have already died. Despite more than 20 years of knowledge of the existence of the disease there is still no vaccine and no effective cure.

In the beginning of the epidemic, just like our ancestors did when they were hit by the plague, we started looking for someone to blame – men having sex with men, drug addicts and commercial sex workers – always someone else than ourselves. This has been a big problem. Now it is time to open up our eyes. The reality is, which is also seen around the world, that HIV can effect and can be transmitted by anyone and to everyone.



era of HIV/AIDS

Another important reality to bear in mind is that the HIV virus, causing the disease AIDS, must be regarded mainly as a sexually transmitted disease. Although there are other ways for a person to contract the virus, via shared blood and blood products like needles, and from parent to child, the fact is that most infected people have been infected through unprotected sexual activities.

The fact of AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease has often put us in a difficult situation when discussing the actions that must be taken to prevent a further worsening of the pandemic. Examples of questions raised are whether these preventive measures should be directed to young people? Talking about sexuality with our young – won't that stimulate them into an early sexual debut?

Sex and sexuality is something influencing the life of teenagers just as much as adults. The fact is that many persons have their first sexual experience during these years – no matter whether we prohibit it or not. One unpublished policy study from Save the Children Fund estimates that more than half of the world's population have had unprotected sex (sex without a condom) before the age of 16 (from Young Men and HIV; Panos/UNAIDS, 2001). The facts surrounding HIV/AIDS and the present situation where not just adults, but also many young people, are infected by the disease every day indeed show the need for new commitments. It is time to make a change in the present situation where shame and taboos surrounding young people's sexuality and HIV/AIDS often make it impossible to talk openly about the need to direct open information about sexuality towards the young people of today.

The emerging sexuality during the teens together with lack of necessary information has made the young people today especially vulnerable to the disease. This troublesome situation is made further difficult by the harsh environment of poverty surrounding many children in the developing world.

The HIV virus, causing the disease AIDS, must be regarded mainly as a sexually transmitted disease.

Talking about sexuality with our young – won't that stimulate them into an early sexual debut?

Sexuality and sexual behaviour – a special dilemma in developing countries?

Generally speaking low and middle-income countries are by definition less developed economically than richer countries. This results in many poor communities and many poor individuals. Poverty can in many ways have an effect on the sexual behaviour and sexual experiences of young people, as well as that of adults.

For many young girls and their mothers, who are often singles and heading households, there is sometimes not much choice but to venture into selling sex in some way or another, willingly or unwillingly, full-time or as “free-lance”. Even boys and young men are affected in this way but to a lesser extent.

Poor school children are often harassed by teachers who promise good grades in exchange for sexual favours. Sugar daddies, and sometimes sugar mummies, give gifts and may pay school fees in exchange for sexual favours. It should not be denied that some of the young might even enjoy it for a while, not being aware, however, of the effects on their young lives. Some girls get tempted to receive gifts from boyfriends and are subsequently “expected” to pay back with sexual favours. As a result they may get pregnant and expelled from schools. In most countries the girls are not allowed to go back to school.

To survive in a harsh environment boys and young men tend to engage into criminal and asocial activities more easily than girls. Researchers have begun to argue that violence against girls and women is partly fuelled by men’s fundamental insecurity concerning their masculinity. To be a “real man” in many countries is equal to behave aggressively and to take many risks. Significantly, sexual conquest and potency appear as repeated themes in many cultural definitions of manhood, exposing women to increased risk of coercive sex. To say that men are insecure does not in anyway condone their coercive conduct but it can help us understand the phenomenon and suggest avenues for intervention.

Young people, irrespective of sex, need a safe and supportive environment in which they can talk freely and be informed about sex and

To be a “real man” in many countries is equal to behave aggressively and to take many risks.

Boys and girls as well as men and women need to talk about mutual feelings and how the respective sex experiences different situations.



sexuality. One important suggestion in this matter is to encourage boys and girls as well as men and women to talk about mutual feelings and how the respective sex experiences different situations.

Young people also need to be able to talk safely to adults about their problems. Now they often have to rely on friends, media and myths. These are normally not very reliable channels of information.

Evidence of coerced sex and sexual human rights violations world-wide

It is an undeniable fact that men in many societies sexually abuse girls and even infants. Many believe they can get cured from HIV/AIDS or at least not attract a sexually transmitted infection by having sex with virgins. This sexual abuse may take the form of incestuous defilement



and rape which is more common and “accepted” in some societies or sub-groups of societies than in others. In some countries rape of young girls and women have reached alarming levels.

