

SAY IT OUT LOUD – SEXUAL WELLBEING MATTERS

PERSPECTIVES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE IN ECUADOR AND UGANDA

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Rutgers

For sexual and
reproductive health
and rights



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Institutet

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AYSRHR	Adolescent and Youth, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
DHS	Demographic Health Survey
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IDI	In-Depth Interview
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual
LMICs	Low-and-Middle-Income Countries
SRH(R)	Sexual and Reproductive Health (and Rights)
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infections
UDHS	Ugandan Demographic and Health Survey
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organisation

FOREWORD

The denial of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is having devastating consequences on the bodies, lives and futures of girls and young women around the world. While SRHR are recognised in many global, regional and national frameworks and commitments including the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action and the Sustainable Development Goals, so much remains to be done to ensure equal access to these basic human rights.

A challenging political environment and the rise of populist, conservative forces with regressive policies, have put SRHR increasingly under attack in recent years and threaten progress achieved to-date. Now, in the middle of a pandemic, which is straining even the most robust health systems, we are seeing girls' SRHR de-prioritised with devastating consequences.

Adolescent girls and young women are disproportionately affected by and vulnerable to violations of their SRHR. In many societies, girls are valued less than boys and restricted by harmful social and gender norms which glorify sexual purity, marriage, motherhood and fertility in a manner that limits girls' autonomy and curtails educational and work opportunities. Girls and young women are further impacted by the patriarchal desire to control female sexuality which often results in a paradox whereby girls are considered old enough to become wives, yet too young to access essential information and services.

At Plan International, we believe that children, adolescents and young people, in all their diversity, should have control of their lives and bodies and should be able to make decisions about their own sexuality, free from discrimination, coercion or violence. Realising the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all young people, especially girls, is fundamental to achieving gender equality.

Traditionally, sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes for young people have often

emphasised the negative consequences of sexual activity, such as unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. There has been much less focus on highlighting the positive and healthy aspects of sexuality and sexual experiences and the role this plays in overall wellbeing.

Sexuality is a common human experience which begins at birth. Taboos and stigma around sexuality and harmful gender norms often result in children being denied the opportunity to build positive and confident relationship with their own bodies, including a sense of bodily autonomy. This leads to many children, adolescents and young people becoming sexually active without access to timely, age and gender-responsive, quality SRHR information and services.

This report, *Say it out loud – sexual wellbeing matters*, sheds light on young people's perspectives on their own sexual wellbeing, and how they comprehend and navigate sexual consent. The research shows that young people want to receive comprehensive sexuality education long before they become sexually active and want to communicate with parents more on the topic. They emphasise the importance of sexual consent, but in practice, they find it complex, and sometimes difficult to achieve.

This report makes clear the need for a holistic multi-level approach which addresses the changes required at the individual, normative and structural level to improve adolescent and young people's sexual wellbeing. It also serves as timely and insightful evidence on what young people think and how we can better respond to their needs. Most critically, it emphasises the importance of a sex-positive approach to SRHR and the importance of recognising the evolving capacities of children, adolescents and young people to make decisions for themselves.



STEPHEN OMOLLO
CEO, Plan International

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was commissioned by Plan International and conducted with young people in Uganda and Ecuador. Its aims are:

- To explore the understanding of sexual wellbeing among young people, including the different aspects of sexuality development during adolescence and the evolving capacity to sexual consent.
- To contribute to the understanding of how local and contextual factors, including religion, community attitudes and national laws, can influence the sexual wellbeing and sexual consent of young people.
- To formulate recommendations for Plan International to further strengthen their SRHR programmes based on the insights generated by this research.

Many sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes concentrate on sexual risk – on the perils rather than the pleasures, of sex. This study, by listening to young people themselves, aims to bring about change. It seeks to improve approaches to SRHR to reflect the reality of young people's lives – encouraging communication between partners and ensuring young people have the opportunity to learn about sexuality and sexual wellbeing. As the young people taking part in the study made clear this must include acknowledging and discussing the positive aspects of sex and sexual pleasure.



“If we are talking about general sexual wellbeing it would include things like whether you enjoy your sexual experiences ... consent, and whether you are STI free, and a lot of that kind of stuff. So, coming up with a definition is very hard for me.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, UGANDA

In many parts of the world, adolescent sexuality is very much a taboo. As a result, young people get little information despite the fact that many become sexually active in their early adolescence and have experiences and make decisions that can affect the rest of their lives.



WHAT WE FOUND

- **Although most young people were able to understand the concept of sexual wellbeing and considered it to be important, many did not experience it fully in their relationships.** They have not been equipped with information about sexuality by their parents or their schools. As a result, they lack the knowledge and skills to negotiate, they are subject to peer pressure to engage in sex, and gender norms in their communities encourage divergent attitudes to sexuality between young men and young women.
- **Sexual consent is complex** – it is rarely direct verbal consent. It is mostly assumed and open to misinterpretation and sexual risk.
- **Traditional gender norms** often encourage young men to be sexually active and suggest that young women are not supposed to be until they marry. However, in Uganda in particular, female sexual activity was sometimes seen as a source of important economic security for both the young woman and her family.
- **Violence and non-consensual sex** is too often a component of young people's sexual relationships. Traditional gender norms can be barriers to equality between young men and young women and can put young women in particularly vulnerable positions. However, gender equitable attitudes were valued by study participants.
- **Parent-child communication** is often limited, and though young people wanted the support of, and information from, their parents, many parents seemed to lack information themselves or to be too embarrassed to talk about sex and sexuality.
- Young people are keen to have proper **access to information on all aspects of sex and sexuality** but, on the whole, this is not available in the communities they come from. Study participants were grateful for the efforts of NGOs and some schools to provide sexuality education.
- **Young people try to educate themselves** but information from social media and their peers is often misleading. There are many inhibiting factors related to the lack of support from community and religious leaders, law enforcement officials and often from their own families. This emphasise the need for comprehensive sexuality education.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement a sex-positive approach** to comprehensive sexuality education which includes sexual pleasure, communication and equality between partners.
- **Listen to young people** and meaningfully engage them in programme design and implementation.
- **Engage key partners** so that there is support at all levels of the community – schools, local leaders, parents – for age-responsive comprehensive sexuality education for all young people.
- **Support parents** and provide education and information for them too.
- **Engage with lawmakers, policy makers, education and health departments** to create an enabling environment which prioritises the reality of young people's lives.
- Make sure **services**, including access to modern contraception, are safe and available.
- Focus on the **economic empowerment of young people**, particularly young women, so that poverty and inequality do not negatively impact on sexual wellbeing and consent.

In many communities, comprehensive sexuality education for the young is a contentious issue. Only by listening to young people themselves, and tackling the taboos and the resistance at all levels, will it be possible to implement effective SRHR programming and policies to help ensure the sexual wellbeing of the next generation.

“So, I feel like if there is an opportunity for this positive learning on sexual pleasures and sexual wellbeing. The young people, the adolescents, they're looking for a space to embrace it from.”

YOUNG WOMAN EXPERT, 26, UGANDA

“Because sex is a taboo. And so, young girls and boys are just sent into the world to discover sex on their own, which is not really a good thing.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, UGANDA

INTRODUCTION

“Maybe the taboo of talking about sexuality has been lost a little bit, but it still exists because there are parents who follow the same patterns of ‘no, not talking about sexuality,’ because the first thing the girl will do is have sex.”

MEETING WITH CO-RESEARCHERS, 17 – 22, ECUADOR

Many sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes for young people take a sexual risk perspective, emphasising the negative consequences of sexual activity, such as sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, unintended pregnancy, and focusing also on the prevention of sexual violence. Sex-positive approaches are rare and little emphasis has been put on the affirmative aspects of the development of young people’s sexuality and sexual experiences.



WHAT WE MEAN BY ADOPTING A SEX-POSITIVE APPROACH:

A sex-positive approach to SRHR and comprehensive sexuality education focuses on supporting and enabling adolescents and young people to explore and express their sexuality in positive, pleasurable and safe ways, rather than only focusing on preventing negative health consequences. Sex-positive approaches address risks and concerns associated with sexuality without reinforcing fear or shame.

Taboos surrounding young people’s sexuality reinforce stigma around sexual pleasure, give people an unrealistic view of what sexual wellbeing is or could be, and may not connect with the reality of how young people feel and think about sex.

“[Sexual wellbeing is] to be sure of oneself, to be aware of who you are, to be satisfied with who you are and not to want to be like someone else”

FGD 3, MIXED GROUP, 18 – 21, ECUADOR

Young people’s sexual wellbeing, including their positive sexual experiences and their evolving capacity to consent to sex, needs to be better understood in order to improve work with young people, including SRHR and child protection programmes.

“It [sexual wellbeing] involves everything, it involves being myself physically, emotionally and socially.”

FGD 4, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 19 – 21, ECUADOR

This research talked directly to young people aged 18 to 24 in Ecuador and Uganda, heeding their views and experiences in order to build the services they need.*

**One of the co-researchers in Ecuador was 17 years old. They were included because of their experience with Plan International and since an older co-researcher had to drop out last minute due to school work.*



Plan International’s work on young people’s SRHR has been evolving over the past decade. It is underpinned by a gender-transformative approach, aiming to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and to shift the unequal power relations that control female sexuality. Plan International’s key investment areas for SRHR are:

- supporting access to positive sexuality education and dialogue that enables individuals to explore values and attitudes and build skills and coping mechanisms, regarding sex and sexuality;
- strengthening quality adolescent-responsive and gender-responsive SRHR services;
- strengthening support for adolescent girls and young women most-at-risk;
- prevention of child, early and forced marriage and unions, and female genital mutilation/cutting, HIV and AIDS.



