

Values, Rights, Culture

Introduction

In this chapter we will share with you the fundamentals for Comprehensive Sexual Education. These fundamentals are like a soil where it can grow. We will dive into big concepts, such as values and rights, historical perspective, power, to name a few. We believe it is important to start here, because all the content you will discover along the Theoretical Framework and through the Cards Activity is built on our common understanding and relationship with these concepts.

What is sexuality?

The concept of sexuality is not easy to define and of course, in different cultures and languages it means different things. We have taken on board the definition used by UNESCO and it goes like this:



*Sexuality may be understood as a core **dimension of being human** which includes: the understanding of, and relationship to, the human body; emotional attachment and love; sex; gender; gender identity; sexual orientation; sexual intimacy; pleasure and reproduction. **Sexuality is complex** and includes biological, social, psychological, spiritual, religious, political, legal, historic, ethical, and cultural dimensions that evolve over a*

*lifespan. Simultaneously, **sexuality is a social construct**, most easily understood within the variability of beliefs, practices, behaviours and identities. The expectations that govern sexual behaviour differ widely across and within cultures. Certain behaviours are seen as acceptable and desirable, while others are considered unacceptable. This does not mean that these behaviours do not occur, or that they should be excluded from discussion within the context of sexuality education. **Sexuality is present throughout life**, manifesting in different ways and interacting with physical, emotional, and cognitive maturation.*

UNESCO: *International technical guidance on sexuality education*, page 17 [link](#)

Photography taken from: [LINK](#)



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Even the definition itself states: sexuality is complex; sexuality is a social construct and is present throughout life.

It is important to mention at this stage, that even though it is complex, we (as an international team of trainers in youth work and youth workers) truly believe it is essential to have at least a basic understanding of what it implies to be able to support young people in their development as youth workers. You do not necessarily have to become an expert on sexual education. There are other people in the field who will have this role to support you; however, daily youth work comes across many situations where quick reaction is needed, wise advice or support, or even a clear opinion of a youth worker formed before they need to apply their skills to reality.

As *sexuality is a social construct*, we base the content on the European dimension of youth work, as inclusive of diversity and cultural perspectives as possible. We do not have experience of working on sexual education in South Africa, or Indonesia (Even though it would have been very interesting!) so, the European map is already our big challenge of difference: from sexual education in Norway to Poland... only imagine!

And last, but not least – sexual education takes time and place *Entire life*. We do not have magic wands to figure it all out for all ages and support every possible stage. We will only focus on young people. In specific, the time between 14 and 18 years old, with necessary insights into some aspects of younger and older stages of development, as they are not simply linear, but as well complex, depending on the environment, support, legal aspects, etc.

Social and Political importance of Comprehensive Sexual Education

Humans are social beings in our biological programming. A sense of Belonging is the one we constantly search for, and evolution has put us in groups to guarantee our survival. The way we relate to one another and express our sexuality shapes the communities and the society as a wider structure we are part of. The recent results of elections in many European countries show a high rise of far-right parties, whose ideologies are separatist and racist, built on fear and control, power over and manipulation. We will not go into an analysis of why this is happening. But we need to understand what it leads to. Sexual diversity and gender equality are not the values promoted by such political governance, and the restrictions around Comprehensive Sexual Education shape the quality of education young people have access to.

In some countries, like Poland, where the extreme right party has come to power, in 2022, Comprehensive Sexual Education has become prohibited. Why? Is there danger in Comprehensive Sexual Education? What kind of power does it give to people? Very interesting questions to put on the table with a group of young people. Imagine what happens when the



younger generations become equipped with knowledge, skills and attitudes and nurture healthy sexuality? Or what happens when there is a contrary situation?

Let's talk about values: cultural, ethical, and religious frames of sexuality.

The values cultivated around sexuality are deeply rooted into the general values system of every person. Young people are especially perceptive of forming those, based on the influence they receive from their closest environment (family or caretakers, school they go to, friends or other young people they get in touch with, a youth club or other extra-curricular activities they are part of). The physical development of a young person also plays a role here. It is exactly at teenagerhood that their frontal cortex is being developed. It means they gain more and more capacity (from the physiological point of view) to *plan, prioritise, and think logically*. Before this process, their emotions predominate and so to say, there is something missing to complete the full picture. It is also known that young people's brains are extremely flexible, which is a great time for learning.



