

# RELIGIOUS VALUES, BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS IN AGE-APPROPRIATE SEXUALITY EDUCATION



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## Introduction

Religion remains an important variable or factor across the world. Providing guidance in issues relating to belief and practice, religion has emerged as a key issue in the uptake or acceptance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in different parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> How individuals, families, organisations, institutions, etc. respond to CSE is influenced by religion to a significant extent. Whereas the dominant critique has been that religion is a hindrance to CSE,<sup>2</sup> religion is also a facilitator or enabler for CSE. This report seeks to present an overview of the faith values, beliefs and teachings related to sexuality education. Although it adopts an expansive approach, it leans more towards the African context, with the impact of religion in the delivery of CSE in East and Southern Africa dominating.

The focus on religion is motivated by the critical role that religion plays in the lives of many individuals and communities across the world. This report cites the following passage at considerable length as it



brings out some of the key factors in the discourse on religion and CSE:

First, religion is a socialization agent much like parents or peers, but it has received considerably less attention.... Organized religions have a powerful ability to establish norms and then to reinforce these normative beliefs and values by differentially promoting and sanctioning certain actions. Religious institutions also create religious communities that share these values, and the religious communities can exert a level of social control on the individual members' behaviors. Secondly, sexuality is of particular relevance to religious institutions, as most religious traditions specifically address human sexuality in their respective doctrines.... Therefore, by addressing sexuality, religious traditions are recognizing the importance of sexuality as a human experience and consequently its relevance to one's spiritual and religious life. Furthermore, many religious traditions approach sexuality from a positive perspective, which is a marked departure from sociocultural tendencies to pathologize sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

1. See, e.g., Ubisi (2023),

2. See, e.g. Mokonga and Muchibwe (2023) and Ngabaza (2022).

3. Freedman-Doan et al 2013: 248.

An earlier study by Faith to Action Network also highlighted the importance of, among others, taking

religion into account when programming on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR):

A range of socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors were identified as either barriers to more effective delivery of SRHR or the reasons why there has been limited progress in this regard. Conspiracy theories, conservatism, multiple religious interpretations combined with lack of a clear stance from religious leadership, stigmatisation, are some of the challenges which were regularly cited by participating organisations.<sup>4</sup>

The report provides an extended background to the dynamics of religion, values, beliefs and teachings on CSE as this helps to contextualise the issues at hand. It is envisaged that this will contribute towards an appreciation of the complexity characterising

the field. The investment in clarifying the interface between religion, values, beliefs and teachings on the one hand, and CSE on the other, is due to the conviction that CSE is valuable. Thus:

According to research, quality CSE improves children and young peoples' sexual knowledge, self-confidence and esteem, positively changes attitudes, gender and social norms, strengthens decision-making and communication skills and builds self-efficacy.<sup>5</sup>

4. Faith to Action Network 2014: 49.

5. Wangamati (2020)

## Defining Terms



### Comprehensive Sexuality Education

How to name CSE remains an ongoing challenge. Given that the definitions are not neutral, but

stem from particular worldviews, there is serious contestation regarding the most appropriate term to be used. First, however, is the (widely popular) UNESCO definition:

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.<sup>6</sup>

6. UNESCO 2018: 16.

While it would be important to provide details relating to the preceding definition, for the purposes of this report it is helpful to proceed to indicate that there has been notable resistance to this particular interpretation of CSE (without suggesting that all those who oppose it have read and processed it). Some religious (and, often, traditional and political) leaders, including in some parts of Africa, have argued that CSE leads children to sexual immorality

and that it sexualises them early.<sup>7</sup> Others charge that the emphasis on human rights and dignity in CSE is a strategy to smuggle in issues relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI). Writing with special reference to India and Bangladesh, Gunasekara makes the following submission about the religious right's efforts to control gender roles, sexuality and fertility:

These tropes, relating to the amoral nature of CSE content and implications for premature sexual behaviour of young people, can be seen as ideological tools that reaffirm the importance of the traditional family, fixed gender roles, and the return to an age of moral superiority and religious and cultural authenticity.<sup>8</sup>

