



Youth Actionism

China Youth Network Experiences of Youth Participation and
Young People's Sexual and Reproductive Health Promotion

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though young people around the world live in different geographical, economic, and cultural contexts, their demands for health are basically the same – health issues are closely related to their future educational development, economic level, and health level. Comparing with other age groups, young people are more vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health challenges. At the same time, sexual and reproductive health interventions and promotion for this group are also more effective and far more reaching. In the process of the young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights promotion, young people are motivated to gain the initiative and active participation instead of passive education. That's how to meet the needs of young people and bring about sustainable changes.

The China Youth Network (CYN) is a youth volunteer organization that undertakes peer education on sexual and reproductive health and advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and HIV/AIDS prevention for young people aged 10-24 in China. It has developed into a sustainable and influential youth-led organization with strong social campaign skills, peer education and training capabilities, and a mechanism to nurture new volunteers. In order to support the youth participation in sexual and reproductive health and rights promotion, this report collects the reflection and discussion of members of CYN, summarizes their successful experience, and proposes the following EARLY model:

- ✓ **Empowerment** Respect the ideas of young people and help each young person to gain personal growth, ability enhancement and self-realization opportunities, gain the confidence and ability to participate, lead and make decisions, and become a vigorous pioneer.
- ✓ **Awareness** Encourage young people to think about and discuss sexual and reproductive health and rights-related issues from scratch, and awaken young people's independent consciousness, so that they will become advocators of young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- ✓ **Reform** Encourage young people to integrate sexual and reproductive health and rights peer education into daily life, bring about changes in the environment around them, expand the space for youth participation, actively participate in social promotion, and become a promoter of social progress.
- ✓ **Lead** Exert the creativity of young people, encourage them to independently explore the direction of development and establish diverse cooperative relationships with adults, and become a leader in advocacy of the young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- ✓ **Yell-out** Encourage and inspire young peers and promote public awareness in sexual and reproductive health and rights, gain the opportunity to take the initiative in expressing their opinions in the government and relevant authoritative organizations to become the spokesperson for the young people's sexual and reproductive health needs.

2. THE URGENCY

2.1 URGENCY OF PROMOTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

At present, there are about 1.8 billion adolescents and young people aged between 10 and 24 in the world, accounting for a quarter of the total population. This is the largest group in this age group (UNFPA, 2013). The health issues of this period are closely related to their future educational development, economic level and health level, affecting their potential (Brock & Columbia, 2008).

Compared with other health challenges, young people are more vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health issues due to their special economic status, knowledge level, cognitive level, and physiological development stage (Cowan, 2002). AIDS is becoming the second cause of death among adolescents around the world. Complications of pregnancy and delivery are the second cause of death for women aged 15-19 around the world (World Health Organization). According to the 2010 sixth population census data released on the website of the National Bureau of Statistics of China, there are 227 million people aged 15-24 in China, accounting for 17% of the country's total population. A survey conducted in the same year showed that about 60% of this group had unmet demands for sexual and reproductive health counseling, and more than half of them had unmet demands for sexual reproductive health services. 22.4% of the young people of this age have had sexual experiences. One out of every five sexual behaviors of young people did not use any contraceptive measures and faced such risks as STIs/HIV infection, unwanted pregnancies and possible unsafe abortions (郑晓瑛 & 陈功, 2010).

Sexual and reproductive health issues are becoming an important factor affecting the development of young people. In the last 50 years, the world has made great progress in health development. Adolescent health promotion progresses slowly compared to the results achieved in the field of child development, most of which can be attributed to sexual and reproductive health problems: on the one hand, the adolescent pregnancy problems are complex and difficult, on the other hand, nearly 40% of new HIV infections occur in people aged 15 to 24 (Hindin, Christiansen & Ferguson, 2013). Sexual and reproductive health issues bring not only physical

pain, but also significant impact on mental health, education, career development, and socioeconomic status. For example, in some areas where premarital sex is regarded as a taboo, adolescents who have had sexual behaviors or even unwanted pregnancies may be negatively evaluated by teachers and other groups and lack sufficient social support, which directly or indirectly affects their future life development (Hindin & Fatusi, 2009).

