

# Openness about sexuality important for people and societies

*A call for Action from the participants of the international conference "What about sex?"  
6-7 March 2006 Utrecht, The Netherlands.*

Sexual health and sexuality are rarely discussed at the policy, programme and grassroots levels. Evidence shows that countries that adopt an open and comprehensive approach to sexuality, information and services achieve better health outcomes. Therefore, it is essential that sexuality is put back on the agenda on all levels (local, national, regional, and international, including the UN)

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## **A call for action**

The two-day conference 'What about sex?', organised by *Youth Incentives* and *World Population Foundation* took place in Utrecht on 6-7 March 2006. 225 participants from 31 countries in five continents, representing 89 organisations, demonstrated that, regardless of their own cultural, social and religious backgrounds, it can be easy - and even fun - to talk about sexuality. The participants concluded that talking about sexuality empowers people to make responsible choices, stimulates debate, guarantees a learning experience and creates space to enjoy sexuality.

The starting points for the conference were the WHO draft working **definitions** of *sexual health* and *sexuality*:

1. '*Sexual health* is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity'.
2. '*Sexuality* is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.'

The participants acknowledged a rights-based approach as the **basic principle**, one that puts the well being and free choice of the individual at the centre. No one should be forced or coerced into any sexual activity against their will. All people should be able to exercise their rights, without harming others or being harmed, either physically or psychologically.

## **Preamble**

Sexuality is a natural part of a person's identity. Sexual health is intertwined with an overall sense of happiness and well-being and has a profound influence on how people function in their daily activities and social environment; it thereby contributes to public health in general.

Negative experiences with sexuality can traumatise and negatively impact on people's lives, as well as their families and even societies. A closed or judgemental environment makes it very difficult to discuss or overcome negative experiences, and feeds into shame, guilt, abuse, denial, sexual ill-health and frustration. It disables people from expressing their identity, from being themselves, from making personal choices; such an environment therefore constitutes a violation of human rights.

## **Discussing sexuality empowers!**

Openness about sexuality is a precondition to create a safe, non-judgemental and respectful environment, in which people can fully enjoy their basic human rights ...

- ... it contributes to gender equality

Open communication about sexuality contributes to equal relationships. It helps people to decide freely over their own body and to engage in wanted and pleasurable relationships. All people can learn how to enjoy their sexuality and plan their own families, which in turn contributes to increased participation in the social and economic spheres.

- ... it enables sexual activity to become a choice

Research shows that young people who are well informed about sexuality make their own choices regarding when and how to become sexually active and, when they do have sex, are more likely use contraceptives and condoms.

- ... it reduces stigma and discrimination

Speaking openly about sexuality has been demonstrated to be an effective tool in reducing stigma and discrimination in relation to age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, HIV status, marital status or lifestyle.

- ... it leads to healthy relationships

Knowledge of our own and of our partner's body, and exchanging experiences and desires, leads to better mutual understanding. Understanding is one of the basic prerequisites for respect and acceptance.

Consensual and pleasurable sex contributes to better relationships between partners.

- ... it leads to decreases in sexual violence

Sexual abuse, exploitation and violence occur in all societies, and can take different manifestations; for example, marital rape and FGM. Many of these are not seen as sexual violence but as part of everyday life. Openness about sexuality acknowledges these as sexual violence, thereby increasing the opportunity to develop preventive programmes and policies.

### **Challenges to discussing sexuality**

Alongside the obvious need to discuss sexuality in an open manner, it has to be acknowledged that it is a challenging subject to discuss. This is partly due to the fact it is an intimate part of life and influenced by religious and cultural factors. Within religions and cultures, the meanings of sexuality and reproduction differ from country to country and from person to person. However, openness about sexuality can be realised everywhere in respectful, safe and non-judgemental environments, while respecting religious and cultural values and norms.

Promoting the positive sides of sexuality requires people to:

- become aware about the need for openness,
- learn about their own norms and values and acknowledge that these can vary,
- attain a positive attitude towards sexuality,
- acquire the skills to talk about sexuality, to negotiate and to refuse any act against their will, and
- learn how to cope with social and cultural norms and values in a changing society.

### **The participants of the conference adopted the following recommendations:**

We, participants of this conference call upon ourselves, policymakers and programme officers at all levels to:

- talk about sexuality in a positive way,
- acknowledge people's sexual rights, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, HIV status, marital status or lifestyle,
- promote open, evidence-based comprehensive sexuality information and education,
- promote skills to ensure people can discuss and negotiate safe and consensual sexual behaviour and interactions,
- ensure the availability of non-judgemental counselling services so that people can get the information and support they need for safe and pleasurable sexual behaviour,
- improve and expand sexual and reproductive health services for all,
- guarantee the availability and accessibility of sexual and reproductive health supplies, including male and female condoms,
- call upon governments and legislators to adopt and implement laws and policies that safeguard sexual health and to finance these accordingly,
- ensure meaningful participation of all the different target groups in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy and programmes,

in order to enable all people to fully enjoy their rights and entitlements, and to experience their sexuality in a safe, healthy and respectful manner.

### **What about sex? Let's talk about sex!**

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