The term "sexuality" in CSE is a trigger for some religious leaders who regard sex and sexuality as spaces imbued with sacrality, to be kept well out of reach of children, adolescence and youth. As this report shall highlight below, this has led to the emergence of alternative terms. However, given the overarching need of ensuring that children, adolescents and youth attain life-saving competencies as regards sex and sexuality and in interpersonal relationships, most terms retain the reference to sex. Thus:

- Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)
- Sex Education
- Sexuality Education
- Sexuality and Reproductive Health (SRH)<sup>9</sup>

## Sexuality Education

Sexuality education is a broad term and has different meanings for different people and organisations. Sexuality education comes under different labels, including:

- Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)
- Holistic Sexuality Education
- Life and Living Skills



7. See, e.g., Bweyale and Sekaye (2023)

8. Gunasekara (2017): 11.

9. Khan et al (2020): 3.

The multiplicity of terms, however, has its own advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it allows those who have serious misgivings with the term, "CSE" to generate and utilise less contentious labels for the same undertaking. Some religious groups have settled for this option. On the other hand, there is the concern that those who opt for alternative labels might not always cover all the key themes that are envisaged by "CSE." In particular, there is the potential and real challenge that sensitive issues relating to sex and sexuality will either be skirted or receive partial coverage. Perhaps the various stakeholders (including government, school authorities, teachers, religious leaders, parents, etc.) could have minimum requirements that must be met, irrespective of how they label their intervention. What remains clear, however, is that the faith community is a key stakeholder

in ensuring that adolescents and youth access sexuality education. Thus, "...there is a need for more engagement with faith actors to explore the possibilities of engagement within CSE and areas of existing overlap, not the barriers to CSE. This includes capacity strengthening through trainings, dialogues, and value clarification processes."<sup>10</sup>

In order to address the concern that CSE might expose young learners to issues of sexuality that are beyond their age, there has been the move to lay emphasis on "age-appropriate sexuality education."<sup>11</sup> This is often accompanied with the descriptor, "culturally sensitive"<sup>12</sup> sexuality education.

Participants from diverse faith backgrounds made the following recommendation:

In the African context, the term "Comprehensive Sexuality" poses challenges, and the following alternatives have been proposed: "contextual sexuality education" or using inclusive language like "life skills," which encompasses various aspects. In Islamic settings, incorporating "puberty education" can facilitate communication. For Benin, "Education à la santé sexuelle," and for Burkina Faso and Senegal, "Education à la santé reproductive," are suggested. Adding "adapté à l'âge" emphasizes age-appropriate education. It is advised to avoid using "sexuality" in isolation and to steer clear of the term "rights".<sup>13</sup>

Overall, there is an understanding that the exercise under discussion (namely, CSE) involves, among others, adolescents and youth accessing knowledge relating to sex and sexuality, bodily integrity, as well as health and well-being. There is evidence relating to the importance of approaching CSE within a faith-based context with cultural

sensitivity and a commitment to the principles of inclusivity, respect, and upholding human dignity. In this regard, balancing religious values with accurate, age-appropriate, and evidence-based information is essential to ensure the well-being and holistic development of individuals within their respective religious traditions.

10. Wilkson et al 2019: 13.

11. See, e.g., Faith to Action Network 2019-2020 Annual Report: 11.

12. See, e.g., Mukoro (2017)

13. Faith to Action Network (2023): 8.

## Values, Beliefs and Teachings

In reality, the three terms (values, beliefs and teachings) have different meanings. However, they are closely related in religious contexts and this report shall discuss them together. In particular, values drive the beliefs and teachings of the

religions in relation to CSE. While there are many definitions of values, the contention that, “[V]alues express what people believe to be good or bad, and what they think should or should not be done,”<sup>14</sup> is a sound one. This is

