

BRIEFING NOTE

Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Missing Piece To Building Gender Equality For Young People.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a missing piece in achieving gender equality for all. All governments have committed to making sure that the [Global Goals](#) for Gender Equality, Education and Health are achieved by 2030 – in just seven years time – yet gender equality and young people’s health and rights are lagging behind in many countries in the world.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education is an essential part of the solution to achieving these goals. But not all young people and adolescents have access to it, and some governments are not prioritizing it.

The evidence is clear: CSE leads to increased gender equality, well-being and health amongst young people

What is CSE ?

- CSE is **evidence-based education** that equips young people with the foundational skills they need to decide about their health and well-being. CSE **builds knowledge, attitudes and values for healthy, respectful and gender equal relationships**. And it lets young people understand and protect themselves from any harm and harm to others, whilst also learning about their rights, and how to be respectful of the rights and choices of others¹.

¹ The UN defines CSE as: “*Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity. It helps them to develop respectful social and sexual relationships, consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others, and to understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives*”. UNESCO et al., 2018

What is the link between education, health and gender equality?

- Achieving gender equality necessitates transforming harmful norms. It requires a commitment to address the root causes of discrimination and the harmful expectations, stereotypes and practices that set young people back. Education is essential to challenge and change negative norms and to **build positive values that support gender equality**. It is globally recognized that education, health and well-being are closely connected. Healthy and happy learners, learn better. CSE is key in supporting and teaching young people about human rights, gender equality and how to become contributing members of a peaceful and sustainable society. These are global promises set out by all governments to achieve quality education for all.²

How can gender equality be achieved through CSE?

- CSE teaches young people **what gender equality is**, and what it looks like in their everyday lives. It supports them to learn how to have respectful **relationships**, to understand their own rights and respect the **equal rights** and choices of others. This education gives young people the tools to understand the value of respectful social, family and sexual relationships, based on **consent**, equality and good communication.
- CSE builds the **skills and attitudes that enable young people to treat others with respect, acceptance, tolerance and empathy**. When young people have access to quality comprehensive sexuality education they can develop life skills, self-esteem and understanding and respect for

² 4.7 by 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

human rights and gender equality. CSE supports young people to build positive values of non-discrimination, equality, kindness, dignity and love. It also empowers them with critical thinking skills to speak up for gender equality for themselves and others.

- CSE helps young people to **develop positive values and attitudes** in their lives, including in relation to their sexual and reproductive health, which is foundational for achieving gender equality in practice.

How does CSE change harmful norms that lead to gender inequality?

- CSE equips young people with a better understanding of gender inequality and how to **challenge and change harmful attitudes**, sexual and gender-based violence, and discriminating behaviors that can stand in the way of achieving gender equality.
- CSE helps young people to **reflect on how inequality and some norms can be harmful** and result in ill-health, or even sexual and gender based violence.
- CSE supports young people to **develop critical thinking** around harmful, **unequal power dynamics** including negative masculinity norms, stereotypes, peer pressure, bullying, sexual harassment, and lack of respect for bodily autonomy, rights and consent.
- CSE provides young people with the tools to **identify abuse and coercion, set boundaries** and know when and how to **seek help**. It also helps young people to have more open conversations with their parents or carers about difficult issues.

What is the link between CSE, health and gender equality?

CSE is crucial for young people to have a **safe, productive, fulfilling life** in a world where gender inequality, early and unintended pregnancies, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and HIV still pose serious risks to their well-being.

- Research shows that when young people are taught about gender inequalities, discrimination and power dynamics through CSE, they are **five times more likely** to act in a way that successfully prevents unintended pregnancies, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.³
- CSE equips young people with the knowledge and skills they need to make **healthy, informed, and responsible choices** in their lives, including on the use of modern contraception. It creates awareness of safe, protected and healthy sexual relationships, and addresses harmful gender norms and risk-taking behaviours that lead to increased health risks.
- When adolescent girls are empowered with CSE to make [informed decisions](#) about their sexual and reproductive health, the number of teenage **pregnancy drops, girls stay in school and complete their education** which also leads to greater gender equality outcomes.

Why should CSE be prioritized now?

- Because young people still face **health challenges, that can be prevented**. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death for adolescent girls in low-income countries. AIDS related deaths have increased among adolescents over the past decade⁴.

³ *Haberland, N. (2015) *The Case for Addressing Gender and Power in Sexuality and HIV Education: A Comprehensive Review of Evaluation Studies. International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health.* 41:1, 31-4

⁴ https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/young-people-and-hiv_en.pdf

About 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual violence. More than 1 in 10 girls world-wide have experienced forced intercourse or other forced sexual acts.⁵ A lack of CSE may leave children and young people vulnerable to harmful sexual behaviors and sexual exploitation.

- **Misunderstandings and/or deliberate misinformation** are spread that CSE would cause harm, increase sexual activity and increase risks for young people. This is not true. As a matter of fact, evidence shows that CSE leads to young people delaying their sexual debut and having fewer sexual partners⁶, as they are equipped with the life-skills to make their own informed decisions and safe, healthy choices. CSE decreases sexual activity and reduces risk-taking behaviors. It also increases the use of condoms and contraceptives.
- CSE is not the problem - it is part of the **solution**. Quality education must be based on **evidence**.
- Despite commitments made by all Governments, [we are currently off track](#) for delivering on global goals for gender equality - **action is needed now** if we are to leave no one behind.

An opportunity to make a change – take political action!

It's time to accelerate action to better **support young people's health, rights and well-being**. World leaders are meeting 10-15th April at the 56th session of the [Commission on Population and Development](#) at the United Nations, to discuss how to

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

⁶ UNESCO, 2009; Fonner et al., 2014; Shepherd et al., 2010

advance gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights and education, to decide what steps are needed.

CSE is currently at risk of being deprioritized, defunded and scaled down by governments, despite the clear need to accelerate support for young people. Young people across the world are **demanding to have access** to comprehensive sexuality education in their schools, to live healthy dignified lives. Young people have the right to quality education and trained teachers. It is time to move forward on the global commitments, and not backwards!

Take action now!

- **Speak out for CSE!** Use this [social media toolkit](#) to show your support for CSE and highlight the important role it plays in achieving gender equality. Join allies from across the globe and add your voice on April 11th.
- **Learn from where progress is happening** – there is broad global support for CSE. Across the world, many governments have passed laws and policies to prioritize young people’s education. [85% of countries have policies or laws related to sexuality education and more than 4 in 5 countries cover relevant sexuality education content and topics in their national curriculum.](#) But more needs to be done to ensure that policies and global commitments are turned into action.

For more information visit www.cse.shedecides.com