2.2 URGENCY OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Young people are recognized as one of the most effective age group for reproductive health intervention programs. Interventions with populations of this age will have far-reaching implications for the health of their future life and even the next generation. Life skills education including sex education is proved to reduce high-risk sexual behaviors among young people, reduce unwanted pregnancies and the possibility of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS (WHO, 2003).

In the traditional intervention programs, young people are the target group of intervention. They accept the guidance and education of the teachers, parents and other adults, and they are passive learners and recipients. Today, however, their ability, rights and responsibilities in the programs are increasingly valued (UNICEF, 2002). In reality, it is very difficult for the young people to express their opinions to the public, and their needs are often ignored when policies related to their interests are formed. At the same time, the young people rarely receive enough knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS prevention during adolescence due to the limitations of traditional concepts. How to protect the sexual and reproductive health rights of young people, and how to improve the status of the young people's sexual and reproductive health is a matter of concern. Young people need not only to be seen and noticed, but also to have the opportunity to speak for themselves. Since 2003, United Nations Population Fund has advocated global youth participation in reproductive health projects and decision-making processes (UNFPA, 2003). Under the influence of globalization and international consensus, China's adolescent reproductive health project has carried out some attempts and

explorations of "youth participation".

Youth participation helps to develop their own exploration ability and critical thinking. Young people are exposed to a variety of information and value judgments as they grow up. These statements about sex, social sex, and gender equality are contradictory, mistaken, biased, and likely to be selective. Parents and teachers who guide them are likely not adaptable to discuss topics related to sex with their children, and there are limits to their own recognition. Studies have shown that in many developing regions, parents also lack reproductive health information like their children, and most parents do not have the experience of supporting reproductive health promotion programs during adolescence (Gavin, Williams, Rivera, & Lachance, 2015). As the real subject of the intervention programs, young people continuously receive information and interact with the environment, and build their own knowledge system on this basis (Giroux, 1994). When young people have the opportunity to learn to critically think about their own experience and the information from the outside world, actively explore and assume responsibility, and form their own understanding and judgment on this basis, the programs are most effective.

Meeting the increasing demands of young people for reproductive health requires us to work creatively. Young people are full of energy, passionate, strongly curious, adventurous and fearless. Even in adversity, they will show their ability and adaptability. Advocating youth participation in sexual and reproductive health promotion helps to listen to them, understand their views, employ their energy, develop their talents and mobilize their autonomy. On the sensitive issue of the sexual and reproductive health, this helps to overcome the communication barriers between generations, encourages adults to respond to the needs of young people with enthusiasm and responsibility, jointly develops the programs of the concerns and needs of young people and incorporates many factors related to sexual health and well-being.

2.3 URGENCY OF YOUTH-LED INITIATIVE

Youth-led organizations and social networks are critical to the sustainability of youth participation and are imperative. Young people can get support and encouragement in their own

organizations and social networks, break through the limitations neglected in the past and at the subordinate status, take the initiative to master all kinds of resources, and form cooperative relationships with adults. Their potential has thus been able to be exerted and further developed. Compared with individuals, youth-led organizations and social networks play a greater role in international and domestic platforms. They strategically advocate, promote and protect their sexual and reproductive health well-being, and build partnerships with other organizations to become a catalyst for reforms in the field (Ketterling, 2009).

In youth-led organizations and social networks, peers support each other, exchange information, share knowledge, and make progress together, express a voice that belongs to and represents themselves. Achieving this goal requires the capacity building and growth of young people themselves. Youth-led organizations and social networks can promote the growth of young people in practice, empower young people with a sense of belonging and power, establish self-confidence and social responsibility of young people, give play to the advantages and abilities of young people, and cultivate the leader for a new generation of sexual and reproductive health in the field. They can further support young people's participation in social advocacy, project formulation and policy advocacy.

With their own model effect and influence, youth-led organizations and social networks can promote the continuous development of sexual and reproductive health promotion programs and activities, and expand the influence, coverage and scope of services. Young people have established their right to participate and speak in the group activities of self-help and mutual help, and thus can carry out a large number of effective interventions of self-empowerment at the micro

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