



Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the Commonwealth

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Friends,

Two fundamental human processes pave our mental and physical human development journeys from childhood to adulthood – learning AND self-realization. Every one of us – has travelled down that dual-laned highway - by which we became ourselves – arriving in adulthood more personalized, gendered, sexual, intimate, talented, desirous, hopeful ...

For the purposes of the journey down the “learning lane” - a child’s education - we make policy; we set standards; build universal systems – imperfect and inadequate as they may be, systems for children’s and young adults’ education - these are seen to be central; its popular - even fashionable - to call for education first - above all else. And, of course, we have set an explicit SDG goal for this purpose. It’s that important.

But the self realization path? Our provision of systems, information, support and services necessary for safe, sustainable, harm-free self realization? For identity formation? For healthy and dignified evolution into who we will become – who we will emerge as adults - sexual, reproductive, intimate, loving, gendered? To that path, however, and by comparison, what do we offer? Well, more often than not, we provide, we mainly provide, only silence, shame, stigma.

Is adult amnesia just so deep that we cannot recall the utter loneliness, uncertainty, embarrassment of our pathways through puberty? That no longer can we recall the tug of that toxic webbing which is shame interlaced with attraction interlaced with risk taking? Does no one recall that their first sexual experience was without their consent?

How can it be that we so readily abandon the child – specifically the girl – at the onset of puberty? While puberty brings new risks for boys, at puberty the doors also open for them onto a world relatively of greater opportunity, more access to the public domain, greater freedom of movement. For girls, however, socially, culturally more often we have constructed out of her puberty, a man-made disaster.

The human costs of the gendered stigma and taboo that are centered on sex, and which are released intensively with puberty’s onset, are disastrous for those whom they disempower, can be tragic too for their communities, and simply wasteful for the world at large. And for this, young people are paying with their lives.

In the time of the Millennium Development Goals, the one group for whom deaths from HIV/AIDS increased were adolescents. In the meantime, millions of women and girls lost their lives to preventable causes of death in pregnancy, while giving birth, because of birth, at birth – because we would not invest in comprehensive sexuality education; did not give due priority to provision universally of access to modern forms of contraception; did not do what we could to enable abortion to be provided safely by ensuring that abortion was legal. Instead,

we indulged in a shameful fiction that criminalizing abortion, would reduce even end it.

How can we tolerate, for even one minute more, those norms, practices and policies that render our children's most intimate selves – their innate and gendered identities – into sources of fear, of shame, even of self-loathing? That we leave them to that without the shelter of information they need to understand themselves; leave them exposed to the harsh elements of ignorance, of exploitation; deny them the informed choices that are theirs by right. How can we still be weaving out of a child's emergence into their gendered, sexualised identities, the fabric of ostracization, for exclusion, excuses for exploitation, violence?

So perverse is our relationship with matters affecting sexual health and intimacy that certain countries would rather legislate against consensual relationships between men or between women, than tackle - in law - the paedophilia of the adult man who "marries" a girl child. That in certain places we are so quick to denounce consensual love and yet so accepting of bigotry and hate; so slow to hold accountable the perpetrators of the non-consensual?

It seems as if we would prefer to make reproduction sexless. It seems, we want to deny that sex might be exercised for purposes other than reproduction – to such an extent that we fail to even collect data on the sexual health of those under 15 (although the onset of puberty has dropped dramatically below that) or even for those over 49 (even though that is the age group for whom STIs have increased most dramatically).

Stereotypes that seek to confine sexual intimacy to reproduction – excluding older women past their reproductive years; excluding those who have a disability; those who are not heterosexual; those who are not married. Such stereotypes are not merely misplaced ideas – they have life taking, life threatening and life disabling consequences.

And through these very adult failings, we are letting young people down - leaving in place unchallenged double standards that impede their dignified passage into adulthood:

- Old enough to be pregnant, but not old enough to be trusted with access to comprehensive sexuality education or with access to contraceptives?
- Old enough to catch a STI but not old enough to seek and receive treatment for it?
- Not old enough to drive, yet old enough to be a parent?
- Not old enough to vote, yet old enough to be married off?

In the time of Sustainable Development Goals, despite the commitments made and the targets set, still there are those seeking to make silence the "s" in sexual and

reproductive health again – a silent “s” in terms of sexual rights specifically, and thus silent in terms of obligations and accountability too for honouring those rights.

In this, the greatest killer of all is not only the absence of life saving drugs or the absence of information; nor merely the service providers who stigmatize when they should welcome. The greatest killer of all takes no money to change, little effort to fix, and requires no complicated supply chains to secure. For the greatest killer is adults’ silence and adults’ shame: adults’ systematic denial that, at its heart, the journey from childhood to adulthood is also a sexual and gendered journey. The toll of death and indignity exacted from adults’ shame-filled hypocrisy - that is what we really should be ashamed of.

Instead, the politics of shame has been cast over potentially intimate, precious, loving spaces into which young people – informed and supported should be able to emerge. Those politics of shame must be challenged and usurped. Not because sex – and the respect, pleasure and regard that it, at its best, should express - matters more than food, shelter, education or justice but because it matters just as much.

With more young people alive today than ever before in all of human history, this is now truly urgent! It’s wrong to leave in place, and we can’t afford to leave in place, impediments to young, young people’s rights of access to essential services, to quality and accurate information and to comprehensive sexuality education, to lawful and thus safe abortion. If our children are to emerge from their journeys out of childhood and into adulthood – unwounded, uninjured, intact - then their sexual, not only their reproductive, or their intellectual, dignity must matter more. To this end, it’s time that adults grow up.