This report is part of a larger research project that includes a literature review that was published in September 2021 and is accessible [here](#). There is also a youth-friendly comic book and animation, describing the findings from this research in story form, which is accessible [here](#).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 01 To explore the understanding of, and perspectives on, sexual wellbeing of young people in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) including the different aspects of sexuality development during adolescence and the evolving capacity to sexual consent.
- 02 To contribute to the understanding about how local and contextual factors such as predominant religion, socially acceptable norms, cultural practices and political outlook can influence the sexual wellbeing and sexual consent of young people in LMICs.
- 03 To formulate recommendations for Plan International to further strengthen their SRHR programmes for young people, based on the insights generated by this research.

The research is framed around the key competencies found in the conceptual framework for healthy adolescent sexuality developed by Kågesten and van Reeuwijk.¹ These competencies form the foundation of how adolescents explore sexuality and achieve a sense of sexual wellbeing, in relation to themselves and others. They consist of:

- **Sexual literacy** involving age- and developmentally-appropriate understanding of the human body, relationships and SRHR.
- **Gender-equitable attitudes** that support gender-equal norms related to the social and cultural roles, responsibilities, rights and capacities of men and women.
- **Respect for human rights** demonstrating respect and empathy for others, understanding privacy and consent in relation to self and others.
- **Critical reflection skills** encompassing the ability to critically assess and challenge harmful norms and messages related to gender and sexuality.
- **Coping skills and stress management** to deal with, and learn from, negative experiences and handle stress and pressure related to social and sexual expectations.
- **Interpersonal relationship skills** relating to the ability to communicate, to assert values and preferences, and negotiate in both intimate and social relationships.

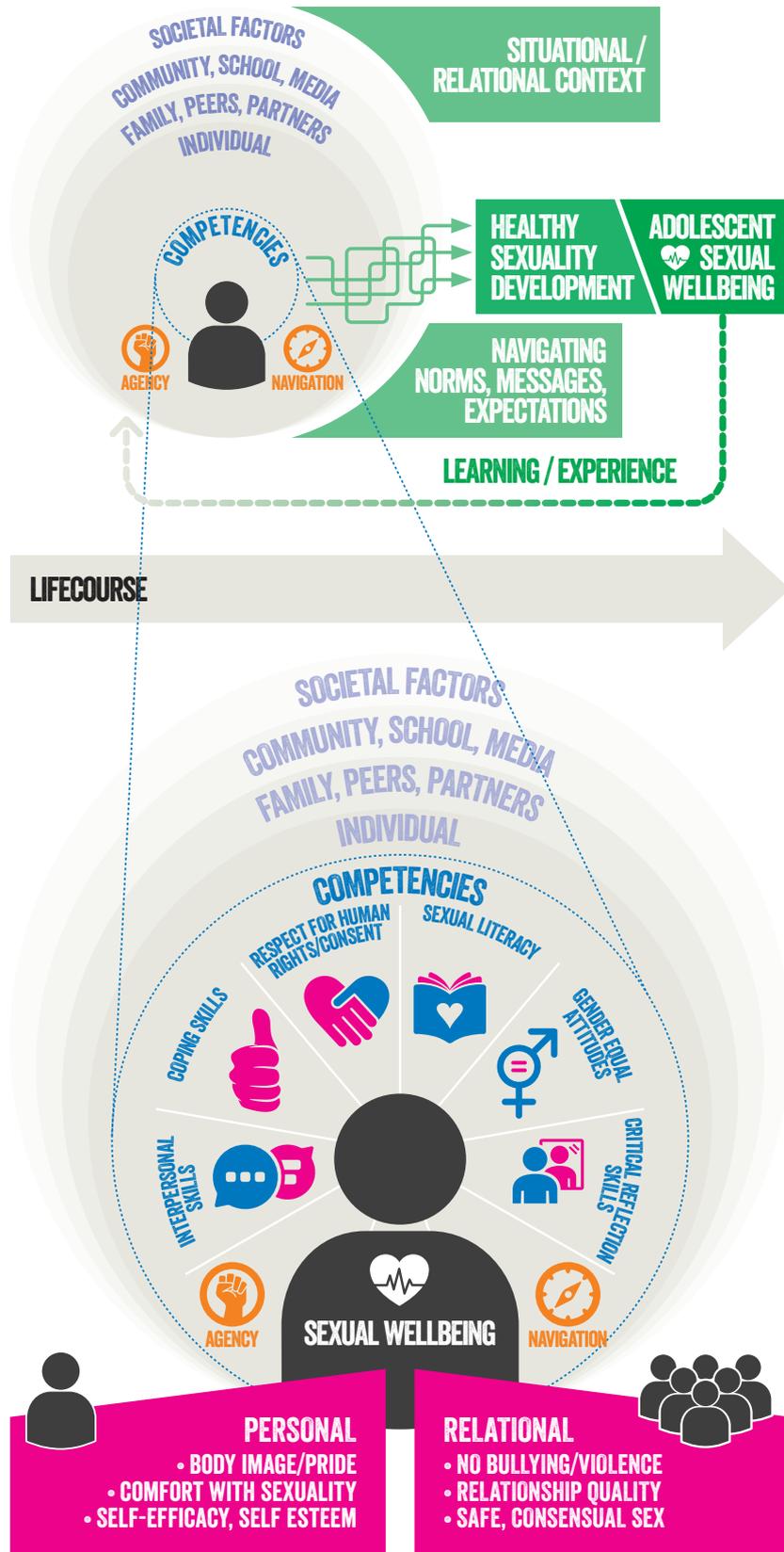
The framework also highlights the role of **influencing factors** in shaping if, how and when adolescents are able to use these competencies to achieve a sense of sexual wellbeing. These factors exist at multiple and interacting levels including:

- **Individual** experiences, physical health, sociodemographic background
- **Family, peers and partners**, relationships and connectedness with parents, siblings, peers and partners
- **Community**, school and media, availability of health services, connectedness with teachers
- The broader **societal level**, macro factors such as norms, laws, policies and economy.



1. Kågesten, A. and van Reeuwijk, M. (2021). Healthy sexuality development in adolescence: proposing a competency-based framework to inform programmes and research. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:1.

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK HIGHLIGHTING KEY COMPETENCIES FOR HEALTHY ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY DEVELOPMENT AND THEIR POTENTIAL LINK WITH SEXUAL WELLBEING



Kågesten, A. and van Reeuwijk, M. (2021). Healthy sexuality development in adolescence: proposing a competency-based framework to inform programmes and research. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 29:1.

IN **ECUADOR**, THE STUDY WAS IMPLEMENTED IN TWO URBAN COMMUNITIES IN GUAYAQUIL, THE SECOND LARGEST CITY IN ECUADOR.



ECUADOR

Young people in Ecuador today have a wide range of health care needs related to sexual and reproductive health. A major concern is the high rates of unintended adolescent pregnancy with research also indicating that indigenous groups are more vulnerable. Members of these groups have higher rates of both unintended adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Although 39 per cent of young people aged between 15 and 19 are sexually active² a study from UNFPA in 2011 found that 68 per cent of women and 61 per cent of men did not approve of sexual relationships among adolescents.³ These attitudes also are common among health workers. Given this, one of the main barriers to adolescent access to contraception – and a major reason for the gap between knowledge about contraception and its actual use – is the attitude of health workers who believe that contraception is not an adequate response to sexual activity among adolescents.

Research among young people in Ecuador reveals a cultural system which includes a traditional gender ideal of male dominance and female submission. The macho young men are supposed to be heterosexual, have many sexual partners

and engage in sexually riskier behaviour than young women. Young women are expected to be innocent and self-sacrificing and are therefore more vulnerable to violence and unintended pregnancies. Additionally, the traditional norms related to sexuality, gender and religion, common to many Latin American countries, are resistant to providing young people with sexual and reproductive health information and services. There are legal restrictions preventing unmarried young people receiving certain services. These traditional gender norms are also barriers which can prevent girls and young women from enjoying sexual experiences.⁴

The legal age of consent for same sex and heterosexual sex in Ecuador is 14 years old.

The study was carried out in Guayaquil in the urban parish of Tatqui, one of the largest parishes in Guayaquil, with a population of over 835,000 inhabitants. It has low-cost housing with limited basic services. Access to this parish is difficult because it does not have paved roads and it is prone to flooding. The majority of the population depend on daily wage jobs. Most people finish secondary education, but very few go to university.

2. Ecuador National Health and Nutrition Survey 2012. Retrieved from: https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/documentos/web-inec/Estadisticas_Sociales/ENSANUT/MSP_ENSANUT-ECU_06-10-2014.pdf

3. UNFPA Ecuador, (2011). Estudio de Percepción Sobre Planificación Familiar Y Uso de Métodos Anticonceptivos. Quito: UNFPA.

4. De Meyer, S., et al. (2014). A cross-sectional study on attitudes toward gender equality, sexual behavior, positive sexual experiences, and communication about sex among sexually active and non-sexually active adolescents in Bolivia and Ecuador. *Global Health Action*, 7:1.

IN UGANDA, THE STUDY WAS IMPLEMENTED IN TWO URBAN SETTLEMENT AREAS OF KAMPALA CITY.



