

IMPORTANCE OF INCORPORATION OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR) EDUCATION IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The Daily Star and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) as an implementing partner of UBR Bangladesh Alliance jointly organised an online discussion titled “Importance of incorporation of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education in the National Curriculum for the prevention of sexual violence” on November 10, 2020. Here we publish a summary of the discussion. Speakers’ serial has been maintained as per the flow of the discussion.



Rokeya Kabir,
Executive Director,
BNPS & Chairperson
of this meeting

People speak about how our society, values, culture, family bond, and reputation are in ruins. However, we know that many aspects of our traditions go against women and their equal rights. Even our literature promotes child marriage and depicts girls as a burden for their families.

This shows that, no matter how much we try to glorify our culture, society or family values, these have never been in favour of women and equal rights. We can no longer uphold these values.

Education is a critical factor in economic and social development. It is an excellent tool for changing people’s mindsets. The right kind of education will allow societal values to shift and create an environment where women can live their lives freely. Graduates still need to be given gender sensitivity training. If this kind of teaching was already included in our education system, there would be no need for such training. This would help cut down on costs as well.

There will be a change in the national curriculum soon, which is the perfect opportunity to incorporate SRHR education into the curriculum. SRHR education cannot be viewed as just reproductive health education; it is about women’s health and sexual rights.

This roundtable is organised in the context of ongoing nationwide protest. Education is a critical area to work on to fulfil the constitutional pledge of ensuring equal rights of women and men. Our educational curriculum must promote women’s right to freedom of movement.



Professor Dr Sameena Chowdhury,
Reproductive Health Specialist and Former Head of Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Dhaka Medical College

Every person has a right to information about their bodies. However, we keep violating this right every step of the way. People find it difficult even to utter the words “sexual health”, further establishing the dangerous notion that this topic is shameful. Talking about your body is forbidden at schools and also at home, so children end up gaining this knowledge from harmful and unreliable sources. After a lot of struggle, this teaching has been included in a limited manner in the education system. But teachers tell the students just to read the material at home instead of teaching it in class. We need our education system to teach us to be human, regardless of gender.

Women are not safe anywhere, be it at home, on the road, or public transport. Why should it be like this? Have women been born just to please men? Advertisements unnecessarily hypersexualise women’s bodies. Why should women be objectified and disrespected? Women, especially sex workers, are degraded through the words we use as well. This needs to stop.

Violence against women, both outside and inside their homes, has become normalised. People are demanding maximum punishment of the perpetrators, but there is no guarantee of when justice will be served. Therefore, our focus should instead be on preventing acts of violence against women.



Dr Mohammad Mainul Islam,
Professor and Chairperson,
Department of Population Sciences,
University of Dhaka

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), there are 18.6 percent adolescents aged 15 to 24 and 29.4 percent young population aged 10 to 24 in Bangladesh. We need to figure out which age group is best suited for SRHR education.

The incorporation and implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in our national curriculum has to be viewed at three different levels: national, meso, and local. We need to make the teaching materials age-specific and outline the learning objectives. The learning time and content delivery need to be worked on as well.

The 2015 BBS survey shows that one in

every four women is a survivor of sexual violence. 27.2 percent of women faced gender-based violence. 23.8 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds and 28.1 percent of 20 to 24-year-olds faced intimate partner violence or non-partner violence. Only 2.6 percent of the women had sought legal action. 22.8 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds and 24 percent of 20 to 24-year-olds had no knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases.

In the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, Bangladesh had committed to CSE. In section 7.41 of the Programme of Action, this dimension has been clearly stated. In the 2015 SDG panel, section 3.7 and 4.7 contain clear guidelines on how to move forward with CSE. Therefore, we have a commitment to CSE at the policy level. Only implementation is required.



Nilima Jahan,
Reporter, The Daily Star

I had the opportunity to work on a report on a study by BRAC about SRHR of male youths aged 15 to 25. The study showed that 63 percent of male youths in Bangladesh believe that if their wives do not agree to sexual intercourse, it is justifiable to abuse them physically. They think there is no need to take their wives’ consent.

27 percent male youths are not even familiar with the words “family planning”, and 54 percent do not know the term “sexually transmitted diseases” (STDs). Those who are aware of the word STD believe that these diseases occur as a result of weak faith, curses, or evil looks. If they contract STDs, they usually go to local pharmacies or homoeopaths. Only six percent said that they went to doctors or specialists to treat STDs.