Values are the windows or spectacles through which every human being and every human community looks at the world and determines what is worth pursuing and what is worth reviewing and abandoning. Values are the tools we invent, acquire and develop to make decisions about personal lives and relationships, social organization, cultural engagements and political activity. They guide us in what we choose and what we reject and why.<sup>15</sup>

Religions invest in CSE (and its variants) due to the values that they hold dear. For the current report, five dimensions are relevant here. First, the faith community engages in/promotes (or resists) CSE on the basis of its own interpretation of its values. Second, there is an anticipation that the adolescents and young people will be empowered by the values that they gain from religion to respond

to the various themes or issues in CSE. Third, it is possible that religions might prefer or adopt some interpretations of values, beliefs and teachings on CSE, while overlooking alternative interpretations of the same. Thus, there is the need for faith communities to constantly and deeply search within their traditions for diverse interpretations of their values, beliefs and teachings.<sup>16</sup> Fourth, it is always important to acknowledge internal dynamics and variations regarding CSE within specific religions. Thus, it is difficult to make assumptions about a particular religion's approach to CSE, without taking into account such as national contexts.<sup>17</sup> Fifth, it is helpful to recognise that although professional individuals who are vested with delivering CSE, such as teachers, are supposed to be guided by the demands of the profession, in reality their personal faith commitment sometimes influence their approach to CSE. In other instances, teachers might not deliver CSE out of fear of the religious beliefs of the parents of the learners.<sup>18</sup> Further, the teachers themselves, as members of faith communities, can experience conflicts in relation to religion, cultural background and gender inequality in implementing CSE.<sup>19</sup>



14. Rocass (2005).

15. Kaulemu (2022): 27.

16. The Contextual Bible Study (CBS) methodology, for example, is very effective in bringing out alternative interpretation of biblical passages.

17. For example, a particular religion/denomination might be fully supportive of CSE in one country/region, while the same religion/denomination opposes CSE in another country/region.

18. Mahoso and Finestone 2023: 62-63.

19. Shibuya et al (2023).

## Religious Values, Beliefs and Teachings on Comprehensive Sexuality Education



Religious values, beliefs and teachings on CSE are derived from different sources. It is helpful to appreciate the fact that there are internal debates within the different religions regarding the ranking of specific sources for these. Thus, for example, “religions of the book” such as Christianity and Islam place emphasis on sacred texts such as the Bible and the Quran, respectively. However, two major issues emerge: first, the overall authority of these sources in relation to other sources of authority, and, second, how specific texts addressing particular themes should be interpreted. Key here is the fact that some interpretations can be regarded as progressive, accommodating and life giving, while other interpretations are on the opposite end of the scale.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the sacred texts, there are other sources of authority in these religions. For example, these include the Sunnah (the Prophet Muhammad’s example, deeds, and customs); and *ijtihad* (the interpretations and deductions of Muslim religious leaders) in Islam.<sup>21</sup> Different Christian

groups also have different sources of authority (e.g., senior leaders, traditional teachings, independent ethical reflection, etc.).

This implies that the values, beliefs and teachings outlined below are often approached in the light of other sources of authority. Overall, religious leaders utilise the sacred texts, beliefs and teachings of their traditions to empower children, adolescents and youth to navigate the challenges of growing up. They also see CSE empowering them to recognise the power of acting in solidarity/accompaniment with young people, including responding to the stigmatisation of teenage girls when they fall pregnant out of wedlock. Thus: “Our value systems compel us to demonstrate love and compassion to our daughters in their hour of need.”<sup>22</sup> This is captured by the UNESCO Southern Africa and INERELA Religious Leaders’ Toolkit on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights which describes the toolkit in the following way:

20. See, e.g., Nelson-Pallmeyer (2003) on violence in the Bible and the Quran.

21. See, e.g., Oweidat (2019).

22. Faith to Action Network et al, “Interfaith Brief” (n.d.): 4.

It has learning objectives and activities that the religious leaders can utilise in order to promote ASRHR in their places of worship and in the larger community. It also has suggestions for religious exhortations (known as sermons or bayaan in some communities of faith). These exhortations can be adjusted to fit different settings (e.g. from the pulpit, at weddings, funerals, birthday parties, graduation celebrations and other events).<sup>23</sup>