UGANDA

Statistics from the Uganda Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in 2016 indicate that Ugandan adolescents become sexually active at an early age. Among 20 to 29 year-olds, 11 per cent of men and 18 per cent of women were said to have begun sexual activity below the age of 15.⁵ In a study conducted in 2017 among young people aged 13 to 24 in an urban settlement area in Kampala, the median age of first sex was 16, and 31 per cent of these sexual experiences were non-consensual encounters.⁶ At least 25 per cent of women get pregnant before the age of 18, and adolescent pregnancy contributes to 17 per cent of overall maternal mortality.⁷

Prominent cultural norms characterise ideal men as providers, protectors and decision makers, and ideal women as obedient and submissive caretakers.⁸ Common gendered cultural practices across most communities include bride price, early marriage and polygamy. All these practices subordinate women and make it very difficult for women and girls to negotiate positive sexuality practices and achieve sexual wellbeing.⁹ Women are expected to

fulfil marital obligations and have limited control on sexual decision making, fertility or contraception use. Sexual relationships are often transactional: including early or forced marriage for girls in exchange for bride wealth and the expectation that girls will receive cash gifts or rewards from older partners who are able to afford them.¹⁰

The legal age of consent for men and women to engage in heterosexual sex is 18 years old. Same-sex relations and activities are criminalised.¹¹

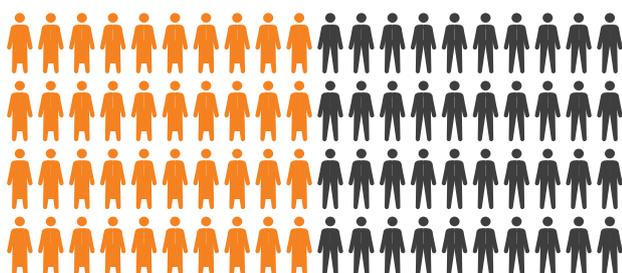
The study was conducted in the Kawempe division of Uganda's capital city, Kampala, in two zones located in the urban settlement areas of Katoogo and Kakungulu. These areas have low-cost housing, which are congested and lacking in essential sanitary facilities. The areas are low-lying and prone to flooding with poor sanitation and limited access to safe water. Most people depend on daily wage jobs. Most of the participants were educated up to secondary level four, leaving school at around 16 years old.

5. Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and ICF (2018). *Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rhsupplies.org/activities-resources/publications/uganda-demographic-and-health-survey-2018-8192/>
6. Renzaho, A.M.N., et al. (2017). Sexual, reproductive health needs, and rights of young people in slum areas of Kampala, Uganda: A cross sectional study. *PLoS One*, 12:1.
7. Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and ICF, (2018). *Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016*. Retrieved November 26, 2021. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR333/FR333.pdf>.
8. Nyanzi, S., Pool, R. and Kinsman, J. (2001). The negotiation of sexual relationships among school pupils in south-western Uganda. *AIDS Care*, 13:1.
9. Bantebya, G.K., Muhanguzi, F.K. and Watson, C. (2014). Adolescent girls in the balance: Changes and continuity in social norms and practices around marriage and education in Uganda. Retrieved from: <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/9180.pdf>.
10. Muyinda, H., et al. (2010). Traditional sex counselling and STI/HIV prevention among young women in rural Uganda. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 3:3
11. Singh, J.A., Jogee, F and Chareka, S. (2020). Age of consent: legal, ethical, social and cultural review – Uganda country report. 2020. Retrieved from: www.researchgate.net/publication/341542066_AGE_OF_CONSENT_LEGAL_ETHICAL_SOCIAL_AND_CULTURAL_REVIEW

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a qualitative study between August and September 2021 among young people aged 18 – 24 living in Guayaquil (Ecuador) and Kampala city (Uganda). The study consisted of in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGDs).

ECUADOR



80 YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY

40 MALE
40 FEMALE

UGANDA



93 YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY

45 MALE
48 FEMALE

All interviews and FGDs were recorded, transcribed and then coded into themes, using the data analysis software NVivo. The research used the Explore Methodology¹² developed by Rutgers. This involved working closely with young people in conceptualisation, data collection and analysis.¹³

For **data collection**, country research teams were set up led by the lead international researcher and a national co-lead researcher experienced in qualitative research.

The team in **Ecuador** further consisted of six young people (three young men, three young women, aged between 17 and 22) living in the sectors where the study was conducted. The young people were trained as co-researchers and conducted interviews and focus group discussions.

In **Uganda**, the national co-lead was assisted by two research assistants and one professional co-researcher. Due to strict COVID-19 measures it was not possible to work with a group of young co-researchers. However, the team was supported by an expert panel which consisted of six young experts (four young women and two young men, aged between 18 and 26)¹⁴ who were selected because of their previous work experience with young people on SRHR. The role of the expert panel was to provide insights in the data collection methods and interview guides and to participate in the interpretation of the research findings.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Cuenca (Ecuador), Mbarara University of Science and Technology (Uganda), the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology at national level and from the Karolinska Institutet, Sweden. Safeguarding risk assessments were completed at global and country level, and the researchers worked closely with safeguarding focal points in the countries. All participants provided written informed consent.

12. Van Reeuwijk, M. (2013). Explore, manual for training young people as researchers. Retrieved from: rutgers.international/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Explore-toolkit.pdf

13. In this report, we make use of quotes from the research respondents, as well as co-researchers and youth experts. With each quote, we include a description of the specific data collection method, the age or age range and country.

14. One 26-year-old woman was recruited as she is the Youth Country Coordinator of the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Alliance of Uganda and therefore has extensive knowledge about SRHR issues of young people in Uganda.

FINDINGS

In this section, we describe how young people in Ecuador and Uganda perceive **sexual wellbeing and sexual consent**. What key **competencies** do they need to achieve a sense of sexual wellbeing and what do they consider to be **external influencing factors** for sexual wellbeing and sexual consent?

Findings are organised by research objective.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL WELLBEING AND SEXUAL CONSENT

SEXUAL WELLBEING

Findings from our research indicate that young people's understanding of sexual wellbeing is complex and dynamic. Only a few young people explicitly tried to provide a definition of sexual wellbeing, ranging from broad perceptions of sexual wellbeing involving 'everything' to more specific understandings related to being 'comfortable' in intimate relationships.

"If I did have a scientific definition, it would be that maybe your sexual body organs are okay ... But I feel like it would be wider than this ... if we are talking about general sexual wellbeing it would include things like whether you enjoy your sexual experiences ... consent, and whether you are STI free, and a lot of that kind of stuff. So, coming up with a definition is very hard for me."

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, UGANDA



In both countries, although young people talked about personal aspects of sexual wellbeing it was aspects at the relational level which were more commonly mentioned.

"Sexual wellbeing is being comfortable with that person, with your partner. Being comfortable and determined about what you're going to do and what you're not going to do."

YOUNG WOMAN, 21, ECUADOR



Personal aspects of sexual wellbeing

mainly related to being happy and comfortable with your body because it makes you feel good and attractive to a partner.

These included aspects

such as a good body shape formed by breasts and hips for young women, and beards, a deep voice or having muscular body for young men.

"When you have not yet reached puberty, you do not care how you look like, you don't notice yet: 'ah, this is a beautiful boy,' such things. But when puberty starts, one wants to see people more groomed and with a nice smell and all of these things. And you start watching boys: 'no, this is a beautiful boy,' 'this is a beautiful girl.' Things like that."

YOUNG WOMAN, 21, ECUADOR

In addition, personal self-esteem and comfort with emerging sexuality were recognised as important components of personal sexual wellbeing.

“Having self-love and confidence. Self-love is the ability to appreciate yourself and you express it by embracing what you have and be proud of it and stand out and speak about yourself.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, UGANDA



Relational aspects of sexual wellbeing

were wide-ranging and encompassed physical, emotional and economic wellbeing.



Physical wellbeing

included safe sexual encounters, consensual sex, physical attraction and experiencing sexual pleasure.

“It is important to avoid diseases [STIs] and unwanted pregnancies. Boys at this age just want to enjoy sex but are not ready to be fathers. Also, to use condoms, before they distributed them out but now, I don't know.”

FGD 8, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 21 – 24, UGANDA

Respondents also seemed to think that sexual wellbeing, including using condoms and contraceptives, was easier to achieve in a more serious relationship than a casual one. However, young people in Uganda discussed the complexity of using condoms, which may not always be a straightforward choice. Young people often do not know how to use them, are too shy, or too poor to buy them, and there are issues of trust and of sexual pleasure.

“The feelings you get while using condoms are not the same as those when you are not using them. Most people enjoy sex more when they don't use condoms.”

FGD 2, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

Young people also talked about the fact that sexuality and sexual feelings are natural.

“You cannot be there [exist or live] without loving someone or being loved by someone ... Sometimes it just happens because of circumstances. You find yourself gravitating towards a man. I still think it is human nature.”

FGD 11, MIXED GROUP, 18 – 23, UGANDA

IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE ABLE TO ACCEPT AND APPRECIATE POSITIVE FEELINGS SUCH AS SEXUAL PLEASURE, SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND DESIRE.

“When there is communication between the two, things can be said, because it could be that one may have had already other [sexual] experiences and the other could be inexperienced. Or the two mutually could share the experience of saying, ‘no, no I don't like that,’ or they help each other to have the sexual pleasure they want.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 20, ECUADOR

In both countries young people indicated that being able to experience sexual pleasure with your partner is a key aspect of sexual wellbeing, but perhaps especially for boys and young men. Young women focus group participants in Uganda thought that:

“The girls do not enjoy so much like boys.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

But this sentiment is by no means universal and, despite the taboos that surround female sexuality and female sexual pleasure, there was also a recognition that girls too feel desire and that sexual pleasure is not just a male prerogative.

“Because when I want you and you are not there to do what I want, I will go for another man.”

FGD 4, MIXED GROUP, 19 – 23, UGANDA

“Once I experience orgasm, I feel good; now I don't know if she also feels good.”

YOUNG MAN, 22, UGANDA

FINDINGS



Young people discussed **emotional wellbeing** in terms of being safe and comfortable, feeling love, support, respect and trust.

“In the end, if you do it with anyone, you can feel pleasure. But with the person you love, it’s not just pleasure, it’s the satisfaction of sharing the bond and that it was worth it.”

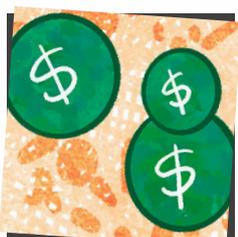
YOUNG MAN, 18, ECUADOR

SEXUAL WELLBEING IS LINKED TO LOVE AND TRUST, AND THEREFORE CONSIDERED EASIER TO EXPERIENCE IN SERIOUS RELATIONSHIPS RATHER THAN CASUAL ONES.