75 percent of teenagers, aged less than 15, have watched pornography at least once in their life. These findings show that there is a lack of information about bodies and sexuality, and the youths are opting for inappropriate sources to gain this knowledge.

Teachers usually skip chapters that include content on sex education since they feel uncomfortable teaching these topics. Sometimes, these chapters are even stapled shut. Therefore, we also have to think about how to train teachers to feel comfortable teaching students. The content delivery should also be fun, perhaps through interactive games.



Shaheen Anam,
Executive Director,
Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)

MJF conducted a national survey on violence against women during Covid-19. From May to July, women and adolescents faced the most violence. Child marriage rates rose. The rise in child marriage shows a huge implication of there being zero SRHR education. Adolescents are the most vulnerable, and yet we have no system to support them through this difficult time.

The consumption of pornography by young minds that have not gained the education that allows them to process this kind of information directly impacts violence against women and girls. The young, married women we have spoken to have painted a horrifying picture of the kind of sexual violence they have had to face. One primary reason for this is the lack of SRHR education. Does our education system teach children to live in harmony with each other, to respect each other regardless of sex, gender, religion, or race? It does not. SRHR education teaches children about respect and how to treat their peers.

Primary school students are never taught about how to protect themselves. They do not even learn about the concept of good touch and bad touch. Consequently, survivors of sexual violence do not feel like they can speak up about the abuse they faced.

If there is a revision of the national curriculum in 2021, then the need for incorporating SRHR education should be pushed further. This education will determine the values of the people who will be part of our future generation.



Dr Noor Mohammad,
Executive Director,
Population Services
and Training Center
(PSTC)

The National Education Policy 2010 mentions that reproductive health topics will be included in our national textbooks. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) is currently working on revising different curricula. The National Health and Family Planning Commission has the National Adolescent Health Strategy of 2017. It contains detailed information on adolescent needs and how to address them.

Although our country has fair policies, there are certain gaps among them. It is essential to bridge this gap. Right after our independence, population education was in the process of being included in the textbooks under NCTB. There were plans for incorporating this education starting from the primary level. The plan later never came to fruition because the teachers felt uncomfortable talking about these issues with the students. Currently, we are trying to include this in the teachers’ training curriculum.

Sexual health is a very sensitive topic and hence the teachers must convey information related to this topic in a careful manner. School students must be taught how to differentiate between good touch and bad touch. Otherwise, they will not be able to understand instances of sexual harassment inflicted upon them. Furthermore, victims of sexual harassment do not have the room to open up about their experiences at home.

We want SRHR education to align with the culture of our subcontinent. Hence, we need to be extremely cautious regarding the age of the students and convey the materials accordingly. What we are looking for is a complete behavioural change in the entire population which will not be achievable overnight.

We are well aware of the importance of SRHR education. Our discussion should focus on how to bring this to reality. NCTB requires the support from our political



Professor Md Moshuazzaman,
Member
(Curriculum),
National Curriculum
and Text Book Board
NCTB

SRHR education is included to an extent in the curriculum but our teachers are failing to disseminate that information. Most schools staple the chapters related to reproduction and reproductive health in the books while other schools ask the students to learn these chapters at home. With the help of partner organisations, we have conducted countrywide training for teachers. Even after all this, there has not been any significant improvement. But, I do believe we have at least paved the path towards change.

Various initiatives are being undertaken by multiple organisations to tackle this issue but there needs to be an integrated effort to bring about change.

NCTB is prepared to fully incorporate SRHR education in the curriculum but we need the support of other relevant organisations for implementation. We have plans on introducing interactive learning and making SRHR education interdisciplinary in the future curriculum. We have conducted gender sensitivity training for our curriculum specialists to tackle the issues of gender bias that have been so ingrained in us. We also have plans on providing such training to all our curriculum specialists before every curriculum revision.



Mushfiqua Zaman Satiar,
Senior Policy Advisor,
Embassy of the
Kingdom of the
Netherlands Spacial
Guest of the meeting

CSE will help adolescents better understand their rights. It will also mould into them the necessary skills required to embark into the real world. The knowledge imparted by

bring change in the mindsets of men and women alike. A teacher is a child’s role model. Therefore, age-specific CSE at school will be pivotal in bringing about this change in mindset.



Professor Dr Syed Md Golam Faruk,
Director General,
Directorate of
Secondary and
Higher Education,
Ministry of
Education, Special
Guest of this
meeting

There has been some progress in our country in terms of incorporation of SRHR education materials. Sangsad Television regularly airs a children’s animated series called Shahana which discusses a lot of important topics including the issue of child marriage. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has prepared 13 SRHR education classes for us and we will soon start airing them for the students as well.