Another form of human rights violations is when adults, and sometimes even parents, trade their children, knowingly or unknowingly, for sexual exploitation purposes, such as for prostitution and pornographic activities. This is presently more common in Asia than in Africa. Other adults are involved in trafficking of women and children for the same purposes. Another increasingly common and recently more evidenced form of gender related sexual violence is acts of rape and abuse from partners and husbands within marriages. Few countries have legislation prohibiting sexual abuse and rape within marriages and stable relations.

Other human rights’ violations are the many forms of harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, wife cleansing, wife inheritance, wife burning, dry sex, early marriages, giving away a young girl in exchange for the death of a relative, initiation rites of young girls involving defloration by an older man in the village. These sexual violations against girls and women are effects of the patriarchy’s control over women’s sexuality and their power to oppress and hinder women from a free expression of their own sexuality and sexual needs.

Sexual violations against girls and women are effects of the patriarchy’s control over women’s sexuality and their power to oppress and hinder women from a free expression of their own sexuality and sexual needs.

The need for new commitments

These undeniable facts presented clearly show how important it is to work for a safer life of our young, and a more open discussion about the young people's situation in the era of HIV/AIDS.

Therefore the Cairo conference on Population and Development in 1994 put adolescents and young people on the agenda regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights. This was a good initiative and start, but in the year 2002 action on the ground is still sorely lacking. Despite available facts and research evidence, there is not much policy change and programming at the national level and there is still need for change. This necessary change could take the form of initiating large-scale national sexuality education programmes as well as youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, while including the children and the young people in the planning for development.

When reading through the few well intended documents on young people's sexuality one can wonder if presidents, policy makers and planners ever read them. Some adults in power may intellectually acknowledge young people's sexuality and the right to explore it. But the risk is they would shy away from taking sensitive decisions that could really benefit the young in this domain. The two UN special sessions in 2001 and 2002 on HIV/AIDS and Children and Adolescents were challenged to spell out declarations based on reality. Instead, declarations of wishful thinking of innocent little "children" never dreaming of sex or even less having sex – whether forced or voluntarily – were adopted!

The failure is clear. Still more than 20 years after the beginning of the disease young people all around the world face adult life without the necessary information regarding sexuality that they might need in this era of HIV/AIDS. We can no longer close our eyes to the undeniable fact that also young people have sex. The fact remains and therefore their need for information has to be taken seriously, especially by different leaders in society.

We can no longer close our eyes to the undeniable fact that also young people have sex.

Sexuality – also for young people!

Sexuality – a Superforce

We have to admit that *Sexuality is a Superforce*. Without a sexual drive we would simply not exist. First of all, it is very natural and needed for procreation. But as it is so natural, why should it be considered so “dangerous” with sexuality and even more to talk about sexuality?

This question could possibly be ignored if it wasn’t the case that sexuality and its related behaviours has a very deep impact on everybody’s life and hence on the development of societies.

Second, and also important, the sexual drive is important for intimacy and pleasure.

What if the human body was not equipped with devices such as the clitoris and the corresponding nerves at the head of the penis, not to talk about other erogenous zones and the capacity of dreaming, fantasy and feelings around sexuality? The risk would be high that human beings would concentrate on other things than on fulfilling urges leading to sexual activities. To safeguard the effectiveness of the strategy of human survival, a component of pleasure and personal satisfaction was added. A very efficient strategy but today sadly surrounded by silence and shame.

Without a sexual drive we would simply not exist.

The sexual drive is important also for intimacy and pleasure.



We are all sexual beings – from birth to death

Sexuality exists as a powerful inner force right from infancy and childhood. In a tradition stemming from Charles Darwin, researchers have recognized the signs of the radical importance of sexuality in a young person's life. Sexuality has its foundations in biology and instinct. If restrained too much it becomes perverted. The sexual drive, as a major psychological, social and cultural factor can no longer be denied.

Of course sex is not the only thing in life, or as the young people themselves stated at The Hague in 2000 preparing for Cairo plus 5: *"We are not only sex machines but have many other aspirations in life"*. However, most adolescents and young people will undoubtedly admit that sexuality, tenderness, love and sexual feelings are very central to their lives.

The American researcher Alfred Kinsey has shown that the human being has a sexuality lasting throughout the lifecourse. The findings in themselves were regarded as an argument for introducing sexual politics designed to promote sexuality education already from young ages and a tolerance of different sexual behaviours. This becomes even more important in the era of HIV/AIDS.

"We are not
only sex ma-
chines but have
many other
aspirations
in life"

Who are the young people?