These emotional aspects of sexual wellbeing were considered equally important by both young men and young women. They used the same words to describe them and also referred to them as being important. In Ecuador, the respondents mainly referred to ‘feeling comfortable’ with their partner and in Uganda, the presence of love, and of feeling comfortable and confident within a relationship, was seen as key to sexual wellbeing.

“You get comfortable, you feel confident, there is a way it gives you harmony when you are loved. I may compare it with that special kind of parental love, so when you feel loved by someone, you feel proud of yourself; so it gives you courage.”

YOUNG MAN, 24, UGANDA



In Uganda, young people also referred to **economic aspects** when describing sexual wellbeing: mainly the ability of young men to provide money and essential needs for their female partners.

“If you have done nothing to provide, you are not entitled to my body. Where do I gain from?”

FGD 8, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 21 – 24, UGANDA

“For girls it’s basically money and care that they want. A man should be with money in order to be in a romantic relationship.”

FGD 2, BOYS ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

On the one hand, this economic aspect can contribute to sexual wellbeing through its function as a symbol of worth and expression of love and can pragmatically increase young women’s economic decision making and access to resources.

There were also examples of mutual financial support:

“If my boyfriend has debts and I have money, I can support him and we clear the debt. There [are] some circumstances whereby the boyfriend gets sick and he is no longer working. If I have money, I can help him with some money if I have – why not?”

FGD 4, MIXED GROUP, 19 – 23, UGANDA

However, this emphasis on money can be negative if it is an incentive for sex or sexual relationships where the power imbalance is so great that it compromises consent and safety. It means also that young men without money feel they have little chance of establishing relationships.

“For me, based on what I know, you cannot be in a happy relationship when there is no money. It is difficult. I don’t know any such girl. That you will just give her words, that one is not there.”

FGD 3, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 21 – 23, UGANDA

ALTHOUGH MOST STUDY PARTICIPANTS CONSIDERED SEXUAL WELLBEING IMPORTANT, THE RESEARCH INDICATES THAT IT IS DIFFICULT FOR MANY YOUNG PEOPLE TO EXPERIENCE IT IN THEIR DAILY LIVES.



For example, while safe sex was considered a key aspect of sexual wellbeing, many young people were not able to practice it. Communication and respect between partners can be difficult to achieve, as one young woman in Ecuador articulated:

“We live in a world where communication and respect no longer exist. There are few people who encourage you to talk or to respect. I have friends, even in my own family, someone meets a girl or a boy and in less than a month or two months they have sex and therefore get pregnant or can have a sexual disease.”

FGD 2, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18 – 20, ECUADOR

The respondents further emphasised that the idea that a partner will fulfil all your expectations is too ambitious, and needs to be adapted. For example, faithfulness – not having more than one partner at the same time – was considered important by both young men and women. However, there were clear gender differences as fidelity was more often expected of young women while men expected their girlfriends to be understanding and accept the fact that young men (need to) have many girlfriends to ensure their sexual wellbeing. In light of this, young women in Uganda described how in real life ‘the fairy tale’ does not exist. Young men will not be faithful, despite what is considered ideal.

“Girls should know that no one is perfect in each and every thing because angels are in heaven.”

FGD 2, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

SEXUAL CONSENT

“It depends on both parties such that when they agree as couples to have sex, that is what we call a good relationship, and it means that there is consent. But in our communities where we stay, most boys and men believe that when a girl visits you, it means that you have to play sex.”

FGD 2, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

“[Sexual consent] means that I agree to be with someone intimately.”

YOUNG MAN, 18, ECUADOR

Examples of sexual consent can be divided into four different categories:¹⁵

- 01 direct verbal signals, e.g., verbally asking for sex
- 02 direct nonverbal signals, e.g., touching a partner, responding to a kiss
- 03 indirect verbal signals, e.g., inviting someone to come over, asking to watch Netflix together
- 04 indirect nonverbal signals, e.g., accepting gifts, coming to a boy’s home

For many young people the whole idea of sexual consent seems to be new.

“I have just heard of sexual consent today. It is my first time.”

FGD 10, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

For others it is a concept that several of them can describe, but that few explicitly apply in their daily lives. Young people in our research appeared to have their own understanding of consent: not an explicit yes or no, but **indirect, non-verbal** and probably easy to ignore.

“If the boy touches the girl and she does not resist, it means she has accepted and she has allowed the boy to do whatever he wants.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

“IF THE GIRL RESISTS TOUCHES, IT MEANS SHE HAS REFUSED.” **FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA**

The fact that girls and young women rarely verbally indicate their boundaries means that sexual consent is mostly assumed and open to misinterpretation.

IT IS HARD TO TELL TO WHAT EXTENT CONSENT IS ACTUALLY ASKED AND GIVEN.

“According to the people of our age, it is not easy to seek consent; some boys will just start the action without asking you for consent. So, I think some young people do not understand it properly.”

FGD 4, MIXED GROUP, 19 – 23, UGANDA

15. Hickman, S.E. and Muehlenhard C.L. (1999). By the semi-mystical appearance of a condom: How young women and men communicate sexual consent in heterosexual situations. *Journal of Sex Research*, 36:3.

FINDINGS

“I didn’t want to but I agreed to satisfy him.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 20, ECUADOR

Our findings show that in both countries, often boys and young men initiate sex and girls and young women are the ones who need to accept, or not.

“Yes, there is a difference because the man comes up to you and says, ‘you know what, I want to be with you’, and men are like that, they just say it; but the woman won’t come up to you and say ‘I want to be with you’ because she is embarrassed. It’s more the man who invites.”

FGD 2, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18 – 20, ECUADOR

“I mean it’s the flirting, the touching, they might touch your back, before they used to hug you but now, they’re touching your buttocks or they might start to get a little more romantic, they start to give you more affection, it’s more sticky, it’s more chewy.”

FGD 3, MIXED GROUP, 18 – 21, ECUADOR

The issue of consent is further complicated, in Uganda at least, by the idea that no may not mean no.



“First of all, we boys have a myth, that when a girl says no, we think it is a yes.”

FGD 3, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 21 – 23, UGANDA

“I take someone’s no as a no. To also avoid getting embarrassed, you take the no. You may have a girlfriend if she says no and you insist, the love may stop there and if you insist you can cause a scene and you get embarrassed.”

FGD 3, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 21 – 23, UGANDA

“For a girl’s no to be a no, it has to be accompanied by reasons. Most cases, girls don’t say yes, they say no.”

FGD 3, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 21 – 23, UGANDA

“One can say a no and you can also surely see that it is a joke, but then there is a tone and you know that it is surely a no.”

FGD 3, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 21 – 23, UGANDA

The ability to experience sexual consent and the importance of communicating sexual consent seemed to **differ between different types of relationships.**

SERIOUS RELATIONSHIPS ARE MORE LIKELY TO MEAN DEVELOPING MUTUAL RESPECT AND THE ABILITY TO SAY NO.

There seems to be a direct link between love, consent and sexual wellbeing, whereas in casual sexual encounters the goals seem to be different and more short term. Pleasure, economic imperatives and boosting self-esteem are the driving factors, with less interest in the wellbeing and consent of the other person involved.

In Ecuador, female respondents discussed how important it was for them to express their boundaries at the beginning of a relationship.

“You have to do everything from the beginning ... Because if you don’t set the limits from the beginning and let him take advantage of everything ... one has to put a stop from the beginning. If you say no, it’s no, but if you give the opportunity that if you said no and he still did something, then he’s always going to do it again.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, ECUADOR

In both countries, **age and maturity** contribute to the ability to give, or refuse, sexual consent: older female youth seemed to be better informed and more experienced. Although even they might still engage in sex when not really wanting to, perhaps because of economic need or fear of losing their partner.

“You know, you’re a girl, you’re supposed to keep yourself a virgin until your marriage. You’re the same girl who is having friends who are having sex. They talk about it all the time and you’re feeling maybe your boyfriend is having sex with another woman. That’s why he’s not asking for it ... You start feeling guilty and then all your friends are like: ‘That guy ... he will leave.’ You know? There is a lot of pressure.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 26, UGANDA

In Ecuador, participants noted that it is very common that boys ask their girlfriends for ‘la prueba de amor’ – proof of love – and it can be difficult for girls to refuse to have sex.

“The guy says, ‘no, if you love me, let’s have sex’ and it’s like a pressure ... because ‘by obligation’ I’m going to have sex with him ... So, I think it’s a strong pressure and indeed the girls at some point would give in for fear of losing their boyfriend or their relationship.”

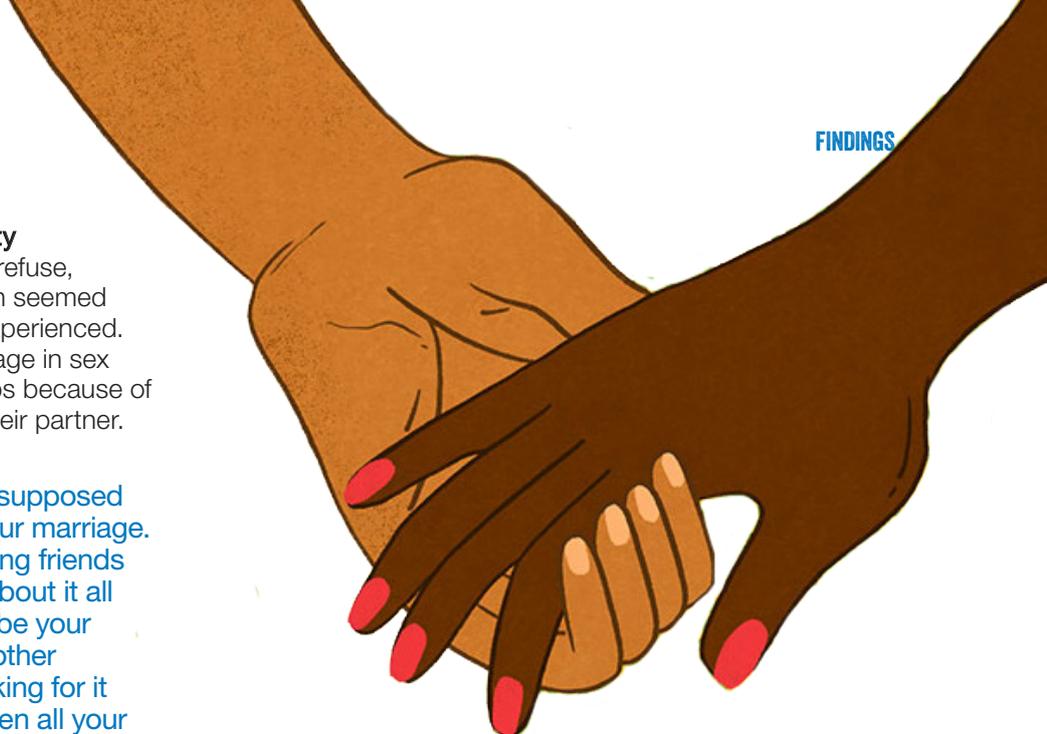
MEETING WITH CO-RESEARCHERS, 17 – 22, ECUADOR

Pressure is a word that keeps coming up. It is relentless, and sometimes escalates into violence.