We should not limit SRHR education to textbooks only. We have to scale up our interventions through online and social media platforms. We are seeking your support in this regard. You can also help us scale up the training programme for school and madrasah teachers.

We are seeing meteoric rise in the use of mobile phones among young students. We are trying to create critical awareness among them about the digital contents they encounter every day so that they can choose the right content and avoid harmful information.



Muzib Mehdy,
Deputy Director,
BNPS

I want to highlight some recommendations from today’s discussion. First, speakers have observed that gender stereotypes continue to appear in media and advertisement that need to be changed. Media should also avoid use of gendered vocabularies. Second, we have a lot of policies and action plans regarding CSE. Now we need to implement those policies effectively. Government alone can’t do that. There must be coordination among the government and non-government initiatives. UNESCO’s guideline can also be very helpful in this regard. Third, life skills education should be provided to both boys and girls. Fourth, NCTB will take more initiatives to encourage teachers to teach the SRHR-related chapters of the textbooks. Some questions should be set on SRHR in the exams so that students study those chapters diligently.

Rokeya Kabir,
Executive Director,
BNPS & Chairperson
of this meeting

The forces against women empowerment are very active in our country. We need to counter their propaganda and create a critical mass who will carry forward our work for creating a gender-equal world. All human beings are born free. They are created equal. We have to organise our whole education system around these principles. We should stop giving the excuse of cultural reality. We need to change the culture that perpetuates patriarchy and violence against women. We all need to work together to implement our policy and action plans regarding SRHR education.



Tanjim Ferdous,
National Consultant,
United Nations in
Bangladesh and
Moderator of the
session

Today’s discussion had two objectives: understanding the importance of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education in preventing sexual violence against students and discussing the solutions to the challenges that exist in the implementation process. I believe both the objectives have been achieved successfully. Now, we all need to work together to implement the recommendations of today’s roundtable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop age-specific SRHR teaching materials
- Train teachers to be comfortable in teaching SRHR topics
- Ensure proper implementation of the present policies related to SRHR education
- Incorporate SRHR education related questions into the assessments of the students
- Bring about a multisectoral approach for the incorporation of SRHR education in the curriculum
- Media should be careful about negative portrayal of women and avoid gendered vocabularies
- Life skill education should be planned for both girls and boys and it should be started at home
- Students should be taught to respect every person irrespective of their belief, sex and ethnicity.

leaders for implementation. The NCTB review team should consist of people from different institutions who have knowledge and experience regarding the implementation of SRHR.



Dr Sanjib Ahmed,
Director Program,
Family Planning
Association of
Bangladesh (FPAB)

It has been pointed out that our teachers do not feel comfortable teaching SRHR. This should not be the case at all. Instead, a teacher should feel embarrassed when their students are accused of sexual harassment cases because of a lack of sensitivity training.

Comprehensive sex education (CSE) consists of seven modules and covers all the necessary topics quite extensively. Along with inducing gender sensitivity, CSE will be able to ingrain the concept of women’s rights into young minds and they will be able to understand how to stand up against injustices such as child marriage. If we want to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend, CSE is essential.

Educational institution closures due to Covid-19 have made it difficult to reach the students this year. At the policy level, we need to include SRHR education related questions in the assessment of the students. This will compel both the teachers to teach the materials thoroughly and the students to learn them.

pornography negatively shapes the viewpoint of our young ones and hence dissemination of the correct information by the teachers and the parents is crucial.

There are policies present regarding CSE along with action plans; but, unfortunately, we are falling behind in the implementation of these policies. Incorporation of CSE should be a multisectoral approach. Apart from the education ministry, other sectors should also support its incorporation.

Research shows that males and females are almost equally affected by sexual harassment. Hence, CSE is necessary for all genders. The programmes initiated by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands are always centred towards all genders which is how it should be.

We completely agree that CSE should be strictly age-specific and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) guidelines for this topic already exist.

The conversation around menstruation and menstrual hygiene should begin from primary school since a lot of girls start their period when they are eight or nine years old. This will prevent the trauma these young girls undergo when they begin menstruating for the first time without understanding what it is. For the boys, the topic of nocturnal emission needs to be talked about. CSE will be able to prevent unwanted pregnancies and teach the concept of consent from a young age.

The negative portrayal of women in mass media is a major issue. We see women being hyper-sexualised and stalking being glorified. We need to look into these issues.

To prevent sexual harassment, we must