

Youth Forum Statement at CSE session with Ministries of Health & Education and UNFPA

In the last two days, over 150 young people ranged from 17 to 35 years, representing over 20 countries, came together in solidarity. The youth group at the second largest AIDS forum in the world, the 9th ICAAP, drafted a collective commitment to increase young people's stake in programmes and policy processes that impact their lives and their rights.

As youth from Brunei, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Japan, China, Philippines, Brazil, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal, Burma, Malaysia, Samoa, Lao, Papua New Guinea and South Korea, this commitment we make, is deeply personal. It is to achieve meaningful youth participation by developing strong adult peer partnerships, increase funding and capacity building for youth led and youth serving initiatives, mainstream human rights in the HIV and AIDS response for all young people, recognize and affirm young people's sexual reproductive health and rights and eliminate stigma and discrimination amongst young people.

And one wonders, what exactly does that mean? As a 24 year old who has been part of this incredibly diverse forum, there is a question that repeatedly comes up in all of our communities. Young people ask about it, in confusion. Parents ask about it, worried. Teachers and Schools wonder what to do with it, communities discuss it, in secret and our governments are still grappling with developing a comprehensive framework to implement it.

Why is sexuality so problematic?

Why as society, are we so scared to address any kind of sexuality education or rights cohesively? What stops us from giving young people complete rather than half baked information that is critical and life saving and that can protect them from disease, empowers them to be informed individuals and that teach them to be respectful to their own needs and desires and to be respectful towards the rights of others as well?

Why is there in all of our countries, this huge gap between what's happening in our lives and how empowered young people are, to be able to address these issues within their own societies?

Sexuality Education is about young people's right to know. The arguments based on cohesive Sexuality Education being against our cultural and moral values are invalid and do not justify denying young people the information and skills they need and are entitled to. Exhaustive research studies show that implementing comprehensive sexuality education does not lead to an increase in early sexual activity.

Majority of the awareness work we do around the prevention of HIV and AIDS isn't nearly half as effective as it should have been, because there is this underlying silence that no one will address. And as governments, as leaders, you cannot look away from the fact that young people are contracting HIV every day because they do not have the knowledge and tools to protect themselves. When you take the so called 'safer route' and substitute conversations about recognizing multiple sexuality and gender identities, staying healthy and protecting oneself from STI's and feeling comfortable with one's own body with conversations instead, about promoting self control and abstinence, you destroy any open space or possibility for conversation between young people and their families and communities.

No religion or society in the world, wants its young people to contract STDs, wants its young women to die in early childbirth or see violating inequalities between men and women. Comprehensive Sexuality Education is a framework that addresses each of these issues. It is not just about how to have sex, but rather about good quality school based sexuality, relationship and HIV education that increases the age

of sexual debut and has positive effects on the risk of STIs and unintended pregnancies and attitudes towards people living with HIV.

It is also not automatically covered under the ambit of Reproductive Health. When we replace curriculums on sexuality education and call them population control, family and life planning, health education, we need to ensure that we are still addressing sexuality as a basic component of human nature, that needs to be integrated in a larger framework of human rights.

Young people from Asia and the Pacific commonly identified various gaps and highlighted best practices present in how comprehensive sexuality education was being addressed in their country, some of which I'm sharing with you today:

- Many young people at this forum have highlighted the problems faced with having decentralized governments. There needs to be a standardized approach taken to implement comprehensive sexuality education. Central governments need to be able to dialogue clearer with state governments or provinces, to lobby for a standardized, comprehensive approach that is made accessible not just in government schools, but to out of school youth and those in private and faith based institutions as well.
- We believe that the approaches the ministry of education and ministry of health in each country implement could be aligned to ensure a more effective outcome, making schools a safe space for such conversation.
- We also believe that UN organizations in each country can play a key role in ensuring that this happens, because they have access to spaces of influence with governments that as young people, we do not.
- The importance and need of explaining to young people, condom use as well as negotiating the same was flagged as critical. Young people from Malaysia and India specifically felt that this was lacking in the approach that their governments implemented.
- Youth from Pakistan, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Burma, Bangladesh and India felt strongly that comprehensive sexuality education is only effective if the form by which it is taught is without shame or embarrassment and that currently in their countries, a larger focus needs to be made on implementing peer education services, as this makes the information contextualization easier and more age appropriate.
- They also felt strongly that teachers implementing curriculums need to be trained. The Brazilian Government partnership with civil society organizations who have the capacity and infrastructure to be able to do this was a best practice highlighted. We believe that civil society organizations and peer education has greater potential to be able to correctly implement community specific comprehensive sexuality education and partnerships should be encouraged by governments in Asia and the Pacific. Young people from China and Japan endorsed the need for this strongly.
- Young People from Pakistan feel that the lack of a specific curriculum in sexuality education in Pakistan has led to limited information being made accessible in certain provinces of the

country. A study by a recent NGO in the country revealed that sex education being conducted was not age appropriate, it was only in class 12 that many male students are taught anatomy and that often, frogs reproductive systems are used to explain human biology and sexuality.

