Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE): What do we know, and where do we go from here?

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*Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) can play a critical role in the development of young people.*

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By: Nicole Haberland

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) enables young people to think broadly about the physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects of sexuality and enhances development of important life skills. The research is clear – introduction of CSE programs and curricula reduces sexual risk and increases protective behavior (Chin et al., 2012). But, we have more to learn.

Senior Associate Sajeda Amin attended the United Nation’s recent side event focused on the benefits and impacts of CSE, where she presented key facts and pressing knowledge gaps to a diverse audience of global stakeholders. Her presentation reaffirmed evidence that exposure to CSE reduces risky sexual behavior among young people. In addition, work by Senior Associate Nicole Haberland shows that CSE programs that address gender equality and power dynamics are more likely to be effective than gender-blind efforts (Haberland, 2015). The Council’s BALIKA project is a testament to this. In this study with over 9,000 girls aged 12-18 in Bangladesh, those in the “Gender and Rights Awareness” arm were most likely to receive the highest empowerment designation. They were also more likely to marry later, stay in school, and be employed than girls in the control arm.

However, Amin emphasized a lack of information surrounding CSE implementation. She underlined a need to understand programs’ optimal duration, frequency, population coverage, and long-term
impact. Despite a strong research base focused on changes in sexual behaviors, it is necessary to discern CSE’s influence on broader outcomes such as education, violence reduction, and gender norms, as well as the pathways through which programs achieve impact. Multi-component or multi-level interventions may also offer additional benefit as compared to isolated delivery. Together, these factors require further investigation to ensure sustainability and scalability of future programs.

Another hurdle to scaling-up CSE exists. As governments are integral to investing and implementing these programs, global buy-in is key. The Council, along with our She-Decides partners and allies, recently co-signed an important op-ed calling for more government action to scale-up CSE. Stronger initiative is especially crucial if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals benchmarks for Gender Equality, Education and Health by 2030. The Secretary General echoed this sentiment in his report from the Commission on Population and Development’s (CPD) 56th session, advocating for governments to provide “comprehensive sexuality education that is rights-based, age-appropriate and consistent with their evolving capacities, and which assures that young people are cognizant of their right to bodily integrity.”