But then, who are the young people? The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines people between 0–18 as children. Defining "children" this way easily leads the thoughts in the wrong direction. The second-generation children, being between 10–19, definitely have other needs than toddlers and early primary school children. Young teenage mothers, who are unmarried, married at legal age, or prematurely married off under age and against the law – are they children? Or sexually mature teenage men, often victims of a socialisation process of premature manhood and machismo – even against their own will at times – are they children? The nowadays commonly used UN terminology states 10–24 years as being the age range of young people.

A new openness concerning young people

When young people try to follow the strategy of human survival, satisfaction and pleasure, many adults punish them and try to keep them ignorant about their body growth and natural sexual development. Adolescents need a more positive approach to their existing and demanding sexual needs and problems. This does not mean a libertarian promotion of free sex. It simply deals with the fact that sex is going on anyway whether in dreams or in actual life, whether forced or voluntarily, whether sooner or later. Even toddlers experience sexual sensations and cannot be punished for that.

A strategy directed in a positive way will be more effective in giving young people personal strength to decide for themselves if, when and how they want to have sex and with whom at what point in their lives. If the hypothesis is true that sexual feelings and sexuality is necessary for human survival and the same urges are among the most oppressed, one must ask *why*? This question is the more important when observing the official actions, or rather non-actions and denials of governments around the (developing?) world. As an example, try a spell check of any HIV/AIDS document and see how surprisingly scarce the words sexuality and sexual intercourse are.

Many presidents, who are the officials ultimately responsible for the wellbeing of their citizens have waited much too long before they made any official statement on HIV/AIDS, although there are exceptions. Why? Probably because there are so many taboos around sexuality – sexuality being the main driving force behind the spread of this deadly disease. The sensitivity surrounding sexuality and the inaction that follows hits back and destroys individuals and societies on a level hitherto inexperienced in modern times.

Presidents' official and outspoken words are crucial in the battle against HIV/AIDS. Presidents and those in power – often men and patriarchs – hold the secular destiny in their hands. Have men taken the exclusive power to allow or deny the right to discuss sexuality and to define the rules around sexual behaviour? If so *why*? Do women speak more easily about intimate feelings of sexuality and love and relations? Why not try to find out? Young people certainly do talk – if

Adolescents need a more positive approach to their existing and demanding sexual needs and problems. This does not mean a libertarian promotion of free sex.

The sensitivity surrounding sexuality and the inaction that follows hits back and destroys individuals and societies on a level hitherto experienced in modern times.

and sexuality

let to – in a caring and supportive environment such as youth friendly services could provide.

It is true that sexual acts are most private and therefore not easily discussed in public. However, when a pandemic of this magnitude is spreading over whole nations, we all have to learn how to talk openly and naturally about this essential super force. A superforce, that paradoxically is necessary for human survival, and now threatening human extinction in certain areas.

HIV/AIDS is a blessing in a terrible disguise in as much as it will force people to start speaking openly about sex and sexuality and gender-power relations. But when? Time is running out. If young people are involved in designing policies, programmes and messages, things will most probably change faster and to the better. They certainly do not want to die prematurely!

HIV/AIDS is a blessing in a terrible disguise.

It will force people to start speaking openly about sex and sexuality.



Why let the young participate?

Adolescents want to take part in a large number of diverse activities, for which they need to have opportunities and facilities. They have also been granted many rights in international declarations that need to be met if they are to become healthy and productive adults. These include their rights to study, work, rest and leisure, but also their right to develop emotional and satisfactory sexual and gender relationships.

One of the big problems regarding the relation between adults and young, in relation to sexuality is that young people often have difficulties taking the adults seriously when they are told to abstain from all these emotional and sexual feelings. At worst they are being punished for having the most natural urges belonging to puberty such as masturbation and longings for intimate relations. They become even more doubtful when they experience how many adults behave in their own sexual and personal lives. The adults often act contradictory to what they preach to the young. This can cause difficulties in the formation of the child's identity.

The adults often act contradictory to what they preach to the young. Young people are excellent agents of change and can advocate for changed sexual behaviours even among the adult population.



Perhaps it is the ability to regard sexuality and love as part of one's identity that leads to the experience of having a personality of one's own. A "yes" or "no" to sexual activity is created in unison with the individual's inner norms and ethics. It is therefore important that parents and the school give realistic norms and ethics to the children when they grow up. One of the ultimate objectives of education in personal relationships is to create a set of personal ethics. Acting from an inner self-esteem which accepts one's own sexuality means a greater ability to protect oneself against infections, unwanted pregnancies or acts which encroach on one's own integrity and body space.