“The girl can say no, but if the boy wants to do it [having sex] [then] ... the boy’s feelings win [over] ... because he would convince her, because the girl would be afraid of losing that person. She can [also] be threatened or be forced.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, ECUADOR

THROUGHOUT THE RESEARCH IT WAS CLEAR THAT LINES OF CONSENT WERE BLURRED, AND YOUNG PEOPLE ALSO MENTIONED THAT SEXUAL ABUSE AND VIOLENCE OCCURRED QUITE OFTEN.



“He always wanted [sex] ... He would hurt me. Since it was forceful [sex] my vagina would hurt, my legs would hurt, my chest would hurt and my whole body would hurt me.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, UGANDA

Additionally, in Uganda, there was a general perception that boys are simply entitled to sex if they provide gifts or money to a girl in a relationship or if a girl visits their home. In such circumstances, a girl may be blamed if a forced encounter occurred during the visit.

“If a girl visited and got raped, they would ask what she had gone to do there. Visiting a boy loosely translates to consent and so people would not pity the girl for getting raped. But it is not a must that every time you visit a man, there must be sexual relations. There are times when I just want to spend time with you being playful without anything sexual happening.”

FGD 11, MIXED GROUP, 18 – 23, UGANDA

Throughout the research, despite the pressures on young people, it is clear that they value consensual equal relationships based on trust and mutual desire, not coercion. Some feel that relationships and equality are improving, as one young woman reported:

“We are getting better, there have been a lot of feminist organisations in terms of sexual violence especially among young people but it is better than 10 years ago, especially within educated communities.”

YOUNG WOMAN EXPERT, 23, UGANDA



YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL WELLBEING AND THEIR ACQUISITION OF THE KEY COMPETENCIES THEY VALUE CAN BE SUPPORTED BY NORMS, CUSTOMS AND LAWS – OR UNDERMINED BY THEM.

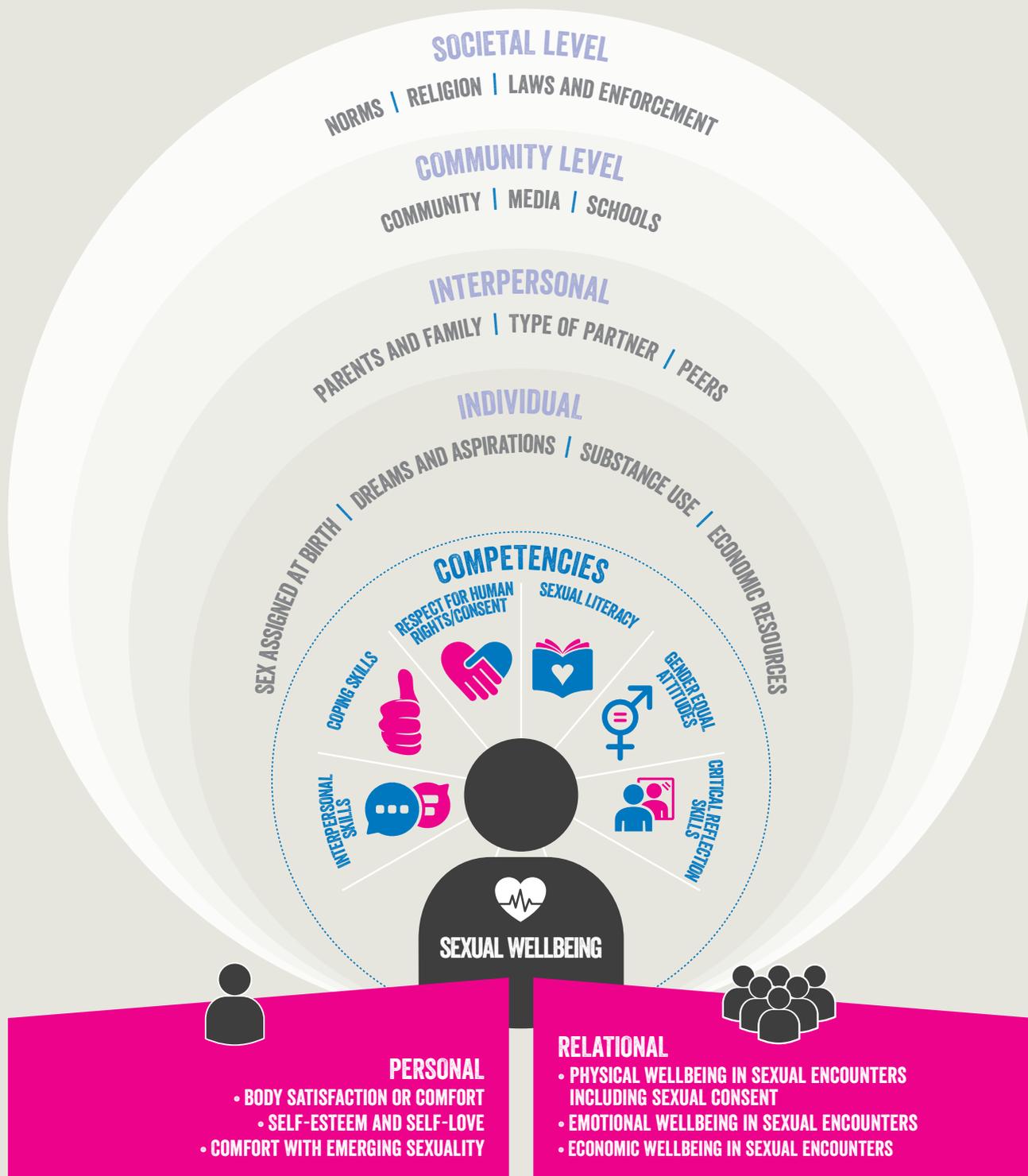
LOCAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SEXUAL WELLBEING AND SEXUAL CONSENT

Sexual wellbeing is not just dependent on individual characteristics and circumstances. Young people and their ability to acquire knowledge, stay safe, to formulate and achieve their hopes and aspirations are dependent too on the wider environment they are exposed to. Many factors – gender norms, cultural practices, poverty, religion, access to services like schools, colleges and clinics, the media and the wider political environment, including laws – all shape young people's experiences of sexual wellbeing. The interaction between the person and their environment helps shape each individual's attributes and opportunities.

In our research, at the personal level, the **individual competencies** most frequently mentioned by the young people as key to sexual wellbeing, were **sexual literacy, gender equitable attitudes, coping skills and interpersonal relationship skills**. They valued information, resilience, communication and equality.

How and if, these are achieved depends on **the socio-ecological framework** they are operating within and **on external influencing factors** which affect all levels of their lives. Poverty, government actions and community attitudes condition the society they live in, as they also condition the people they live with. Inevitably, this will have an impact on individual abilities and opportunities. It is therefore important to analyse and understand the relationship between the society a young person belongs to and their acquisition of key skills which will foster sexual wellbeing and individual happiness.

FIGURE 2. OVERVIEW OF MAIN STUDY FINDINGS RELATED TO YOUNG PEOPLE’S UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL WELLBEING AND CONSENT, THEIR INFLUENCING FACTORS AND KEY COMPETENCIES TO ACHIEVE A SENSE OF SEXUAL WELLBEING





KEY COMPETENCIES: INTERNAL INFLUENCES

Sexual literacy

“Adolescents and, you know, young people, they have a lot of questions and they’re just looking for the right information and you give them that. They will not leave this topic ... So, I feel like if there is an opportunity for this positive learning on sexual pleasures, and sexual wellbeing, the young people, the adolescents, they’re looking for a space to embrace it from.”

YOUNG WOMAN EXPERT, 26, UGANDA

MORE KNOWLEDGE ON SEXUAL HEALTH AND RIGHTS TOPICS WAS CONSIDERED TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN ACHIEVING SEXUAL WELLBEING.

This emphasis on sexual literacy and the need for information also illustrates clearly the impact of surrounding circumstances on individual development. Most participants were convinced that **information about SRHR was lacking and if provided not responsive to their needs**. Participants mentioned the importance of receiving youth-responsive and youth-friendly support which is accessible and understandable and is provided from an early age.

YOUNG PEOPLE FELT VERY MUCH LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES IN TERMS OF EDUCATING THEMSELVES ABOUT SRHR.

“So, what we know about sex in most African homes is something that we watch ... movies and stories, which usually is a cliché kind of experience for girls. You know, most African communities, because sex is a taboo. And so, young girls and boys are just sent into the world to discover sex on their own, which is not really a good thing.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, UGANDA

“[It is about] having the willpower to investigate oneself, not to wait for our schools or our parents to give that information, since many times they keep quiet because it is a taboo or they give us wrong information.”

FGD 3, MIXED GROUP, 18 – 21, ECUADOR

Information sources included parents, friends, schools and the media and these are discussed, as key influencers, later in the report. Young people also talked about the role of NGOs in promoting sexual literacy. On the whole their work was very much appreciated, although a comment from young men in Uganda stressed that more emphasis on boys would be helpful.

