

***Council of Europe Conference to mark the European Day
against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children***

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Strasbourg, 12 November 2020

Good afternoon to you all and thank you very much for the invitation to contribute to this important event!

The world we and our children live in is often described as over-sexualised. Children are exposed to sexualised images and messages from the media, advertisements and popular culture on a daily basis, in fact they are often themselves represented in a sexualised way. In this environment – as you just discussed – there is also a growing number of child self-generated sexual images and videos circulating, which presents a serious risk of abuse and exploitation.

So, why do we need comprehensive sexuality education? I believe that the need for that today is as urgent as it has ever been.

The right of children and young people to receive comprehensive sexuality education is well established in international human rights law. It derives from a range of protected rights, such as the right to live free from violence and discrimination, the right to the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health, the right to receive and impart information and the right to quality and inclusive education, including human rights education.

Comprehensive sexuality education means that it is about cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It goes beyond biology and reproduction and truly equips children with knowledge about their bodies and their rights, while also teaching them about gender equality, sexual orientations and gender identities. This is necessary for children to feel good about themselves and to develop safe and respectful social and sexual relationships throughout their lives.

There is strong evidence for the benefits of comprehensive sexuality education for children and young people. They include delayed sexual initiation, reduced risk-taking, increased use of contraception, and improved attitudes towards sexual and reproductive health. In addition, sexuality education helps children better protect themselves against violence, including sexual abuse and exploitation, and it equips them with skills to identify risks and protect themselves against sexual predators online. This has become particularly important during the current pandemic when children have been spending significantly more time online and, as we know, have become more vulnerable to online forms of sexual exploitation.

Comprehensive sexuality education also serves as a powerful tool to prevent gender-based violence and discrimination against women; it provides an ideal context for raising awareness about sexual and reproductive health and the rights of women, including access to modern contraception and safe abortion; and it is an essential tool to combat homophobia and transphobia.

Comprehensive sexuality education is beneficial not only for children but also for society as a whole. In fact, the need for comprehensive sexuality education has even been recognised in the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, as greater gender equality in society is known to enhance economic productivity, improve developmental outcomes for future generations and render institutions and policy-making more representative. It helps us build a safer, more inclusive society where everyone has the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that empower them to exercise their rights to health, well-being and dignity; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights in everyday life.

Yet, unfortunately and despite ample evidence to the contrary, distorted and misleading information about sexuality education is proliferating across the continent. The myth that comprehensive sexuality education equals “propaganda for homosexuality” is fuelling resistance against it. Some attempt to define it as a threat to traditions and religious values, accusing educators of seeking to spread a so-called “gender ideology” and depriving parents of their right to educate their children in line with their values and religious beliefs. Often, and worryingly, these allegations are made in the context of broader and growing opposition to the full realisation of the human rights of specific groups, including women, LGBTI persons - and children.

We have seen protests by religious communities and parents in front of schools in the United Kingdom and a draft bill labelled ‘Stop Paedophilia’ put forward in the Polish Parliament earlier this year. Bowing to pressure from religious communities, the Romanian Parliament in June 2020 scrapped mandatory sexuality education in schools – which had only just been introduced.

It is this situation of growing resistance and opposition to comprehensive sexuality education that prompted me this summer to publish a Human Rights Comment on the subject.

We must work together to dispel these myths and defend and improve the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education as part of good quality education that is provided by law, mandatory and mainstreamed across the education system from the early school years.

In my Human Rights Comment, I stress that sexuality education in schools is a complement to, and not a substitute for, what may be taught by parents at home. It cannot be left entirely to families, however. In what other field of science would we relinquish the education of our children exclusively to families - and, of course, to the internet? Because this is where most children will get their education from, if it is not provided by schools. We must counterbalance and complement the oftentimes distorted information and images that children find on the internet.

I have further stressed that the curricula and teaching methods used for comprehensive sexuality education should be adapted to the different stages of child development and consider their evolving capacity, in line with technical guidance provided by UNESCO. The information should be relevant and based on science and human rights standards. It should not include value judgments or perpetuate prejudice and stereotypes. Comprehensive sexuality education should also be provided to out-of-school children and youth. This is particularly relevant for children and young people with disabilities who are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and whose sexuality is often ignored.

Teachers should receive adequate specialised training and support for teaching comprehensive sexuality education, and the delivery should be closely and regularly monitored and evaluated.

Finally, families and communities should be provided with accurate information about what sexuality education really is - and what it is not - and it should be explained that it benefits all, not only children. It is important to engage with families and to take their views into account as long as they do not contradict the very aims of sexuality education, the best interests of the child, or human rights standards. And – we must also consult and involve young people themselves to ensure that the content of the education they receive is relevant, age-appropriate, and adapted to their needs.

Thankfully, there are also some positive examples where governments have shown the political will to stand up against regression and remind society that access to comprehensive sexuality education is a human right. In January 2020, for instance, the Welsh Government removed the possibility for parents to prevent their children from attending classes on inclusive sexuality and relationships. In Estonia, sexuality education continued to be provided to children throughout 2020, even as part of online schooling.

We need more of this political will and I thank you all for your engagement and support for the Lanzarote Convention. Dialogue and exchange on good and promising practices between government representatives, civil society organisations, educators and activists can support our efforts to prevent retrogression and uphold the right to sexuality education as one important part of the fight against sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, and of the protection of human rights more broadly.

Thank you again and I can promise you that I will continue to draw attention to the importance of comprehensive sexuality education for children and young people at the highest political level.