Conveying loving care, admonitions, limits and norms are the tasks of parents. Parents should learn how to answer children's natural questions factually and without embarrassment as the child grows up. A common mistake on the part of adults is that they put their own embarrassment and perceptions of sexuality into very innocent children's questions on the body and its functions such as where babies come from. It is not necessary to teach the child the whole range of facts of life at one go. Answering the question naturally and correctly one at a time as time goes by and the child grows up is sufficient. This is crucial for building the child's sexual identity.

Another important aspect is that provision of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services is a necessary complement to sexuality and gender education in order to fulfil the Convention of the Rights of the Child (and Adolescent) and to protect the adolescent from sexually related mortality and morbidity.

People in power have to let young people participate in changing gender-power relationships, to help introduce sexuality education for in and out of school settings, to help design and introduce youth-friendly health services. Young people are also excellent agents of change and can advocate for changed sexual behaviours even among the adult population. Males have a particularly important role to play in changing gender stereotypes. With the help of young people much could be achieved faster.

Important issues regarding sex and sexuality

Sexuality is not equal to sex or sexual intercourse

It is most often adults who are the culprits in imposing their own perceptions, experiences and sometimes misconceptions around sexuality onto the younger generation. You have got sexuality whether you are sexually active or not. When a young girl shows interest in the neighbour boy, parents often panic and immediately think of sexual intercourse, whereas the young girl probably just thinks of holding hands and maybe kissing. The mistake of many admonitions to the young is that messages often are too vague, too negative, or too technical and void of talk of feelings of love, friendship and gender relationship, or forthright too threatening.

Sad are the many stories of when little inquisitive and innocent children ask their parents why they look different – “down there” from their siblings and friends and may get severely punished for “impudence”.

As for boys, the older generation too often encourages sexual experience and conquests as a way to manhood whether the young man

You have got
sexuality
whether you are
sexually active
or not.



wishes it or not. It must not be ignored that in many societies the young boys are expected to get the experience of sexual intercourse from an early age whether with a prostitute, an older woman or any woman or girl. On the contrary, the girls are expected to stay a virgin until at the wedding night. In Brazil 61 per cent of unmarried young men aged 15–19 reported having sex in the past 12 months, compared to only nine per cent of unmarried women in the same age group. In Thailand 29 per cent of men aged 15–19 had sex in a 12 months period, compared to only one per cent of women of this age group (from Young Men and HIV; Panos/UNAIDS 2001). What mixed messages of double standards does this give young people? To get to grips with the need for changed sexual behaviour, especially among men in many societies one has to start with the young boys. Surveys show that many boys and young men are willing to discuss relations and gender equality with a view to have a more respectful and gender-balanced relation to girls and women.

What is safer sex?

Safer sex is a new wording but not a new phenomenon. To inform about safer sex, the message must be directed with a positive connotation. Selling the message of “Satisfaction and Personal Control through getting more Pleasure with Less Risk” will most probably be more effective than negative scare messages like: Do not have sex – You will die! Or AIDS kills! Or the frequent message of ABC “Abstain, Be faithful or Condom use” which evidently has proven not to be very effective. It is also counter productive to label drug addicts, prostitutes and HIV/AIDS as “social evils” It will only push the problems underground and increase the stigma and taboos surrounding HIV/AIDS and sexuality.

Following an anecdote shows how a well-intended message can be distorted. The initial novel message was “Sex is Power – Protected Sex is Life”. Someone, probably from the older generation kept half but changed it into “Sex is Power – Unprotected sex is Death”. The

Safer sex is a
achieving satis-
faction and
personal control
through getting
more pleasure
with less risk

young see through these scaring messages and one risk is that they might loose their attention to any message given by well-intended but “out of touch” adults.

Safer sex messages can be very appealing to young people who want to safeguard themselves against illnesses and HIV/AIDS. They have a choice. Safer sex practices include non-penetrative sex such as petting, fondling, oral sex, masturbation or postponing sexual activities and for those sexually active performing penetrative sex – the use of condoms. Some policy makers try to claim that safer sex is a Western phenomenon, which is not true. For example, in many societies adolescents have been let to stay together in special houses with the purpose of getting to know each other before choosing a spouse. They could play with each other in any way they pleased – with one condition from the elders– no penetrative sex.

Many poor, however, feel they have no choice regarding safer sex. They know they will die sooner or later anyway and cannot afford condoms or abstain from sex. This is so whether being sex-worker or faithful monogamous wife with a promiscuous or polygamous husband. Empirical evidence show that poor women “in business” ask how long it will take to die from AIDS. When they hear the answer they respond by being grateful that they have so many more years to earn money for their children before they will die! And the faithful wives have no option to be beaten if suggesting condoms or non-penetrative sex or to be accused of not trusting their husband’s fidelity.

