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The status of comprehensive
sexuality education in Asia
and the Pacific: A summary
review 2020



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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

YOUNG PEOPLE IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

More than half of the world's 1.8 billion young people aged 10–24 live in the Asia and Pacific region¹ and a majority of them live in low and middle-income countries. In spite of their diverse socio-economic contexts, young people across this vast region commonly face limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services, including age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. Of the 13 million adolescent girls globally with an unmet need for contraception, approximately half live in Asia-Pacific, leading to an estimated 3.7 million births to adolescent girls in the region annually. In addition, around 82,000 young people are infected with HIV each year in the region.^{2,3}

As adolescents transition through to adulthood, it is crucial that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to support their health and wellbeing, regardless of age, sex, marital status, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴ School-based and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is an effective means of reaching a large population of children and young people, particularly where rates of school participation are high. This overview of the status of in-school CSE in Asia and the Pacific provides a strong evidence base on the reach and impact of this across the region. Importantly, post COVID-19 we need to build back CSE programmes that are better and stronger to meet the social and emotional needs of our young people.

¹ UNFPA. (2020) 'My body is my body, my life is my life'. Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific.

² UNFPA. (2016) Universal Access to Reproductive Health: Progress and challenges.

³ UNFPA. (2020) 'My body is my body, my life is my life'. Sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people in Asia and the Pacific.

⁴ UNFPA. (2013) UNFPA Strategy on Adolescents and Youth: Towards realizing the full potential of adolescents and youth.

ABOUT THIS REVIEW

In 2019, UNFPA, UNESCO and IPPF East, South East Asia and Oceania Region (ESEAOR) collaborated for a regional review on the status of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in the Asia and Pacific region. Thirty countries were identified including 21 in Asia and nine in the Pacific.

THE REVIEW COLLECTED EVIDENCE THROUGH

1



Literature review of national laws and policies around sexuality education

2



Separate country surveys with:

- a. Key representatives of the Ministry of Education in each country
- b. Key respondents at UNFPA, UNESCO and IPPF member associations

The surveys explored national laws, policies and strategies for sexuality education as well as evidence on sexuality education curricula, provision and delivery, teacher training, and linkages to SRH care for young people.

A sample of respondents were also invited to share 'good practice' case studies where relevant.

3



Post-review rapid online survey with experts⁵ in respective countries

This was done to better understand and compare findings exclusively on sexuality education topics covered and comprehensiveness of curricula.

4



Online youth survey completed by 1,432 people aged between 15 and 24 years in 27 countries in the Asia-Pacific region

5



Focus group discussions with 83 young people aged between 15 and 31 years in four countries

⁵ Forty-three experts that consisted of individuals affiliated with UNFPA, UNESCO, IPPF member associations, other civil society organizations, as well as independent consultants completed a rapid online survey.



WHAT IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

- Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality.
- It goes beyond simply providing education about reproduction, risks and diseases by also addressing positive sexuality and relationships, and the broader sociocultural and gender influences on sexual and reproductive health, with an emphasis on developing life skills.

International technical guidance on sexuality education (ITGSE), UNESCO et al. 2018

Empowering young people, including through the provision of CSE, is essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goals 3, 4 and 5.

FIGURE 1. SDGs AND CSE



Source: sdgs.un.org

Box 1. Characteristics and concepts of CSE

CSE PROGRAMMES ARE	WHAT ARE KEY CONCEPTS OF CSE?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scientifically accurate Incremental (starting from an early age, before puberty and sexual debut) Age and developmentally appropriate Curriculum based Comprehensive Based on a human rights approach Based on gender equality Culturally relevant and context appropriate Transformative Designed to develop life skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships Values, rights, culture and sexuality Understanding gender Violence and staying safe Skills for health and well-being The human body and development Sexuality and sexual behaviour Sexual and reproductive health

Source: UNESCO et al. 2018

Box 2. CSE fact and fiction

CSE CAN CONTRIBUTE TO	CSE DOES NOT LEAD TO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Delayed onset of first sex ✓ Decreased frequency of sex and number of sexual partners ✓ Reduced risky behaviours and increased use of condoms and contraception. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Early sexual debut ✗ Increased sexual activity ✗ Risk-taking behaviour.
FACT	FICTION

Source: UNESCO et al. 2018

KEY FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW

WHERE DO LAWS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR SEXUALITY EDUCATION POINT?

While the majority of countries in the Asia and Pacific region have laws or policies related to sexual and reproductive health and/or sexuality education for young people, commitment to CSE varies significantly across these countries.

Most countries in Asia and the Pacific have some form of law, policy or strategy relating to sexual and reproductive health and/or sexuality education for young people.

The survey with Ministry of Education (MoE) representatives indicated that most officials were aware of such national laws or policies within their country.



Comprehensive sexuality education is gaining importance. Currently, CSE has been allotted 90 minutes in a month to be taught for classes PP [pre-primary] to Class 12.

(MoE survey response, Bhutan)

FIGURE 2. AWARENESS OF NATIONAL LAWS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Countries where respondents report that they are aware of national laws and policies relating to sexual and reproductive health and/or sexuality education for young people

Countries where respondents report ¹

Asia

75% (15 out of 20 countries)



The Pacific

63% (5 out of 8 countries)



Source: MoE questionnaire

¹ The number of countries that responded to each MoE survey question differs



Constant advocacy for CSE in the region is leading to more enabling laws, policies and strategies on sexuality education for children and young people. However, commitment to sexuality education varies significantly within these policies and strategies. Sexuality education strategies, teacher training and delivery mechanisms may not necessarily be consistent with the *International technical guidance on sexuality education (ITGSE)*.⁶

Some countries in the region have laws allowing decentralised decisions on education by states and/or provinces. In such cases, consistency and quality of sexuality education delivery can be key challenges. Furthermore, in many countries, laws, policies and strategies apply cultural, religious and social norms in prioritising and delivering sexuality education.