- A greater effort needs to be made to dialogue with the positive power of faith and religion, as most young people pointed out those, religious texts such as the Holy Quran have clear passages that advocate for recognizing women's rights as well as reproductive health. However, it is often in the interpretation of these texts and a lack of community understanding on interpreting religious beliefs that biases step in. In Bangladesh, Imams are trained and in Brunei, Christian priests have now been trained to address the HIV response.
- Many young people feel that counseling and testing services are not comprehensive in their countries, services are not affordable and healthcare professionals are judgmental and stigmatize often the services they are offering. In Papua New Guinea, youth pointed out that there is an understanding of the approach that needs to be taken, but simply a lack in implementing youth friendly services and an educational curriculum.
- Youth from Indonesia pointed out that comprehensive sexuality education is seen as an extracurricular activity and is not compulsory learning. We strongly feel that comprehensive sexuality education should be made age appropriate and mandatory for all young people.
- Moreover we are absolutely sure, that a pure abstinence based approach does not work, as it discourages, embarrasses and stigmatizes young people from asking honest, open and relevant questions. A sex positive approach that mainstreams sexuality as part of human rights to HIV is needed. The recent move by US President Obama to advocate for age appropriate comprehensive Youth Forum Statement at CSE session with Ministries of Health & Education and UNFPA. Sexuality education and replace abstinence only education is testament to this. Youth from Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Pakistan, Samoa and South Korea felt that this was a critical factor and were unable to communicate the same to their governments effectively.
- Youth from India highlighted the need to involve young people in reviewing and developing effective models to implement comprehensive sexuality education curricula. We also feel that young people are aware of the cultural sensitivities in their countries and are at times, better placed to develop approaches that are comprehensive yet practical and sensitive to the needs of the community that they will be used in.

It was clear that all 150 young people feel that in each of their countries, there needs to be a significant increase in recognizing diverse gender and sexual identities and addressing gender equity, both in their respective country's legal and societal frameworks. We believe that you can pretend that an issue doesn't exist in society and refuse to address it, but if you overlook entire communities of people and their fundamental right to express their own identity, you will only fuel anger. Governments weaken themselves when they do this and they are less respected by their own citizens. As youth, we need to see an increase of positive role models in governments.

Sexuality Education is guided by the principle, that by empowering young people and giving them safe spaces in society where they can ask questions, you are investing in develop a very critical human resource that builds the future and promise of any country. And to our minds, that's exactly why we are

we need to support implementing CSE. We believe these issues are key to empowering young people to protect themselves and that if you give young people their right to information, skills and services and that if you trust rather than judge who you think they are, young people can negotiate high-risk situations more effectively and reduce their vulnerability to a range of issues, specifically, violence, HIV and substance abuse.

We have been working for the past 5 months, through E consultations, skill building sessions, advocacy training to now at ICAAP, developing a special youth corner that hosts an adult and young people commitment desk. This commitment desk is testament to the fact that as young people, we will hold you, leaders, decision makers and governments, accountable to working with us. We hope you will raise the bar by making a commitment that highlights how our governments and ministries believe in investing in young people's future and their rights and showcase best practices in how we can work together.

A comprehensive sexuality education framework has many benefits. It improves maternal health, integrating HIV and STI prevention, reducing unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions, encourages democracy through building critical thinking skills and promotes gender equality by empowering young people and involving young men and boys. Our call to you is to redefine the possibility and potential of how we see and work with young people in our societies.

A participative, affordable, youth friendly, well-implemented comprehensive sexuality education framework is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. In this century, with poverty, HIV, climate change and global recession becoming a deadly reality, you cannot walk away. It is unforgivable, inexcusable and inhumane. As decision makers and political leaders, we need you to choose people over politics and development over silence.

As the youth forum from ICAAP, we believe in the positive power of what young people and decision makers can do, if they work together. We hope we can count on you, in the most meaningful way possible, to lead the change we need to see.