Masturbation is not harmful – nor sinful

A considerable volume of scientific research shows that masturbation is a form of behaviour that has no harmful effects on individuals. It is a way of getting to know your own body and exploring pleasurable feelings.

It is common for young people to talk at length about sex, to make jokes and tell sexual stories and to tell about true or imaginary conquests and experiences. During adolescence it is also common to read

or watch erotic and pornographic material and to observe and compare their bodies. This self-stimulation might even involve touching and playing with each other's bodies – irrespective of sex.

Masturbation is probably the most common sexual activity in adolescent life. It is practised by both sexes. It is the most private and therefore difficult to discuss. Available research data may actually understate how common it is. It is probably more common among boys although girls also practice it. When talking to one young man in a developing country about masturbation he first stated that he had done “it” only once but later agreed that he did it very often and so did his friends. When told that it was natural and not harmful he was relieved and expressed feelings of gratitude to be able to talk to “an understanding” adult for once.

Beliefs about the harmful effects that it could cause are fairly widespread especially among religious people. Despite the fact that many young people take grown-ups admonitions and prohibitions rather lightly it is reasonable to believe that many young people have had their sexual lives deformed through the impact of campaigns against masturbation.

Self-stimulation is a natural part of growing up and also later in life to release tension and to experience pleasure, harming no one by this very private action. When you are young and experience sexual feeling and have no partner it is a most practical means of channeling the sexual impulse. It is part of safer sex.

But in many countries religious practitioners fear that self-stimulation would take away the interest from sexual activities with the spouse which cannot be true from a biological sense. Other factors must then be influencing the matrimonial happiness.

Masturbation is probably the most common sexual activity in adolescent life. It is part of safer sex.

Homosexuality and bisexuality – a denial is risky in the HIV/AIDS perspective

Views and opinions vary, mostly unfounded by scientific evidence, as to what homosexuality is and how it should be handled. The most human view based on human rights conventions is to accept anyone as he or she is or prefers to be, featuring whatever sexual variation – be it transvestites, transsexuals or homosexuals. Many religious practitioners, Christians and Muslims and others, adamantly claim that homosexuality, as well as masturbation, is sinful and abnormal.

There is nothing giving evidence as to homosexuality being harmful, neither to the homosexual person nor to the surrounding society. Homosexuals are human beings with a basic sexuality just as heterosexuals and should not be treated differently.

Homosexual games and practices are common during the first phases of adolescence and do not necessarily mean that people are homosexual. Guidance is necessary especially for parents and teachers who are ignorant of the process of psychosocial and sexual development of young people. Adults often react aggressively in these situations expressing homophobic attitudes that are very harmful to adolescents and can cause mental stress and even mental illness. Such punishments and attitudes in the early years are not conducive to forming young peoples' sexual identities!

Whatever the situation is it is a human right to explore and enjoy one's sexual identity. Denying or criminalising homosexuality and bisexuality and other forms of sexual behaviour is a risk factor in the efforts of combating the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The situation for those who are homosexual varies around the world. From South Africa whose constitution is the first in the world to explicitly state the rights of homosexuals, to many other countries with laws protecting the rights of homosexuals. In most countries, however, the homosexuals are either ignored or are being criminalized and persecuted. The churches and other religious movements are particularly vehement in their attacks on homosexuality. Many religions have difficulties in discussing and treating any form of sexuality in an open and natural manner, for that matter.

There is nothing giving evidence as to homosexuality being harmful, neither to the homosexual person nor to the surrounding society.

Denying or criminalising homosexuality and bisexuality and other forms of sexual behaviour is a risk factor in the efforts of combating the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Legalised abortion does not lead to more abortions

Many surveys and research studies show that legalising abortion does not lead to more abortions but to fewer deaths – if backed up by quality sexual and reproductive health services and contraceptives. On the other hand, illegal and unsafe abortions lead to more deaths. Figures are abundant of how many girls and women die every year or become sick or infertile for the rest of their lives due to unsafe abortion practices. This is causing immeasurable pain to the women themselves and to their families and children.

The Cairo Plan of Action states that every effort should be made to make abortions safer wherever legal and to give post-abortion care as well as to decriminalise women who are subject to abortions where these are illegal. If only these measures could be enforced many more women's lives would be saved and consequently the lives of their remaining offsprings who otherwise often die as a result of negligence when the mother dies.



What to be done?

The best tools – building self-esteem and giving facts

The best tool parents and adults can give their young ones to survive in a rapidly changing world is SELF-ESTEEM – equally so to both girls and boys. “We love you – you are good and beautiful as you are – you are capable of many things – stand by your own feelings and inner strength when taking decisions – then you will survive and succeed in life.”