“They put much emphasis on the girls and they forget us, the boys, who are the real problem. Boys are the ones who take drugs and end up making girls pregnant.”

FGD 9, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 21 – 24, UGANDA

LACK OF INFORMATION IS CLOSELY LINKED TO THE TABOO ON SEXUALITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND MAINLY FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN.

It is much easier to ignore than acknowledge teenage sexual activity. Teachers, parents, medical and SRHR practitioners, who should be contributing

to young people's sexual literacy, all struggle with their own embarrassment and sometimes their own ignorance or lack of communication skills. The subject is further complicated by issues of **legal context**, given that young people in these countries are legally not permitted to consent before the age of 18 in Uganda and 14 in Ecuador. This raises important ethical and legal questions in terms of how those working with young people should discuss consensual sexual encounters before the legal age of consent, particularly as broader evidence, and findings from the study, indicate that many young people do engage in consensual sexual activity before the legal age. It is crucial that all barriers to sexual literacy are removed and that age-responsive information is available well ahead of young people becoming sexually active.

Gender equitable attitudes

Young people are aware of how parental and community attitudes to male and female roles, and their assumed characteristics, affect sexual wellbeing and impact on issues of sexual consent.

These attitudes are shaped by gender norms which also lead to gendered expectations on how individuals should behave. For example, views about young women in general, and their sexual behaviour, make it very hard for them to express and put into practice their personal sexual wishes and desires. Many participants indicated that it was harder for girls and young women to achieve sexual wellbeing when they were not supposed to be sexually active at all.

“Women are always more preserved: at an early age you can't do this, not even at the age of majority, you have to study and after you finish studying, if you want to, you have a boyfriend. You can't go out on weekends to dance.”

FGD 2, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18 – 20, ECUADOR

“If a girl had a sexual experience, it would simply be different because she is a girl, because she has to be delicate and reserved, well that's what people say. If a girl is seen from one place to another, they tell her that she is crazy and I think they would say that it is wrong to have sex because she is a girl and things like that.”

YOUNG MAN, 18, ECUADOR

Not only is young women's behaviour judged more harshly but they are also taught to learn to listen to men and please them: making it difficult for them to enforce boundaries and to be respected. This makes them more vulnerable to abuse.

“Women are taught [by their aunties] to please a man and their partners, not to do things for themselves.”

YOUTH EXPERT MEETING, 21 – 26, UGANDA

“A man is free to love any girl he wants and the other thing is that a man is respected, so a woman is supposed to be submissive to a man.”

FGD 2, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

We will look at the continuing impact of gender norms in more detail later in the report.

Coping and interpersonal relationship skills

Participants talked about the importance of both resilience – the ability to learn from mistakes and bounce back – and the need for communication – between partners, within families and amongst friends. This ability, as with sexual literacy and gender equitable attitudes, can be nurtured or knocked back by the prevailing attitudes of the individual's community and the wider society around them.

In general, communication and negotiation between partners was seen as important to sexual wellbeing and to establishing equality between young couples.

“Talking about a good sexual relationship ... First you have to understand each other like knowing someone's characters and hobbies.”

FGD 2, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

“In my current relationship – we already have a relationship of two years and more – as in all relationships we have ups and downs but we have clear points. I am going to study this and she is going to study law, I want to be this in life and she wants to be this, so we make a plan ... I also want this relationship and while it is happening, I don't want to have children, and we do it with protection.”

YOUNG MAN, 18, ECUADOR



Young women in particular talked about patience and how much they appreciated the relationship being allowed to develop more slowly.

“In the relationship that I had, I was never forced. It was always what I wanted. He waited for almost half a year. Another boy would have told me that he is leaving. He told me that he would be with me [have sex] when I was ready.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, ECUADOR

NEGOTIATION SKILLS, MAINLY RELATED TO CONTRACEPTIVE AND CONDOM USE, WERE MENTIONED AS IMPORTANT SKILLS TO ACHIEVE SEXUAL WELLBEING AND SEXUAL CONSENT.

“He respected my decision. He told me: ‘I understand you, don’t worry, parenthood is a problem for me too.’”

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, ECUADOR

INFLUENCING FACTORS: THE WIDER SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The role of family

Throughout the research young people talked about the influence of their parents, in particular, and of their wider circle family in how they learnt to navigate their emerging sexuality and their sexual relationships. The people around them are key to both sexual literacy – getting hold of the information they need – and to the development of their interpersonal skills and self-confidence.

PARENTS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN HOW YOUNG PEOPLE ESTABLISH AND NAVIGATE RELATIONSHIPS.

“You can look for information on the internet. Honestly, you search a lot on the internet, you can look for the pros and cons of things, but the advice of your parents is very useful.”

YOUNG MAN, 19, ECUADOR

They commented also on how parental attitudes to gender related to their ability to help their children with the information and emotional intelligence they need.

“They are very restrictive of the feminine ... girls are always locked in a bubble. They grow up and there is no communication, no education, they don’t know their bodies. They don’t know anything, that’s why I’m talking about girls, but obviously parents should educate boys and girls.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, ECUADOR

Parent-child connectedness, which can be crucial in the development of interpersonal relationship skills, was mentioned in both countries as an important factor in ensuring the sexual wellbeing of young people. Participants mentioned that friendly parents made it easy to share personal experiences including romantic relationships.

“As parents, they have really contributed so much in terms of advising me as a girl or as a lady to always be careful. They advise me on what I should do, how I should treat my partner.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 25, EXPERT PANEL, UGANDA

In other examples, parental influence, driven by poverty and economic anxiety, was not so positive. In Uganda, some parents seemed to encourage their children, particularly their daughters, to find rich partners who would support them and their family. There were those who encouraged young women to remain in abusive relationships as long as the partner had money.

“Parents do not consider that [sexual wellbeing] and they can’t even think about it, even if the man is mistreating you, they will be like you are lying because they do not want you to leave him.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, UGANDA

Having parents who were **actively engaged in the lives of their children** is seen as an important influencing factor for sexual wellbeing and sexual consent in both countries. Some of the participants mentioned that lack of time and affection from their own parents encouraged them to form other relationships.

“There is this uncle in the community that is harassing me, you don’t have time to listen to me. Maybe it is time for my periods, you are not there to provide my pads... But all over those challenges there is this guy who is ready to listen. ‘Oh James, I don’t have money for pads,’ and he provides. This person ... fights for me so at times that provokes a girl to go for these relationships.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, UGANDA

THERE IS A SENSE FROM PARTICIPANTS IN BOTH COUNTRIES THAT THEY FEEL LET DOWN BY THEIR PARENTS.

Young people want information and support from their parents but, by and large, either through embarrassment, lack of knowledge or an inability to communicate, they are not getting it.

Participants mentioned that parents rarely talked about sex, positive sexual experiences or contraceptives. In Uganda, parents communicated information very vaguely or used myths such as ‘if you have sex, you always will get pregnant.’ In Ecuador, participants mentioned that boys receive limited information about contraceptives whereas girls are just told ‘be careful that you don’t get pregnant.’

“If they don’t tell us things, we won’t do things the right way. Because if you tell your friends, they tell you: ‘don’t use a condom because it will make you less sensitive.’ But if you tell your parents, your mother, she would sit down and say: ‘if you are going to have sex take care of yourself because it’s not just pregnancy but diseases as well.’ If my parents had told me about sexuality, it would have been better.”

YOUNG MAN, 19, ECUADOR

“I think it’s how the parents were raised, it’s like they follow a generation but now we are in another century. It’s different, and they think we are still in another century. My mom was raised very strong and they didn’t even let her go out to the corner.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, ECUADOR



FINDINGS



Peer pressure

In the complicated search for information about sex and sexuality **friends** are a key, if not always reliable, source, and they can influence sexual behaviour.

“Peer pressure makes young boys or girls to engage in sexual relationships. Even if you had decided that you are going to abstain. Your friends who have boyfriends ... will influence you because during their conversations they [will] be talking about their boyfriends, so you can start admiring to have one ...”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

Participants in Uganda also indicated that peers can encourage risky sexual practices. For instance, some boys and girls mentioned that peer groups may encourage competition on who has the highest number of partners and encourage multiple partner relationships. Girls talked about encouraging each other to have casual relationships with boys for monetary gain.

“For me, I have my friends, we call ourselves, ‘girls with money,’ the moment you cry that you are poor, they ask you ‘aren’t you a girl?’ So, you also find yourself being pushed to look for a man so as to get money.”

FGD 8, YOUNG WOMAN ONLY, 21 – 24, UGANDA

Peer pressure is not all negative, and friends can also contribute to sexual wellbeing by providing help, both practical and emotional.

“If the girl does not trust the boy, she will choose to go with her friends for security purposes just in case of anything. If a girl goes with her friends, the boy can’t do anything bad to her.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

“They give you advice... when I was at school, I saw many young people in relationships and they gave advice among friends about how to manage a relationship, that is ... from people who already have more experience in that area. The advice was about emotions, they told you not to have toxic moments, when for example your partner wants to know where you are, who you are with or that you send him evidence of where you are.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, ECUADOR

Bridging the gaps: services and information

To counter the lack of information, the misinformation and the different pressures on their sexual behaviour, young people’s sexual wellbeing can be enhanced greatly by the availability of local **SRHR services and information** in clinics and schools. The distributions of condoms or individual consultations with professional health providers and support from teachers and counsellors was greatly appreciated when it was available.

“In the schools we attended, we would get guidance, we would also get condoms in schools. Organisations would bring condoms. They knew students from Senior Four [above 16 years] upwards, have grown and can do anything.”

FGD 9, YOUNG MEN ONLY, 21 – 24, UGANDA

The absence of these services during the COVID-19 pandemic was noted, as was the detrimental affect it had had on young women in particular.

