

Webinar

# COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION



*A gender-transformative tool for advancing adolescent sexual health and rights and preventing child, early and forced marriage and unions*

**SPEAKERS:** Elizabeth Amondi Okumum, Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH) of Kenya; Rosalba Karina Crisóstomo, Comunidad de Lesbianas Inclusivas Dominicanas (COLESDOM) of the Dominican Republic; Nargiza Nurlan Kyzy, National Federation of Female Communities (NFFCK) of Kyrgyzstan; Eunice Garcia, Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights; Tamara Kreinin, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation; Moderated by Manak Matiyani, The YP Foundation of India.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) provides scientifically accurate information that equips young people with knowledge to make informed decisions to protect their health. CSE also dives deep into the personal and social aspects of sexuality, and is among the [promising practices](#) that contribute to a gender-transformative approach to preventing child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU).

The Child, Early & Forced Marriage & Unions and Sexuality Working Group convened representatives from civil society and philanthropy to discuss their experiences, insights and recommendations for CSE. Common threads came together from these diverse stakeholders to make the case for a rights-based, sexuality-affirming approach to CSE, centering the priorities, participation and leadership of young people.

Below are highlights from what they shared.

### Why is CSE important?

**1. Control of young people's sexuality, particularly that of adolescent girls and young women, is a driver of CEFMU.** Caste purity and virginity (India), pregnant girls having no choice but to marry the father (Kenya), rigid interpretations of religion (Kyrgyzstan) and forcing LGBTQI+ young people into heterosexual relationships (Dominican Republic) were some of the examples the speakers gave. These examples were not meant to describe all communities or instances within their countries, but to highlight the variety of ways in which control of sexuality and CEFMU manifest themselves.

**2. CSE helps achieve good health outcomes, and also helps promote positive social outcomes for young people.** Funding institutions that support CSE should prioritize these often harder-to-measure outcomes in their portfolios. Examples of such outcomes, and more asks of funders, as well as governments, are below.

**The Child, Early & Forced Marriage & Unions and Sexuality Working Group** convened this online dialogue to elevate the voices of civil society organizations and young people implementing and advocating for CSE, and to encourage funding institutions to give more and better funding for CSE.

**3. CSE is an important avenue for learning about and challenging harmful social norms around gender and sexuality.** Such norms take away agency from young people, notably young women and girls and people of gender nonconforming identities, when it comes to decisions about their education, relationships and health. CSE that is truly comprehensive not only combines accurate, complete, and scientific information about sex and sexuality, it also **addresses social factors such as gender, power, patriarchy, discrimination, consent and bodily autonomy.** Girls and young women can take control over their own bodies and decisions about sex, relationships and health. Young people are better positioned to engage in respectful, non-violent, healthy relationships.

**4. CSE programming that is girl-centered, with a focus on increasing their agency, can also support girls' leadership and foster solidarity.** Speakers from Kenya and Kyrgyzstan spoke about the initiatives and collective action girls took in their communities, including educating their peers and community members about young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Young people also learn about sexual diversity and break down prejudices and stereotypes, and encourage those around them to **respect diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity.** According to one speaker, CSE can make people "better lovers, better parents and better citizens."

**5. Quality CSE can reduce violence, including against young people who do not conform to traditional gender roles.** [Research](#) from COLESDOM on the intersection between gender-based violence and sexuality with members of the LGBTQI+ youth community in the Dominican Republic found that LGBTQI+ teenagers have been kicked out of their homes and expelled from schools due to their sexual orientation and gender identity.

**6. The gap that commonly exists between the law, cultural practices and personal beliefs perpetuates the practice of CEFMU, and negatively impacts young people's SRHR, particularly for unmarried adolescent girls. CSE that centers young people but that also includes educating parents, teachers, community leaders and service providers about young people's SRHR can help to mitigate and prevent the multiple forms of gender-based discrimination that put girls at risk of CEFMU and other rights violations.** Control of young people's sexuality violates their rights and autonomy, cuts their access to information and services and drives the practice of CEFMU, **with or without minimum age of marriage laws.**

**7. In many contexts where age of consent and age of marriage are conflated, and premarital sex is taboo, without CSE and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, adolescents are unable to access the support,** advice and information they need to ensure their sexual health, navigate relationships, prevent unwanted outcomes such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and exercise self-determination with regard to their bodies and life choices.

### **What should funders and governments do to support CSE?**

**8. There is a growing body of evidence** that recognizes the relevance and impact of CSE, yet there is a resistance to taking up comprehensive, sexuality-affirming approaches. The reasons for this are social and political. **Governments around the world must ensure that sexuality education that is truly comprehensive is available and accessible to all young people,** from a young age, along with quality youth-friendly SRH services. CSE must integrate gender and sexuality, diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity, HIV/AIDS, and disability rights to counter repression, coercion, and the societal expectations that entrap rather than empower young people. **Funders and national governments need to recognize the negative impact on young people's rights when topics and content from internationally agreed standards for CSE are removed.**

**9. CSE in schools is important, but is not enough on its own. The Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights noted the challenges with in-school CSE: it can be outdated and not comprehensive, and/or teachers are not willing to implement all aspects of the curricula. Funders and governments are urged to invest in youth- and girl-led organizations and networks and civil society organizations** that work with peer-to-peer approaches, families and communities, in-person and online. They can reach young people who are not in school, but also young people who are in school who prefer engaging on these topics outside of a school setting. They can reach religious and traditional leaders, engage men and boys about their role in patriarchy and gender inequality and work with people of all ages, identities and abilities to create positive attitudes and norms that support SRHR. A truly comprehensive, intersectional approach can **mitigate potential backlash** from those who oppose sexual and reproductive rights and freedom for young people in all their diversity.

**10. Young people must be recognized as experts, not targets.** Young people need a meaningful seat at the table in decision-making spaces, including in government settings, at the United Nations and elsewhere. Young people's expertise is necessary to ensure CSE evolves to stay progressive and relevant, as well as respectful of local and indigenous cultures.

**11. Funders should prioritize the social outcomes of CSE** and work with CSOs and youth organizations to learn how they define success and what kinds of results they may want to track in order to learn from and evaluate their work. **Flexible core support and long-term funding** are necessary to pursue social outcomes—like social norms change—which can take longer to materialize and may be less predictably obtained. Funders must support organizations to take risks, try new approaches and learn lessons from what works and what does not in their contexts. In addition, **many CSOs conduct advocacy to improve a range of SRHR policies**, but this often is not funded, or expected results are not in line with advocacy timelines and realities. Funding practices more attuned to and optimized for these priorities would lead to more effective CSE.

**Related resources from panelists' organizations:**

- The YP Foundation's *Know Your Body Know Your Rights* [CSE curriculum](#) for 9-13 year-olds (14+ coming soon), available in English and Hindi, for in-person or digital delivery
- The YP Foundation's [CSE campaign kit](#)
- COLESDOM [research report](#) on family violence against LGBTQI+ young people
- [CSE video](#) from TICAH
- [Young Feminist Manifesto](#) (Generation Equality Forum)
- The YouTube [recording of the webinar](#)

For more information, please contact [SGreen@ajws.org](mailto:SGreen@ajws.org).

**CONVENED BY:** The Child, Early & Forced Marriage & Unions and Sexuality Working Group\* on May 25, 2021

Working Group:

Speakers:



\*The Working Group comprises several national and international organizations working with and for adolescent girls to advance their rights and opportunities. We develop resources and engage in advocacy to draw attention to the under-addressed issue of how patriarchal control of adolescent girls' and young women's sexuality acts as a driver of child, early and forced marriage and unions.