The second best tool is giving the young factual information and skills in matters concerning their immediate and future life situations. Whether parents want to realise it or not – their “babies” will sooner or later lead their own lives and what better advice can they get than “Here are the facts – it is your life – you can make it – use your own judgement”.

The ability of setting one’s own standards in a rapidly changing environment is the best gift a young person can get from a caring and

The ability of setting one’s own standards in a rapidly changing environment is the best gift a young person can get. It is therefore the more important to set the agenda right already from the start.



supportive grown-up environment. The young will have to fend for themselves and they need a stable groundwork to start off from. Heart-breaking stories, of what children and adolescents, left ignorant, have to endure due to lack of knowledge of their bodies' growth and of the effects of the force of their budding sexuality, are in abundance.

The world is rapidly changing and so are cultural and societal norms – for better or for worse. In this process parents and caring adults must give factual information, set guiding principles and suggest behavioural norms but can NEVER impose their own ways of thinking on another individual – not even on their own offsprings.

The best option to prevent wrongdoings is to give children and adolescents a respectful treatment and the benefit of the doubt that factual information, love and trust will foster self-esteem and inner strength. Through research, norms achieved before the age of nineteen have been found not to be easily changed. It is therefore the more important to set the agenda right already from the start.

The need for Sexuality and Gender education and Life skills

While most young people become healthy and productive adults, many millions, unfortunately, do not. This need not be the case if adults take their responsibilities towards the young seriously. More than half the new HIV infections occur among young people and one in twenty young persons worldwide contracts a sexually transmitted disease.

One tenth of all births are to teenage girls; many prematurely married off, posing increased risks to both the mother and the child. In many countries, complications related to pregnancy, abortion and childbirth are the major causes of death in adolescent girls. Many young girls and even boys are exposed to sexual violence, abuse and exploitation. Much of this scenario could be avoided if the young get life skills, youth-friendly services and sexuality and gender education already from early ages, before the onset of puberty.

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Especially vulnerable groups of children and young people are the “handicapped” or young people with special needs. Reports are flowing in on how blind girls, for example, are being abused sexually and many others are equally vulnerable to inhuman sexual abuse. It should, however, be stated that young people with special needs also have the right to a fulfilling sexual life and at times need special assistance, advice and support to achieve a complete and satisfactory life – never forgetting the respect for each individuals’ integrity and personal expression of will.

Sexuality education is not a new subject. In traditional societies initiation rites took care of the education of girls and boys separately. Sexuality education through initiation did then entail lessons about sexual expression itself or the range of socio-economic skills, roles and responsibilities. In other words ethnic communities educated their children about sex preparing them for an adult life. Now that initiation rites are disappearing young girls do not get any holistic education from reliable adults. The taboo for mothers to talk of sexuality with their daughters is still upheld and aunts and grandmother are not always accessible anymore.

A survey in Malawi has shown that the majority of all groups wanted sexuality education to be taught in schools. The students even state they want to be able to talk to their parents and trusted adults about sexually related matters. And the parents state that they themselves and the traditional system has failed and they want the government to take over in order to save their children from HIV/AIDS. One parent said: “Why have you waited so long? Our children are dying!”

Another misconception around the concept of sexuality education is that it is believed to mean teaching of how to have sex and the technicalities around sexual intercourse. This is wrong. Sexuality education is much broader and deals with the whole life cycle including ethics, relations, feelings, rights, responsibility, gender equality as well as factual information on the body and its sexual functions. Rarely, if ever, are intimate technicalities around sexual intercourse touched upon. This is what the young learn from friends and the media unless they have a caring and understanding adult who can talk to them about the intricacies of sexual life – or they learn by themselves as happens to most people.

Sexuality education does not lead to increased sexual activity

A common misunderstanding and misconception is that teaching the young about sexuality and the facts of life is equal to pushing them to become sexually active. As a matter of fact it is on the contrary. Therefore, introducing “abstinence only” sexuality education programmes do not help young people to make the best choices. Studies compiled by WHO and UNAIDS have shown that giving factual information and sexuality education to children and adolescents on sexuality, gender relations and the sexual and reproductive life, lead to less sex in early ages and to delayed and more responsible sexual activities not necessarily implying sexual intercourse. And for those already sexually active it leads to more responsible sexual behaviour through safer sex and responsible condom use.

Giving sexuality education to children and adolescents lead to less sex in early ages and to delayed and more responsible sexual activities.