“I would really see good in it if the government took it upon themselves to see that adolescents get this information, because if someone is not informed, she will end up messing up. How? That’s why we see that during this period of COVID, young girls are getting pregnant, because they need certain things, they end up making rushed decisions, so the government should take it upon themselves to see that information is given out and young girls are helped in one way or the other.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 24, UGANDA

The availability of accessible services in schools and health centres is only partially dependent on local decision-makers and is part of a much larger eco-system.

The wider environment

Sexual wellbeing is influenced by immediate personal circumstances and individual characteristics and attributes, including of course gender, but, as we have noted, there are other forces at play. Young people are also at the mercy of the economy and the various cultural, social, political and legal structures which form the world around them. These include:

Cultural practices: for example, boys being taken to visit sex workers by their fathers and uncles, and the many myths about sex that circulate in most communities can have an impact on young people's sexual wellbeing.

“It happens that the father says: ‘you are already a certain age, I can take you to the famous school or – the exact word – chongo’ [sex bar]. He says: ‘I can already take you to that place. Your [pubic] hair is starting to grow; I can take you there.’ Because there are fathers who do this, who tell this to their children.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, ECUADOR

The existence of cultural practices was also mentioned in Uganda, including: labia elongation, early marriages and bride prices. But many young people felt that these traditions are, at last, dying out.

“They used to tell us we have to ‘visit the bush’ to elongate out labias but I never liked pulling of labia because it is a painful experience.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

“Even in the era in which we are now, people got tired of traditions. The kingdoms are trying to push people to come back to the norms but people are not interested.”

FGD 7, MIXED GROUP, 18 – 24, UGANDA

Social norms: accepted gender roles, governing domestic and community life, which invariably condemn women to inferior status both within and outside the home, all continue to have an impact on the sexual wellbeing of young people – particularly girls and young women.

“The traditional gender norms are even more present than what young people might think. These are years and years of conditioning and young people are powerless to know how to negotiate and break free from these gender stereotypes. They are so deep and I feel that the people who hold the power and that are supposed to help us navigate these stereotypes are not helping.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, EXPERT PANEL, UGANDA

In Uganda, failure to fulfil marital obligations, including sex, is a justification for a man to marry another woman and become polygamous, which is not the case for women.

“When you complain of a relationship conflict instead of them solving your problem, they tell you to respect your husband. So they put the women down and they don't have a chance to consent on anything but to just bear ... I tried to go to my mother and aunties but they were saying ... ‘you are stubborn, you cannot be advised.’”

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, UGANDA

Our research did provide examples and stories about young women who challenged these norms. We heard the voices of young women sharing their opinion, being assertive, regardless of whether their behaviour was seen as ‘acceptable’ or not.

“I am very talkative. I say whether I want to or not, I mean I say it.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, ECUADOR

There was also a sense that there has been some progress in gender equality, including attitudes to female sexuality, particularly in the cities.

“Girls who go to college have broader experience sexually than most girls in villages ... communities are very conservative. For example, they will throw a stone at a girl that has sex before getting married, things which do not happen in town.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, UGANDA



“Oh, yes, for instance, looking at menstruation; it used to be entirely a woman’s issue but of late ... during his woman’s menstruation period, he supports her by providing for her water for showering, making sure children have showered and because of that it has made their relationship stronger and they have become happier together. There is more shared role when it comes to domestic work, emotional health which is different from way long ago.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 26, EXPERT PANEL, UGANDA

Religion: In Uganda, young people talked about religion a negative influence on their sexual wellbeing. They felt they could not easily open up to the church or mosque leaders about relationships because they are not expected to engage in romantic relationships at a young age, while in reality they do. Young people felt that religious leaders could do more apart from preaching about abstinence: they could be trained to teach young people – especially those out of school – on how to handle challenges such as menstrual pain and handling relationships before marriage.

“Haaaa you cannot start a relationship in church while young, even the pastor [church priest] will not allow it. It is an abomination, unacceptable. How can you tell a pastor that you are 16 or 17 and you have a boyfriend, you want prayers so that you have a successful relationship? There are steps to follow, you have to first finish school and then take the boy to the pastor and the pastor will pray and ask the Holy Spirit if he is the right guy before you go into a relationship.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

Young people also commented that religion teaches women to be submissive: within marriage sexual consent is taken for granted.

“If I want, you must give me what I want. I married you for that purpose.”

FGD 11, MIXED GROUP, 18 – 23, UGANDA

Media: an important influencer. It can be a helpful source of information but can also be a source of unrealistic expectations and misinformation.

“Young people watch it from television and therefore do it to try out. We have always found them in bathrooms trying to practice what they see and hear about.”

FGD 4, MIXED GROUP, 19 – 23, UGANDA

Political and legal frameworks: The role of government – of political will and enabling legislation – on the overall wellbeing of the entire population is hugely influential. It can help shape attitudes, support aspirations and improve economic stability and prospects.

**SEXUAL WELLBEING IS NOT JUST
A PRIVATE MATTER.**

Young people’s lives and futures are at least partially dependent on the relationships they form, on when they have their children, on staying healthy and on being informed about sex and sexuality which is such a key element of personal happiness. Much of this is not down to individual choice but to the laws, policies and services in place and the attitudes held by family and society.

“Some mothers can marry off a 16-year-old because there is a pressure at home for material things. So as long the man can bring some things, make an introduction and wedding, parents marry off their daughter even if she does not want.”

FDG 10, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18 – 22, UGANDA

The provision of education and health services, support to vulnerable families, economic policies targeting neglected areas, laws tackling violence against women and promoting gender equality are all vital to ensure sexual wellbeing and sexual consent. They are also all the responsibility of governments.

Research participants knew there were laws in place to protect them and referred to laws relating to rape, incest, and defilement. In terms of the laws regarding the age of consensual sex, many of the comments were dismissive.

“I don’t think they know much about the laws, but in everyday life they wouldn’t take it into account either.”

YOUNG MAN, 21, ECUADOR

“They don’t take it into account, even the law itself ... because if a boy is 17 and a girl is 14 and they involve in sexual intercourse, we see the law not applying to them. So, the law only applies when one of the party is above the age of 18, but if all of them are below that age, the law has no effect on them.”

YOUNG MAN, 21, UGANDA

In contrast, those protecting young women against non-consensual sex were considered important, mainly to protect young girls from sexual violence or unwanted pregnancy.

“These days there is a law which protects girls, if a boy/man forces the girl, she can go and report and we have a right to reject what we do not want, if the boy/man forces you, it is easy to go and report him to the authorities.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

However, participants in both countries felt that law enforcement, in this context, was weak. Some participants mentioned that not all law enforcers are knowledgeable about sexual abuse and may disregard offenses such as bad touches. Others complained that attitudes and corruption meant that even serious offences could be ignored.

“Some law makers do not judge correctly ... and [when] you report that you were raped, he can even say that you also wanted. They will blame you or else they can even buy off the case because of corruption.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



“I would define it [sexual wellbeing] as; being in a mutual relationship whereby all partners are playing their roles effectively, whereby you do what is good for the both of you without compromising each other’s interests, whereby you make sure that in each and everything you do in that relationship, you make sure that her interests are protected and your interests are protected as well.”

YOUNG MAN, 21, UGANDA

This study demonstrates the importance of giving young people access to information about all areas of SRHR and of supporting them in understanding and achieving sexual wellbeing and consent.

ALL THE STUDY RESPONDENTS WERE INTERESTED IN BEING INFORMED ABOUT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS ISSUES, TO IMPROVE THEIR SEXUAL WELLBEING AND TO LEARN ABOUT SEXUAL CONSENT.

Young people in the involved communities consider sexuality an important and natural aspect of their lives. Given the opportunity, and despite the taboos and embarrassment around the topic of young people’s sexuality, they themselves are capable of, and willing to, talk about it.

“I think with the girls, and speaking for myself, it was a very negative experience especially with menstruation and stuff because our mothers do not talk to us about that. They’ll just assume that the teachers at school told you, but also the teachers don’t tell you because they are assuming mothers are telling you ...”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, UGANDA

“I think that sexual wellbeing depends on us, on any person, because in schools they do talk about sexuality, but about superficial topics, but they don’t give you the living matter, but ... everyone wants to have their sexual wellbeing.”

FGD 4, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 19 – 21, ECUADOR

Our research shows that it is difficult for young people in both countries to fully experience sexual wellbeing and sexual consent due to limited knowledge, skills, and support and to socio-political barriers including economic deprivation. Many young people seem to get romantically and sexually engaged at an early age and encounter various SRHR related problems. These include unintended pregnancies, sexual violence, STIs and HIV, lack of information on different contraceptive methods and not being able to exercise real informed consent to sexual activity – often due to gender norms, peer and parental pressure and poverty within their communities.

THE NORMS GOVERNING MALE AND FEMALE BEHAVIOUR CONTINUE TO DICTATE THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

Our research shows that, growing up, young people are socially conditioned and expected to act in certain ways. Any deviation from these prescribed gendered scripts is largely seen as unacceptable.

“As a child, girls get dolls and receive the message they should get married; boys get cars and are taught to work hard and make a living.”

YOUNG MAN, 21, UGANDA

“From an early age, girls are taught to be alone at home and to be faithful to their husbands, while men are taught to be the boss, the one who has the authority at home with the women, and that is where machismo comes more and that is when men are judged better than women in society.”

YOUNG MAN, 19, ECUADOR

These gendered expectations have a negative influence on sexual wellbeing and young people’s ability to negotiate sexual consent. They give rise to silence, taboos and sometimes violence and have a significant impact at all levels of people’s lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the research young people talked about what would make a real difference to their lives. With their suggestions in mind the study points to changes that would improve the sexual wellbeing of young people and make sexual consent a fully meaningful concept. The recommendations that follow are based on their experiences, both negative and positive. Input was also provided by research professionals with knowledge of the literature and SRHR programming and community stakeholders who attended validation workshops.