Today, in 2024, we live in the most informed and technological society that has ever existed. The most technological and the most consumerist, as the economic growth has always been a global priority. According to Zygmund Bauman, a sociologist and philosopher who wrote on issues of modernity and postmodern consumerism, even though it may seem that technology and internet has united people more than ever before, in reality, it has created a threat to real (offline) bonding among people, which is a key towards our instinct of survival, understood as collective one, where we need one another, need to be good to one another, as a recipe for sensible life .

Poland Veto Bill Targeting Sex Ed: [LINK](#) |

Brain development in teenagers: [LINK](#)

Z. Bauman: Interview from documentary. Liquid modernity: [LINK](#)

Photography taken from: [LINK](#)



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Bauman introduces the concept of consumerism, which he calls a *form of life of a society of consumers*, which we are now, and says the first area which has been commercialised, are *human relationships*.

When we think about consumerism, we tend to go to things and objects, not to relationships and people. It's not so literate though, we do not necessarily *consume* another person, but the phenomenon translates to more superficial, less durable in time and depth relationships, which of course shapes sexuality of consumerism, same as objects and things.

Some young people quickly refer to *pop culture as the one that has huge influence on them*: the imposition of the importance of the physical looks, dressing in a particular way, sexist language and imagery used in the pop songs and the video clips; constant advertisements and examples of how to live *with success* from Instagram or Tik Tok.

In her work *Sexploitation. Helping Kids Develop Healthy Sexuality in a Porn-Driven World*, Cindy Pierce states that many Mental Health struggles of young people have roots in the excessive use of technology and the time they spend in front of the screens. In combination with what she calls a *culture of porn*, young people are particularly vulnerable to developing healthy sexuality based on what they see on screens. Pierce says that our role, as parents/educators, *is not to finish with the porn industry, but to maintain open conversations and discussions with young people about the topic*. As youth workers we can support young people to become more aware of what they consume on the screens, how it affects them and influences the construction of their values systems, with adequate information and safe reflection space provided. And how lucky we are to have non-formal learning methodologies at our disposal to make it engage and even fun!

The cultural aspects related to sexuality are massively complex. *A Culture is a set of values and beliefs of a specific group of people*. We can talk about family culture, friends' culture, popular culture, ethnic culture and many more. Cultures have their external manifestations, such as language, cuisine, clothes style, traditions, and internal ones, such their attitude towards gender equality, perception of time, political identity, etc. The external manifestations are explicitly learned, conscious and easy to change, while the internal ones are exactly the opposite.

Some cultures (family culture vs community culture) may be coherent with one another, and others may contradict. Nevertheless, all of them will shape the environment of influence for a young person, where their identity is being built throughout time and their values formed. Culture is not a static phenomenon, it changes, gets transformed by education, politics, media, relationships.

Looking at Culture through E. Hall's *Cultural Iceberg Model* helps to visualise and understand better what is above or beneath a surface and that it takes time to learn about a certain culture. Its values and beliefs are hidden and only the apparent features are on its surface.



Another interesting model is the *Onion of Personal Culture*, which can be applied into an activity (developed by Salto EuroMed) that helps participants reflect on different layers of their own cultures, going from the most apparent outside layers to their core values and identity. Some of us have used this activity over the years on the On Arrival Trainings for volunteers under the European Solidarity Corps programme and it has always given good results and enriching discussions. When applied to the Comprehensive Sexual Education, it can also involve certain elements (questions, open sentences to be finished) that you may find most relevant when talking about culture and sexuality with your group.

The religious frame for sexuality is part of the culture of every person as well. *Religion itself is a system of faith and worship*, which is expressed both outwards and inwards and shapes the choice and behaviour of individuals and communities. When working with youth we should be very mindful of what belief system they bring from their homes. We can have young people who are for instance Christians, Muslims, or any other religion, or those who consider themselves atheists even though following a certain spiritual understanding of the world, or those who are very critical of any religious expression at all. At this age many things are changing, and their religious preferences might be changing too. As Comprehensive Sexual Education is based on inclusion and diversity, in respect and equity, as a facilitator you need to take good care of the *safe space and environment within your group*. Our own biases and prejudices also need to be questioned before you guide a discussion on these topics.

Having named respect and equity, one of the other important pillars of Comprehensive Sexual Education is the **Human Rights approach**. Religions are part of conservatism and in many scenarios might not be compatible with Comprehensive Sexual Education. To work on this holistically, we think it is important to introduce the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights to young people as understanding that those are their fundamental Human Rights and come first. Religions and politics, as well as cultural frame for sexuality come after.

