



**IPPF** International  
Planned Parenthood  
Federation

European Network

## DECISION-MAKERS OWE YOUNG PEOPLE RELATIONSHIP AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION



**IPPF EUROPEAN NETWORK IS FIGHTING WITH AND FOR YOUNG PEOPLE SO THAT THEY HAVE THE CHANCE TO DEVELOP THE LIFE SKILLS NEEDED TO FOSTER HEALTHIER AND SAFER RELATIONSHIPS, BASED ON EQUALITY AND RESPECT.**

Over the past few decades we have seen increased support for relationship and sexuality education with several countries in Europe and Central Asia setting an ambitious tone. Nonetheless, access to relationship and sexuality education varies widely across countries, as many governments continue to deprive young people of crucial life skills that would enable them to have happy and healthy relationships and lives. At IPPF EN, we believe that the quality of someone's sexuality education should not be reduced to a geographical lottery.

Sexist and coercive movements are spreading misinformation about relationship and sexuality education. These movements oppose efforts to

break down harmful and rigid gender norms around masculinity and femininity. They attack education that promotes awareness and respect for gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual pleasure and sexual rights.

In this context, IPPF Member Associations are working tirelessly to enable young people to develop knowledge and life skills that support their health and well-being - through trainings for educators, the implementation of innovative programmes outside school settings, and advocacy for mandatory relationship and sexuality education (as per the definition of UNESCO).

## CARING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE BY EMPOWERING THEM

There is ample evidence showing the effectiveness of relationship and sexuality education. Beyond reducing unintended pregnancies, abortions, STIs and HIV, sexuality education fosters emotional-sexual intelligence and the capacity for healthy, intimate bonding and growth. It can extend individuals' ability to care for themselves and others in the realm of intimacy and sexuality and build their capacity for empathy.

Relationship and sexuality education is grounded in an understanding of the concepts of consent, equality, rights and respect for one's own

boundaries and the boundaries of others. These boundaries are particularly important in intimate relationships because without them, young people risk being unable to recognise abuse or protect themselves from violence. Relationship and sexuality education helps prevent intimate partner violence by equipping young people with the skills needed to question harmful behaviours that might otherwise be seen as normal. For example, knowing how to identify possessive and controlling behaviour in a relationship and having the confidence to assert oneself and ask for support is key to preventing violence. If young people aren't supported in questioning these behaviours they may accept them as normal, even though they are harmful.

## PREVENTING GENDER INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE THROUGH RELATIONSHIP AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Relationship and sexuality education can reduce female-focused violence & discrimination. It can help people question commonly accepted behaviours that are in fact harmful to themselves and others. For example, young men are often expected to suppress their emotions so that they can conform to damaging understandings of strength and masculinity. This leaves men ill-equipped to express or navigate through their emotions, which can later on cause issues for their mental health.

Equally, young women are often expected to be polite and accommodating to others -

even in situations where they are made to feel uncomfortable. Conforming to this expectation can make it more difficult for women to assert themselves and can lead to their enduring discrimination or abuse without possessing the skills or confidence to address it.

By dismantling these archaic stereotypes, we can foster equality and prevent violence and coercion within relationships. This can also have beneficial impact elsewhere - for example, evidence shows that women belonging to more gender equal communities have higher access to sexual health services, including HIV testing and treatment.

Relationship and sexuality education plays a key role in ensuring the safe emotional and physical development of young people, yet certain governments and actors in society endanger young people by denying them access to this emotional-sexual literacy.

// Relationship and sexuality education (RSE) needs to be brought up to date. 11 and 12 year olds have iPads, iPhones so it's easier than ever to see porn and there are new dangers such as online grooming. People who oppose RSE because they want to 'keep children innocent as long as possible' are not facing reality. Currently RSE isn't given the emphasis it needs - it should be broader, inclusive, positive. Young worker, 23, UK

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## DENIAL OF LIFE SKILLS ENDANGERS YOUNG PEOPLE IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Keeping young people ignorant endangers their physical, emotional, and social well-being, especially as they must now charter unexplored ways of interaction with their peers in an ever-changing digital world.

New generations are growing up in the digital era without precious life skills, forced to learn about sex and relationships from often violent online pornography and at great risk of misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic online bullying. When governments and societies fail to care, the negative consequences for our youth can be devastating.



### Case Study: RUTGERS, DIGITAL CARE

Relationship and sexuality education protects young people from threats in the digital world. In a world where human interaction increasingly takes place through digital communication, young people are grappling with shifting definitions of personal privacy, safety and respect.