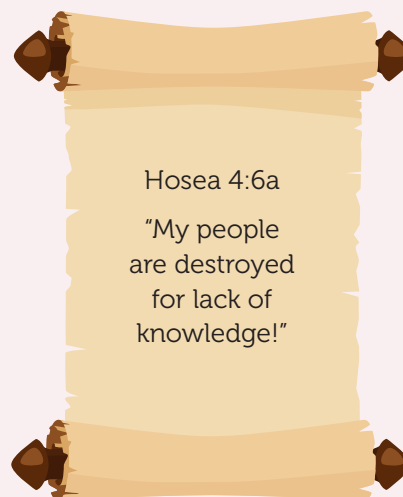
Whereas Wangamati (2020) divides the teaching of sexuality education into three separate and distinct approaches, namely, i) faith and culture-based, ii) public health, and, iii) the rights-based approaches,<sup>24</sup> this report contends that most religious groups and FBOs actually combine these in their delivery of, or attitude towards, CSE. They utilise the values of their faith traditions to promote public health and rights-based approaches.<sup>25</sup>

### The Right to Acquire Knowledge

Religious engagement with CSE is motivated by the conviction that the learners have the right to acquire knowledge. Thus, for example, in the face of sexual abuse (including of minors), teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs ) (including HIV), challenging relationships (e.g. with parents, peers, teachers, authority figures, etc.), religions encourage children, adolescents and young people to acquire knowledge that will equip them to navigate these challenges more effectively.

### Christianity

For the Christians, the Bible is often cited as actively promoting seeking knowledge for all people. One popular and oft-cited verse is:



This passage is deployed by Christians to justify the teaching of age- and –context appropriate CSE in schools, churches, homes and communities. It is read as highlighting the relevance/urgency of knowledge (of all things) and exposing the danger of ignorance. The central argument here is that knowledge is qualitative superior to ignorance, which leads to doom and destruction. In this scheme, CSE is strategic as it seeks to systematically increase

23. UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa and INERELA (2021): 10.

24. Wangamati (2020). According to her: "Different approaches are used in teaching sexuality education. These include faith- and culture-based, public health and rights-based approaches. The faith- and culture-based approaches believe that sexuality education should impart cultural and religious "moralistic" views on sexuality with the purpose of preventing adolescents and young people from engaging in premarital or extramarital sex....Public health approaches are propelled by health concerns; their aim is to impart knowledge that will help adolescents and young people to protect themselves from sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs), and unintended pregnancies...This approach teaches the use of contraceptives as well as interpersonal and communication skills that help young people avoid risks and pursue their goals in life....The rights-based approach emphasises the principles of SRHR with content beyond pregnancy and disease prevention."

25. See, e.g., Serour (2019)

knowledge, while removing ignorance. Other biblical passages relating to the importance of acquiring knowledge, the responsibility of parents and the

churches to guide children and adolescents, are also used to support CSE. Thus:

In Christianity, various biblical verses offer guidance on matters related to youth, morality, and family. Proverbs, particularly Proverbs 3:1, Proverbs 5:7-14, and Proverbs 22:6, emphasize the importance of wisdom, discipline, and training up a child. Exodus 20:13-14 and 1 Corinthians 6:18 address the sanctity of life and the avoidance of immoral behaviour. In 1 Timothy 4:11-16, the scripture encourages youth not to be despised, and Matthew 19:14 records Jesus' affirmation that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children.