These recommendations seek change at all levels of society, from families and schools to governments and law enforcers, and they provide guidance to NGOs and others trying to improve the lives of young people. Change of this sort is no easy task but, for those working with young people at all levels, in education, SRHR and child protection programming, listening to what the young have to say is a good first step.

The recommendations concentrate on three focus areas:

01 GENERAL, HIGH-LEVEL CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS FORMULATED FOR SRHR PROGRAMMES

02 SPECIFIC, PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN YOUNG PEOPLE’S KEY SKILLS AND ABILITIES

03 THE CREATION OF AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT SO YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE THE BEST CHANCE OF PUTTING THESE INTO PRACTICE.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Embrace a sex-positive approach

Policymakers, national and global practitioners working on children, adolescent and young people’s programming and influencing, such as NGOs, community-based organisations, teachers and health workers, should embrace a sex-positive approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Staff and volunteers should engage in continued values clarification and reflection to build a shared understanding on what sex positivity means and how it can be applied.

Policymakers, national and global practitioners should work towards the integrated definition of SRHR as outlined by the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission¹⁶ which provides a universal framework that links sexual and reproductive health, sexual and reproductive rights and sexual pleasure.

★ Engage youth in SRHR programme and influencing, including younger adolescents

National and global practitioners working on SRHR should meaningfully include and engage adolescents and young people in SRHR programming at all stages. They have an important role to play in generating knowledge about their realities, needs and preferences; in designing and co-delivering the interventions; and in monitoring and evaluating them. When working with adolescents and young people, it is vital to recognise the power imbalances that exist across age and gender, to ensure the creation of safe spaces and to use youth-friendly methods of engagement.

National and global practitioners working on SRHR should consider partnering with and funding youth-led organisations as experts in adolescent and youth issues, including adolescent and youth SRHR.

16. Starrs, A.M., et al. (2018). Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission. Retrieved from: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)30293-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)30293-9/fulltext)



EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES ON MEANINGFUL AND INCLUSIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH, PARTNERSHIPS AND PROGRAMMES:



PATHWAYS TO PARTNERING WITH YOUTH-LED ORGANISATIONS (PLAN INTERNATIONAL)

This tool supports organisation to develop and manage partnerships with young people in ways that recognise that meaningful partnerships may require different considerations and ways of working for our collective work to flourish.

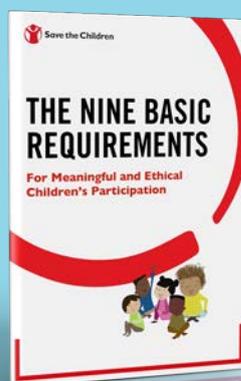
EXPLORE: TOOLKIT FOR INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE AS RESEARCHERS IN SRH PROGRAMS AND PHOTOVOICE – FACILITATORS GUIDE (RUTGERS AND IPPF)

This toolkit contains three manuals to train and support young people to conduct qualitative data collection for research and monitoring and evaluation, and a guide on how to create conditions for successful engagement.



THE NINE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR MEANINGFUL AND ETHICAL CHILD PARTICIPATION (SAVE THE CHILDREN)

A key tool for ensuring quality child participation in any initiative with children.



STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Strengthen comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to address positive sexuality and promote understanding of gender and power dynamics

CSE educators, including UN agencies, should integrate and promote content and information that focuses on an understanding of consent and interpersonal skills to express and respect the wishes and boundaries of oneself and of others.

National and global practitioners working on education for children, adolescents and young people should design and deliver CSE interventions that begin from an early age and are in line with their evolving capacities. CSE should support children, adolescents and young people, in all their diversity, to recognise gendered power dynamics and build gender equitable attitudes. CSE should also equip learners with negotiation skills within relationships, including expressing and respecting boundaries that enables safe and consensual sexual intercourse. Methodologies used need to be participatory.

“What they need [to use, are] games, be dynamic, be participatory. [They should] not get a professional, a doctor, a sexologist or a gynaecologist who stands in front of them and tells them: ‘this happens, this happens, this happens’ and it’s over ... They [young people] don’t participate and they go home and that’s it. It’s like a knowledge that they already have and it remains dead, so that is what sometimes makes it difficult to get young people involved.”

CO-RESEARCHERS MEETING, 17 – 22, ECUADOR

Involve families in programming

National and global practitioners working on SRHR should work with parents and caregivers so they can actively engage and support their children’s SRHR. This includes building parents’ knowledge and supporting efforts to improve child-parent communication around sexuality. Young people look first to their parents for support and information and need to feel they can ask for help without embarrassment or confusion on either side.

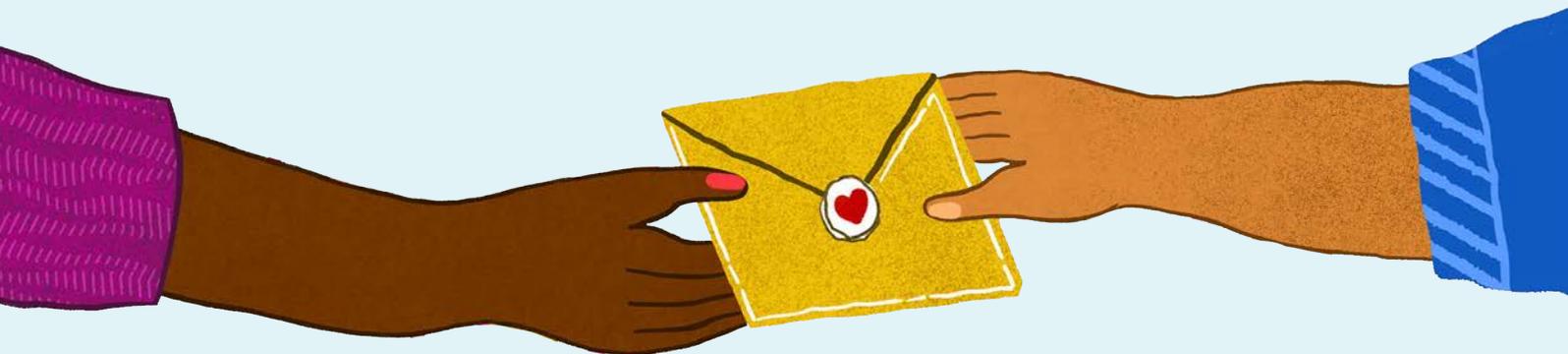
CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Challenge negative social and gender norms

National practitioners working on SRHR should undertake a social norms analysis and support public campaigns and community dialogues to discuss social and gender norms, including stereotypes related to dating and male and female roles and attributes. This can help reduce stigma and taboo in relation to young people’s sexuality and sexual behaviour, and to build more gender equitable norms. Robust efforts should be made to engage gatekeepers or figures of authority, such as local leaders, including religious leaders, medical personnel and teachers, in this dialogue.

National practitioners working on SRHR should identify key partners to work with to challenge negative social and gender norms and the taboos surrounding young people’s sexuality. These partners must include young people themselves to ensure their needs and interests are meaningfully represented. It is essential to build wide-ranging support for CSE and other Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (AYSRRH) interventions, if they are to be effective. For example, collaborating with the city government offices to select and train schools to implement CSE, meeting with the parents and other community members to build their understanding and engaging in joint supervision and evaluation of the programme are essential components of building community and political support. CSE programmes should also provide links to service providers in terms of further advice and information and assess to contraception.

SRHR practitioners need to work holistically across other initiatives. Programmes that promote economic empowerment, particularly for young women, are also important to challenging accepted behaviour and ensuring sexual wellbeing. In Uganda in particular, money, or the lack of it, is a barrier to sexual wellbeing and sexual consent. Economic necessity is often a key driver of relationships for young people and for their parents, who encourage their daughters to form partnerships with men with money. Being less economically dependent on parents and on young men (in case of the young women) would contribute to an individuals’ personal decision making and to sexual wellbeing.



“There is that saying ‘omwavu tafumita lindaazi’ literally meaning that if you don’t have money, you can’t buy anything. So, if the boy/man is poor, the girl is going to leave and go for another rich man who has money and can afford to buy her gifts. She will leave you because you have nothing to offer, that is why girls love older men because for them they have money for buying gifts.”

FGD 1, YOUNG WOMEN ONLY, 18, UGANDA

Ensure that legal and policy frameworks on age of sexual consent do not restrict adolescents and young people’s rights and their access to SRHR information, education and services

Governments and policy makers must aim to protect adolescents and young people from potential harm whilst also enabling them to freely exercise their rights, including their sexual rights. The aim of a minimum legal age of sexual consent should be informed by the evolving capacities of adolescents and young people and should be purely protective in nature. Laws should not criminalise young people who have consensual sex by including close-in-age exemptions. Policy and legal frameworks should enable access to SRHR information, comprehensive sexuality education and adolescent and gender-responsive SRH services from an early age, not linked to the minimum legal age of sexual consent.

Recognise that more research is needed and invest in it

The following key areas are considered important for further research:

- Personal sexual wellbeing among younger adolescents
- Developing and validating measures of sexual wellbeing and consent that go beyond biological health outcomes
- Understanding experiences of sexual consent and sexual wellbeing among minority groups such as LGBTIQ+ youth and young people with disabilities
- Understanding the role of social media in shaping sexual wellbeing and consent
- Understanding effective ways of combining face-to-face (offline) delivery of CSE with digital channels (online) for delivery of CSE
- Evaluating adolescent and young people’s SRHR programmes which take a sex-positive approach
- Investigating what is acceptable in the promotion of sexuality education programmes in settings where the sexuality of young people is taboo
- Case studies on how legal age of consent is interpreted in the balance between protection and autonomy.

“... being aware about my sexual needs and having the power to decide on what actually makes me happy and also having that moment or that, you know, space that no one is going to judge me for my decision. That actually makes me happy.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 26, UGANDA

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About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

Plan International

International Headquarters
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1483 755155

Fax: +44 (0) 1483 756505

E-mail: info@plan-international.org
srhr@plan-international.org

plan-international.org

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