It is important to note that while there is a commitment to deliver LSE (Life Skills Education), given cultural and social constraints the delivery of all components of LSE, as detailed in the ITGSE, may not always be feasible.

(MoE survey response, Bangladesh)

⁶ UNESCO et al. (2018) *International technical guidance on sexuality education*. 2nd edn.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION CURRICULA, CONTENT AND DELIVERY MECHANISMS VARY GREATLY IN THE REGION.

Over half of the countries surveyed teach sexuality education in some form as a mandatory subject. However, it is often integrated into other subjects.

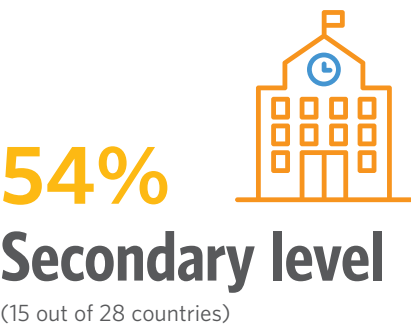
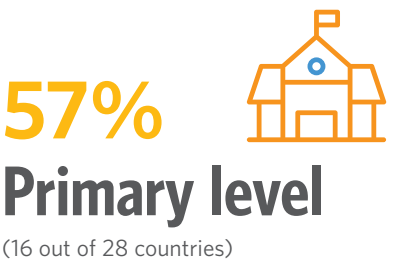
National curricula in Asia and the Pacific may refer to sexuality education differently, such as *Life Skills Education* or *Family Life Education*. In this review, the majority of the MoE responses indicated that there is a national sexuality education curriculum for both primary and secondary school learners. It is ideal to teach sexuality education as a mandatory and standalone subject, as both teachers and students can take the content more seriously. More time can also be focused on sexuality education, and it is easier to monitor and evaluate effectiveness.^{7,8} The proportion of countries that have a mandatory or optional sexuality education curriculum is fairly evenly split across the Asia and Pacific region. Only a quarter of countries have sexuality education taught as a standalone subject (either separately or as part of health education) while the majority reported that sexuality education topics are integrated across other subjects such as science and religion.



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FIGURE 3. DELIVERY APPROACH

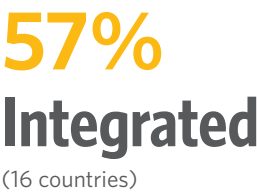
Countries reporting that sexuality education is taught as a **mandatory subject** by education level



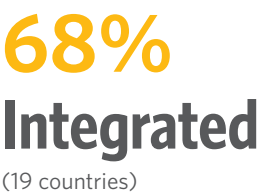
Source: MoE questionnaire

Countries reporting whether sexuality education is **integrated** into other subjects or taught as a **standalone** sexuality education of health education subject by education level

Primary level
(28 countries surveyed)



Secondary level
(28 countries surveyed)



⁷ UNESCO. (2015) Emerging evidence, lessons and practice in comprehensive sexuality education.
⁸ UNESCO. et al. (2018) International technical guidance on sexuality education. 2nd edn.

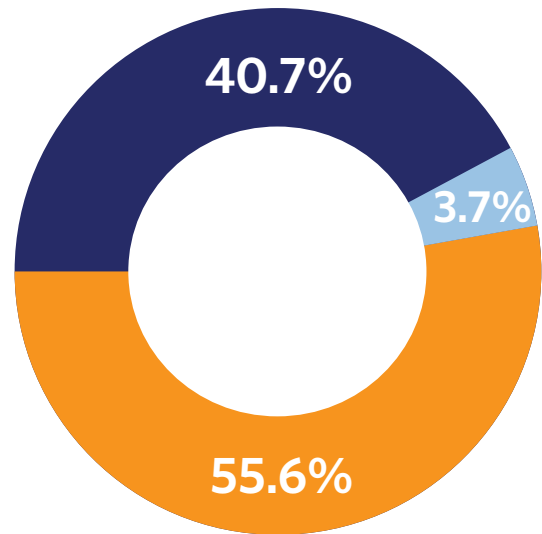


In nearly half of the countries surveyed, age-appropriate sexuality education is NOT introduced to young people in early childhood.

Reaching children with early and appropriately age-sequenced sexuality education is vital to ensure they have accurate information and necessary decision-making skills concerning their health and relationships, prior to sexual debut during their adolescence or later.⁹ Children should receive age-appropriate sexuality education from early primary, and at the latest before the onset of puberty and sexual activity, and such education should continue throughout adolescence and adulthood.¹⁰ Nevertheless, aspects of sexuality education are introduced in the first grade of primary school education or earlier in only half of the countries in Asia and the Pacific.

FIGURE 4. TIMING

Grade at which sexuality education starts



Kindergarten & Grade 1	15
Grade 2-6	11
Grade 7-12	1

(27 countries surveyed)

Source: MoE questionnaire

FIGURE 5. TIMING IN RELATION TO PUBERTY



People think it's too early to give children sex education. But I think it's important.



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