



BREAKING TABOOS: THE CASE FOR INTEGRATING COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION INTO UNIVERSITY CURRICULA IN PAKISTAN, AN OPINION PAPER

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Introduction

Pakistan, home to over 220 million people, has one of the largest youth populations globally, with approximately 64% under the age of 30. A significant portion of this youth is enrolled in universities and higher education institutions. Yet, despite this demographic dividend, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) remain taboo in public discourse and virtually absent from educational policy particularly at the university level. In a country grappling with high maternal mortality, increasing rates of unsafe abortions, early marriages, sexual violence, and gender inequality, the exclusion of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) from curricula is both a public health oversight and a human rights failure. This opinion paper argues that integrating CSE into university curricula in Pakistan is not only justified but urgently required to empower students, improve public health, and uphold international and national commitments to SRHR.

Why University Level CSE Is Essential

1. Youth at Universities Face Real-Life SRHR Challenges

University students in Pakistan are at a transitional phase in life gaining independence, making decisions about relationships, marriage, and in many cases, sexual behavior. Yet they receive little to no formal education about sexuality, contraception, reproductive rights, or consent. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2019), a large number of Pakistani youth are unaware of basic reproductive health facts, and rely on peers, social media, or misinformation for guidance. This can lead to unsafe sexual practices, unintended pregnancies, and psychological trauma.

2. SRHR is a Public Health Priority

Pakistan continues to struggle with poor SRHR outcomes. The maternal mortality ratio is 186 per 100,000 live births (World Bank, 2021), and unsafe abortions remain a leading cause of maternal deaths. The unmet need for family planning stands at 17% (PDHS, 2018), while knowledge about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remains dangerously low among the youth. A 2021 report by Aahung, a leading SRHR organization in Pakistan, found that university students expressed a deep need for structured education on menstruation, reproductive anatomy, contraception, and respectful relationships. Comprehensive Sexuality Education, as defined by UNESCO (2018), is evidence-based, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive education that helps

individuals make informed choices about their bodies and relationships. Studies globally confirm that CSE delays the age of first sexual activity, reduces STIs, and fosters respectful, consensual relationships (UNESCO, 2018; Haberland & Rogow, 2015).

3. Empowering Through Knowledge and Respect

CSE promotes not only health but values of dignity, equality, and consent is crucial in a context where sexual harassment and gender-based violence are widespread. University and colleges campuses in Pakistan have reported increasing cases of harassment, but very few students are aware of what constitutes harassment, how to report it, or how to access support services (Shaukat & Anwar, 2020). CSE modules can help students recognize abusive behavior, foster mutual respect, and build emotional intelligence.

Overcoming Cultural Resistance

One of the most common arguments against sexuality education is that it conflicts with cultural or religious norms. However, this argument is based on a misconception. CSE is not about promoting sexual activity but it is about promoting informed, safe, and respectful decisions. Countries with conservative values like Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Iran have already introduced tailored CSE models that reflect their cultural contexts (UNFPA, 2015). Similarly, Pakistan can and must do the same by involving educators, religious scholars, and public health experts in curriculum development. Another concern is the already overburdened university curriculum. However, CSE can be incorporated within existing courses such as psychology, public health, ethics, or general education modules without overloading students. It can also be offered through non-credit workshops, peer education programs, and online learning platforms.

Conclusion

The exclusion of Comprehensive Sexuality Education from university curricula in Pakistan has serious consequences currently. It leaves millions of young people uninformed, vulnerable, and unequipped to handle essential aspects of their health and relationships. In LMIC Asian country facing a reproductive health crisis, integrating CSE into higher education is no longer optional it is imperative.

Universities must play a transformative role by providing not just academic knowledge, but life skills that foster critical thinking, empathy, and responsibility. As, Comprehensive, rights-based, and culturally appropriate SRHR education is the foundation for a healthier and more equitable Pakistan. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan should initiate a national dialogue with public health professionals, Islamic scholars, educators, and student representatives to design CSE content suited for university-level learners. SRHR must be seen not as a threat to cultural identity, but as a pathway to dignity, health, and empowerment for all.

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