Z Bauman: *Selves as Objects of Consumption Part 1*: [LINK](#)

Z Bauman: *Selves as Objects of Consumption Part 2*: [LINK](#)

C. Pierce: *Sexploitation. Helping Kids Develop Healthy Sexuality in a Porn-Driven World*, page: 71.

E. Hall: *Cultural Iceberg Model*: [LINK](#)

Salto EuroMed: *Onion of Personal Culture*: [LINK](#)

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Comprehensive Sexual Education builds on and promotes an understanding of universal human rights – including the rights of children and young people – and the rights of all persons to health, education, information equality and non-discrimination. Using a human rights-based approach within Comprehensive Sexual Education also involves raising awareness among young people, encouraging them to recognize their own rights, acknowledge and respect the rights of others, and advocate for those whose rights are violated. Providing young people with equal access to



Comprehensive Sexual Education respects their right to the highest attainable standard of health, including safe, responsible, and respectful sexual choices free of coercion and violence, as well as their right to access the information that young people need for effective self-care.



UNESCO: Sexual and Reproductive rights: [LINK](#)

UNESCO: International technical guidance on sexuality education, page 16: [LINK](#)

Photography taken from: [LINK](#)

Sexual and reproductive rights mean you should be able to make your own decisions about your body and:

- Get accurate information about these issues.
- Access sexual and reproductive health services including contraception.
- Choose if, when and who to marry.
- Decide if you want to have children and how many.

A more extensive declaration of Sexual and Reproductive Rights created by World Association of Sexual Health can be found [here](#).

Easily noticeable, depending on politics in power, some countries do not respect several or even all these premises towards the accomplishment of basic human right. There are still countries in Europe who do not respect the women's' right to control and decide freely on matters related to their sexuality and their body and many countries have a large list of conditions in which this human right is exercised.

Sexuality as part of Deep Ecology

The Anthropocene Epoch is an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems.

There is no doubt we live in the times of change. We can call it climate change, if you want, or as the French say *dérèglement climatique*, or global warming. Unfortunately, we still lack



understanding that education needs to be holistic and cannot go separate paths, being constantly divided into topics and disciplines, dealing with one issue at a time and not taking into consideration the whole picture.

Luckily, Comprehensive Sexual Education already proposes us a holistic approach – being part of Human Rights Education, Sociology, Psychology and more, going beyond physiological aspects of sexuality such as prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. We want to propose a small but very important addition to the approach: understanding sexuality as part of Deep Ecology.

Deep Ecology is a branch of ecological philosophy which emphasises the interdependent value of human and non-human life as well as the importance of the ecosystem and natural processes. Deep Ecology advocates for wisdom and ethics being essential and opposite to anthropocentric conservatism which aims to preserve the natural environment for human benefit. Rather, Deep Ecology celebrates diversity and interdependence of all living organisms on Earth.

Key words: celebration, diversity, interdependence.

Interdependence is not something we often acknowledge, especially in the individualistic society we live in. If we apply these keywords to sexuality and the aim for Healthy sexuality (social, physiological, and emotional), we also acknowledge the importance of healthy sexuality as part of the healthy environment.

If we look at sexuality from this point of view, we will see the relationships and their importance differently. Rights, Respect and Reciprocity, as well as Carrying, Love and Belonging will start having a different meaning. We will explore more on this in the Chapter Relationships, feelings and emotions and we invite you to join our curiosity: ***What do young people think about the relationship between sexuality and ecosophy?***

Amnesty International: Sexual and Reproductive Rights: [LINK](#)

Center for reproductive rights: European Abortion Laws: [LINK](#)

National Geographics: Anthropocene: [LINK](#)

Environment and Ecology: Deep Ecology: [LINK](#)

Conclusion

Our role is to support young people in searching for their authenticity, for their uniqueness, helping them be conscious of what they really like, what they truly believe in. We are here to support them in their poetic void for beauty and respect, for equity and inclusion, for diversity being cherished and nurtured, for living in love with themselves and the others. Comprehensive Sexual Education should include information, activities, discussions on each of these aspects of human existence. Then we will achieve the change.



References

- Amnesty International: Sexual and Reproductive Rights: [LINK](#)
- Z Bauman: Selves as Objects of Consumption Part 1: [LINK](#)
- Z Bauman: Selves as Objects of Consumption Part 2: [LINK](#)
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