Although it must be stated that simply providing sexuality education does not automatically lead to everybody always behaving in a sexually responsible way. Many other surrounding factors influence people's behaviour, sexually or otherwise. This is true both for young people and adults. Most people know the danger of smoking but do not quit the habit. A majority of persons know that the HIV virus is transmitted mainly through sexual intercourse but still do not behave sexually responsibly through practising safer sex, using condoms or abstaining from sex nor staying completely faithful.

Simply providing sexuality education does not automatically lead to everybody always behaving in a sexually responsible way.

Silence leads to death – openness leads to life – use of media

Let the young people talk and lead us in this age of time. When talking to young people all around the world similar experiences emerge. Young people want to talk about relations and sexual matters that



concern them. They have much less inhibitions to talk openly than the older generation. Rather than scolding them or trying to silence them we should take this opportunity and build on their thoughts and enthusiasms when designing projects, programmes and messages around sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

While waiting for the public sector to open up around sexuality, media is a powerful means of disseminating information among young people. Through the media young people could be let to express themselves through participating in creating the information. Innovative and risk-taking projects have to be tried in the public sector preferably together with the private and the corporate sector.

Interesting examples in Africa are the newspaper “Straight Talk” in Uganda, TV and radio soap operas “Soul City” in South Africa and the magazine “FEMINA” in Tanzania. Whether we like it or not the media is the most powerful and popular means for young people to find entertainment – why not then use this opportunity to also provide useful and factual information that is to the liking of young people? Education-entertainment (Edutainment) has proven to be very efficient in many countries and can be more open and straightforward – hence more popular.

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Focus on young people’s positive, not negative sides

If and when young people are at the focus of politicians’ and service providers’ minds, it is often in connection with problems of various kinds. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has amply demonstrated this. Young people’s health is therefore frequently equated with problems in relation to “sexual and reproductive health”. Apart from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, – problems related to unwanted and unsafe sex also stimulate the interest and involvement of politicians and service providers, – at best.

What is sorely lacking, however, are youth friendly health services. As a result, young people resort to the advice of friends, quacks, or to phar-



macies and to private sector outlets – not always with the best outcome. Young people would like to see more interest also in their other health needs such as for example mental health and even dental health!

It is important to remember that young people have a wide range of interests that need to be encouraged and stimulated. Children and young people have to be seen and treated as complete individuals living in the same society as adults with as many aspirations and worries as any other adult person.

It is detrimental to a young person's development to be treated as a "problem" every time he or she is in focus. Most young people live their lives without major problems but during adolescence and puberty their vulnerability increases due to many rapid biological and psychosocial changes that they have to face. If treated with a positive attitude they will be able to go through this maturation process in a much smoother fashion.

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Clarification of values needed around sexuality

Personal values are fundamental for influencing peoples' decisions about their life as well as other peoples' lives when they are in positions of service providers or programmers or policy makers. Values are defined as a set of assessment and acceptability and are important for one's motivation and ability to act neutrally and to choose between how to behave in different situations. This is especially important to be aware of when it comes to dealing with sensitive issues surrounding sexuality and young people.

A solution could be to have value clarification and empathy-building workshops for these crucial categories involving exercises in values, role-plays and interactive drama techniques. These kinds of interventions have proven to be very enlightening and appreciated by the involved where they have taken place, in too few instances unfortunately. It does not take long before people relax and learn to talk at ease about the most natural things in life surrounding sexuality much to their own surprise and relief.



The need for teachers' and service providers' training on sexuality

In some countries sexuality issues have been given an increasingly more prominent place in the educational arena in the light of growing insights into the significance of sexuality for the individual person. From having been seen as something that should be restrained or denied, sexuality is now increasingly regarded as something positive in the human beings' development towards maturity.

The subject area of sexuality and personal relationships offers the teachers an opportunity to create dialogues with pupils and the service providers with their young clients. Ultimately the individual is in focus. During conversation sessions the teacher or health staff can be regarded as a guide as much as a source of knowledge. The education

Sexuality is now being increasingly regarded as something positive in the human beings' development towards maturity.

becomes a form of communal seeking for knowledge, allowing scope for individual differences with regard to maturity, thoughts and opinions. This, however, demands a thorough training in sexuality and gender education whether in-service and/or built into the teacher and health staff training curricula, the latter being preferred and more economically sustainable.

It is of utmost importance, however, that teachers and service providers are made to understand and abide by ethical rules and regulations so as not to take advantage of the innocence and vulnerability of the young. For teachers it implies respecting students in not seeking sexual favours in exchange for improved marks or other advantages in the school setting and for health staff a respectful behaviour in very sensitive situations. A survey in Malawi has shown that girls prefer to receive sexuality education from a female teacher whereas the boys did not show any particular preference for either a male or female teacher, which gives cause for warning.

