

Voices from Nepal



"I realized that sex is just a part of sexuality. I was overwhelmed with the amount of new information I got."
22-year old

Family Planning Association of Nepal: Comprehensive sexuality education

This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called "IPPF Changing lives" which capture the stories of IPPF's beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed - in some cases, lives saved - and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference.

Young people in Nepal are learning about sex and sexuality, and for many it has been a life-changing experience. Family Planning Association of Nepal (FPAN) recently implemented a two-year comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) project, which ensured the integration of comprehensive, gender-sensitive and rights-based sexuality education in the national curriculum. This project focused on promoting CSE as a means to promote health, while responding to numerous religious, moral and other challenges.

FPAN conducted a review of government education policies and programmes related to CSE in Nepal, developed a reference manual and training guide for teachers, developed strong networks and lobbied relevant government departments (health and education) to promote CSE. FPAN developed promotional materials for distribution to young people, and trained youth volunteers from 28 FPAN branches, school students and teachers on the new CSE curriculum model covering the seven key areas of gender, sexual and reproductive health, sexual rights, pleasure, violence, diversity and relationships.

The CSE project brought about positive changes to the lives of young people in Nepal by clarifying myths related to menstruation, challenging taboos around sexuality and promoting gender equality.

¹ www.options.co.uk/peer

"[Before the project], I did not allow my boyfriend to kiss me. I thought I might get pregnant. I always thought kissing is oral sex – and every time he wanted to kiss me I freaked out. I thought that any sort of sex makes you pregnant."
20-year old



Achievements

The CSE project has helped young people clarify myths relating to menstruation which is seen as impure and, therefore, almost always results in some sort of seclusion for girls. During menstruation, young women are not allowed to go to school. They are also forbidden to go to the temple, weddings and other family events; they are not able to cook or participate in normal family life; and they are sometimes even forced to sleep outside in the cow shed. The situation is worse for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, who also have to cope with social disadvantages associated with belonging to a lower caste.

Clarification of these myths among girls, their families and their teachers has meant that girls can continue to attend school and other events during menstruation. The CSE training also helped challenge other taboos about sexuality that young people had learned at home, such as sex is 'vulgar' and 'something not to be talked about'.

Another achievement of the project was addressing issues related to sexual diversity, which is a taboo in Nepalese society. Transgender people, known as the 'third gender' in Nepal, are treated as a curse to society and their families. FPAN invited staff from an organization focusing on sexual minorities to facilitate CSE training sessions on this issue. As a result, several people said they had changed their attitudes toward transgender people and now see them as equal members of the community, with equal rights. One 21-year old said, "I now have a completely different attitude towards people of third gender. I do not think they are any different from me."

The project's inclusion of 'sexual pleasure' as a key topic in the CSE curriculum and training was appreciated by many young people. The CSE

training sessions were able to make a significant difference to how sexual pleasure is perceived by young people. For example, a 20-year old said, "Pleasure is something I never thought in relation to sex or love. When in the training we talked about sexual pleasure, I really liked the way it was presented – as something natural, as something that we all should expect and enjoy. Not something to be secretive about. Since the training, I have spoken to my family about sex – which I never thought was possible."

FPAN's CSE project also promoted gender equality and addressed issues of gender discrimination. In Nepal, children grow up knowing discrimination against girls and women as the norm. Young people value what they learned about gender equality, particularly that gender-based violence goes beyond the physical, and that girls should be treated the same as boys, and they now have increased confidence to combat gender discrimination. One 20-year old female said, "The CSE training taught us about gender discrimination being a wrong practice. I am now determined to fight against all the discrimination I see around."

Finally, the CSE training has helped boost many young people's self-esteem and confidence – not just regarding their sexuality, but about their overall wellbeing. One 20-year old said, "I can now talk about sex and sexuality issues with any one – anywhere – young or old. I feel confident."

In addition to the changes brought about to the lives of young people in Nepal, the CSE project has also benefited FPAN as an organization. FPAN is now recognized by other stakeholders as a leader in the implementation of CSE and in providing a much-needed Nepali version of a CSE teachers' manual.

Challenges

The main challenge relating to the project, as identified by the beneficiaries, was that the training was too short and that there was not much follow-up.

Another, broader, challenge was ensuring access to contraceptives for young people when and where they need it, particularly in rural Nepal. One 21-year old said, "The most important issue for young people like us is the lack of easy access to contraceptives. FPAN has solved that to a large extent in the areas they work. But this is an issue for all young Nepalese throughout the country."

One member of the curriculum development committee mentioned the issue of involving too many authors in the writing of the manual, a very time-consuming process.

The Ministry of Education in Nepal wants to train teachers to facilitate and implement the newly developed CSE curriculum in schools. To ensure effective delivery of the curriculum, they would like to train at least two teachers per school. The sheer scale of the task - to train 34,000 teachers - may be overly ambitious within the stated time frame of three months.

The most difficult remaining challenge is the current attitude of the majority of people in Nepal towards sex and sexuality. There are still huge taboos relating to menstruation, sexual diversity, gender inequality and in recognizing sexuality as a pleasurable and normal part of life. All of these together have major effects on young people's health, education and life style. One 19-year old CSE trainee said, "Learning about sex and sexuality is an important life skill that we miss out on due to our cultural taboos. FPAN's effort is admirable and I think the CSE project should never finish. It should do new things - train teachers, teach younger students and also young people who do not go to school."

There is a need for ongoing training and awareness-raising at all levels to challenge the taboos and myths that permeate Nepalese society. A 47-year old female teacher explained, "Until recently, I thought gender-based violence to be just physical violence. A majority of the poor women in rural Nepal are uneducated. If I do not know these issues, I am sure they do not know either. If we give CSE to everyone, there will be less violence, discrimination and misconceptions."

Lessons

The CSE project successfully brought together government representatives, other NGOs, medical professionals, academics from Nepal's top universities and school teachers to work alongside FPAN to develop the new CSE curriculum. This required strong coordination from the project staff, but resulted in the document being accurate and accepted. Though it took longer than anticipated, engaging of multiple stakeholders will extend the lifespan of the project.

The CSE project challenged the relevance of the existing sexuality education framework in Nepal, and how it was being promoted and implemented by the government. After initial resistance, the project leaders were successful in pushing the boundaries and managed to include previously omitted topics such as sexual pleasure, gender equality and sexual diversity issues in the curriculum.

The project strategy of involving young people and school teachers from the very beginning of the planning and implementation phases was critical to the project's success. Using existing young volunteers from the youth centres and integrating the CSE project with other adolescent activities helped to mainstream this CSE project in FPAN.

"I no longer think that sex is about getting pregnant. Pleasure was not in my mind ever. Now I think of pleasure first. It is the most important thing."
21-year old



"That training was amazing! It replaced all my fears with facts."
20-year old



“Earlier everyone in the family knew when I was having my menstruation because of the restrictions and that was so humiliating! Now no one knows, which is such a relief! I accept it as a natural and normal thing and also make sure that everyone around me accepts it.”

16-year old

Nepal	
Country context ¹	
Population (millions), 2010	29.9
Gross enrolment ratio (% of school-age males and females), 2010	60.8
GDP per capita (PPP, USD), 2008	1,189
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2010	67.5
Under-five mortality (per 1,000 live births), 2008	51
Internet users (per 100 people), 2008	1.7
Context for women and girls ²	
Maternal mortality rate (deaths per 100,000 live births), 2008	380
Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women aged 15-19), 2008	101.4

¹ UNDP Human Development Report 2010. <<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/NPL.html>> Accessed on 6th January 2010.

² Ibid.



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The International Planned Parenthood Federation is a global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

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