Rutgers, IPPF member association in the Netherlands, runs a project about how to stay safe and be respectful online. Through direct work with young people that have engaged in digital bullying or harassment, Rutgers seeks to prevent repetition of this behaviour. Young people gain insight into the consequences of bullying online and obtain advice on how to treat their peers with respect and empathy.

Parents are also included in the project, receiving advice on how to engage their children in conversations about respectful and safe online behaviour.

## REACHING THOSE WHOSE NEEDS ARE GREATEST

Due to a continued and acute need for relationship and sexuality education across the region, IPPF member associations work to equip all young people with the competences they need. We work in schools, but also outside school settings. We reach out to young people by working with local communities in youth centres, child protection centres, facilities for asylum seekers and refugees, in prisons and more.

We have specific programmes to reach out to young people that have been neglected by their governments and the societies they live in. We believe that all young people - including those facing the greatest challenges - have the right to access information and sexuality education.



### Case study: ALBANIAN CENTRE FOR POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT (ACPD), WORKING WITH AND FOR NEGLECTED YOUNG PEOPLE

The life skills provided by relationship and sexuality education are particularly important for children and young people who are discriminated against - young people who have been abandoned by those closest to them, neglected by people who have a duty of care, and even vilified in some circles of society. ACPD, IPPF member in Albania, has put in place networks and training programmes that have enabled hundreds of socially marginalised young people to develop knowledge and life skills that support their health and well-being. These young people talk of a sense of empowerment after participating in these programmes.

*"I'm gay and a sex worker, which makes me feel judged twice over. I was invited to participate in ACPD's comprehensive sexuality education school. I learnt about my sexual rights, my right to access stigma-free services. I learnt about having safer sex and always using a condom. Now I have the courage to ask my clients to use a condom when they don't want to. Knowing my rights gives me the courage to speak up for non-judgmental and friendly SRH services when I go to a health care centre. Sexuality education can empower us!"* Young man from Albania

## INVESTMENT FALLS SHORT

Looking at Europe and Central Asia one thing is evident: teachers are not given enough support to roll out relationship and sexuality education. The training of teachers to cover certain aspects of relationship and sexuality education like gender roles, sexual abuse and domestic violence are frequently neglected. The quality of relationship and sexuality education can be heavily affected by a lack of support for teachers. We are at a point where investment is urgently needed - we cannot allow a lack of support for the teachers.

Relationship and sexuality education is not only about building up contraceptive literacy, but is about discussing harmful stereotypes and developing social and emotional intelligence. This means that teachers need to develop specific teaching methods that can address these issues in all of their complexity - but evidence shows that this is not being done. In an investigation carried out by IPPF EN, it was found that only 3 out of 25 countries in the region offered sufficient levels of training for teachers on relationship and sexuality education.



**Teachers were uncomfortable with it. There was pressure to get grades for all the other subjects, but relationship and sexuality education was seen as unimportant. They couldn't see that it was about the wellbeing of students. It's about raising a generation capable of navigating all aspects of the world.** Young student



### Case study:

#### WOMEN HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING (WHFP), SUPPORTING OUR TEACHERS

WHFP, IPPF member in Ukraine, advocated for the Sexual and Reproductive Health National Programme in Ukraine, which was finally approved in 2017. WHFP now works closely with the government and teachers to ensure relationship and sexuality education is delivered in schools.

WHFP developed a manual for educators which includes lessons for young people as well as sections for self-education. Based on this manual, teachers can develop classes that cover: human rights and the rights of the child; sex and gender; sexuality; growing up and reproductive health and effective communication. This is a major step in a country like Ukraine, where the opposition is strongly fighting any progress in the field.

## TIME TO ACT

We fight so that young people are empowered to make their own decisions and assert themselves in their relationships. So that they know they should never be forced or pressured into having sex. By denying access to relationship and sexuality education we compromise young people's ability to manage emotional and physical intimacy and affection. Put simply, we fail young people. We urge governments and the international community to:

- Uphold the right to a life free from coercion, threat and violence by allowing unhindered access to relationship and sexuality education.
- Work towards a world where men and women are equally protected through a holistic approach to relationship and sexuality education.
- Stand for young people's right to literacy in all matters of health and intimacy.



IPPF European Network cares. We are working with member associations and partners in over 40 countries across Europe and Central Asia so that all women, men, children and young people can lead safe and dignified sexual and reproductive lives, free from harm and discrimination. © 2019