Why should young people be let to participate?

Young people know what their needs are. They are enthusiastic and are less inhibited. They can learn and change easily and are open to new ideas. They are creative and passionate and stick to what they believe in. One should be honest and patient when dealing with young people. It is important to let the young learn from experience. Adults should be consistent and show faith in their capabilities. It is counter-productive to dictate to the young. It easily leads to opposition and curiosity to do the opposite. Never ridicule or be overly negative or pessimistic when working with young people. Stay away from being judgmental.

In sum, show trust and involve young people in the formulating and designing of projects and programmes on their own terms but under the guidance of caring and youth-friendly adults. Young people have the potential to influence their parents and peers with factual knowledge.

Never ridicule or be overly negative or pessimistic when working with young people. Stay away from being judgmental.

Therefore it is important to listen to and involve parents and the community in order to ensure that programmes do not undermine and go contrary to the discussions and talks that parents hold with their children and adolescents.

Impact of Health sector reforms, Legal reforms and Poverty Reduction Plans (PRSP's) on Young People's sexuality and rights

We can deliberate at endless Global Consultations around topics dealing with young people and design excellent programmes and policies. However, this would be to no avail unless they are incorporated from the very beginning into Poverty Reduction Strategy Programmes, PRSP's, and Health and Education Sector Reform Programmes or Sector Wide Approaches, "SWAPs". It is most important that everybody concerned with children and young people's health and development start working together with health and education systems development people and not the least with financial analysts and finance departments. When adopting legal reforms it is most important to take into consideration the effects on children and young people. Laws also have to give protection against sexual abuse and other forms of sexual exploitation.

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Final comments

Societal inhibitions and fear that parents and the electorate may not want radical programme changes often make politicians hesitant. But on the other hand political foresight and courage could give the young a healthy and satisfactory life including sexual well being.

As one Secretary of state in a developing country stated: “We are now in a situation of life and death. We cannot afford to close our eyes anymore. It has before been a ‘mouthful’ for us to say words such as Sexuality, Sexuality education, Sex and Condoms, but now we have started talking openly about this. We must – otherwise our young ones will die – and then where do we go?”

Many surveys have shown that this is what parents and the community would want the politicians to do for their children and adolescents whom they see growing up in vulnerable situations and even dying due to lack of adequate protection, information and services.

What is lacking most in the fight for young people’s rights for participation is *communication* with and between citizens of all categories and *political commitment* from those in power. Admittedly, economical constraints may exist but should not be taken as an excuse since much could be done with available resources.

The second decade of life is a period of rapid growth and development for young peoples’ bodies, minds and social relationships. It is a period of great opportunities, of new ways of thinking about things, of new influences, of changing roles and responsibilities. It is a period that shapes the future of individuals, societies and countries. Investing in the health and development of young people is likely to be one of the key decisions that a nation takes about its social and economic progress and stability. With their energy, ideas and enthusiasm, young people are a key resource for promoting their own health and development, and contributing to the health of their families and communities.

It is certainly not the experts’ knowledge of what can be done that is missing, but the political will to ensure the implementation of programmes on a large national scale. Skills, empathy and insight have to be developed at all political levels. Whole nations have to be

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reoriented and retrained, and values around sexuality clarified and sorted out.

As a result it should not be considered difficult any longer to talk openly about sexuality. Nor should it be experienced as dangerous to say Sex is Good – Sex is Joy – Sex is Fun – Sex is Love – Sex is Power – Protected Sex is Life! Only through learning how to speak out around sexuality can we ever dream of changing the negative trends of the spread of HIV/AIDS into a safer and happier life for young people.

Sex is Good – Sex is Joy – Sex is Fun – Sex is Love – Sex is Power
– Protected Sex is Life!

An enlightened public official once told how he had informed his then teenage daughters about the dangers of HIV/AIDS. He also provided them with condoms – just in case. His colleagues accused him of being crazy. He, however, answered them simply: “What is worse – giving my daughters condoms while talking openly to them or facing their premature deaths? I love my daughters. They are now educated healthy grown up young women, and very thankful to their dad.”

The fact is that many young people have their first sexual experience during their teens whether the parents know it or not. One unpublished policy study from Save the Children Fund estimates that more than half of the world’s population have had unprotected sex (sex without a condom) before the age of 16 (from Young Men and HIV; PANOS/UNAIDS, 2001).



SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
COOPERATION AGENCY

SE-105 25 Stockholm · Sweden

Tel: +46 (0)8-698 50 00 · Fax: +46 (0)8-20 88 64

www.sida.se