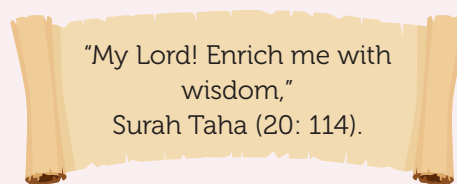
The story of Jesus in the temple, found in Luke 2:41-52, underscores the significance of parental responsibility. Other biblical references such as 1 Thessalonians, the Song of Solomon (Canticles), Psalms, 2 Timothy 2:22, and the books of Corinthians further contribute to the Christian perspective on youth, morality, and familial relationships. The parable of the prodigal son, narrated in Luke 15:11-32, highlights the themes of repentance, forgiveness, and the challenges faced by the younger generation.<sup>26</sup>

## Islam

Islam places emphasis on searching for knowledge. Indeed, seeking knowledge is one of the requirements that comes with being a Muslim.<sup>27</sup> The Quran enjoins people to pray to Allah for wisdom, understanding and closeness.

Islam, therefore, actively motivates its followers to seek knowledge and maintains that there is no contradiction between scientific knowledge and religious knowledge. In the Quran and the hadith, the quest for knowledge is promoted. These include:

God will raise up, by many degrees, those of you who



believe and those who have been given knowledge: He is fully aware of what you do. [Qur'an, 58:11]

He has subjected all that is in the heavens and the earth for your benefit, as a gift from Him. There truly are signs in this for those who reflect. [Qur'an, 45:13]

26. Faith to Action Network (2023): 8. See also, inter alia, Proverbs 1:5; Jeremiah 3:15; Proverbs 22:17; Proverbs 23:12; Philippians 1:9; Exodus 31:3; 2 Peter 1: 5;

27. See, e.g., Yasin et al (2023).

"Whoever takes a path in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to walk in one of the paths to Paradise. Indeed the angels will lower their wings in great pleasure with the one who seeks knowledge." [Prophet Muhammad, PBUH]<sup>28</sup>

The manual on CSE (they have called it, Age-Appropriate Comprehensive Sexuality Education) by the Kenya Muslim Youth Development Organisation (KMYDO) cites the following, "Say: Are they equal to those who know, and those who do not know?" (Quran 39: 9).<sup>29</sup>

Overall, there is the conviction by the faith community in its diversity that children, adolescents and youth have the right to acquire relevant knowledge through CSE.

### Promoting Health and Well-being

Faith communities are actively engaged in CSE due to their strong belief that they are responsible for

the health and well-being of children, adolescents and youth. They encourage families to invest in protecting children, adolescents and youth. In the face of multiple challenges, faith communities regard CSE as a valuable strategy of prevention. Thus, "Religious actors would like to prevent health complications such as fistulas, preventing early pregnancies, raising responsible young people. Ignoring these issues is deemed tantamount to neglecting a significant problem."<sup>30</sup>

An overview of the faith-based manuals on CSE highlights the importance of ensuring that children, adolescents and youth remain on the path of moral uprightness. In particular, faith communities are keen for young people to avoid drug and substance abuse, STIs (including HIV) and teenage pregnancy.<sup>31</sup> In the Interfaith Brief on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, faith leaders from Southern Africa made the following affirmation:

As communities of faith, we are called upon to attend to the "total person," that is, address the person holistically. We are enjoined by our different religious traditions to address the physical, social, spiritual, emotional, occupational, intellectual, political, security, economic and environmental dimensions of wellness. Consequently, issues relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights are integral to our identity as communities of faith. We are acutely aware of the numerous SRHR challenges that adolescents and young people in our region face.<sup>32</sup>

Given the alarm that has been generated by child sexual abuse within faith communities, there has been an investment by the faith communities

to equip children to be on high alert, as well as to minimise the harm of children in places of worship or by religious leaders. For example, The

28. Ramlan (2021).

29. Kenya Muslim Youth Development Organisation (KMYDO) (2017): 9.

30. Faith to Action Network (2023): 6.

31. See e.g., INERELA (n.d.)

32. Faith to Action Network et al. (n.d.): 1

United Methodist Church in Zimbabwe develop, "A Guide to Respond to Sexual Abuse and Gender-based Violence in Faith-based Schools"<sup>33</sup> and the "Contextual Bible Study Manual on Sexual Abuse and Gender-based Violence in Faith-based Schools"<sup>34</sup> to respond to this particular challenge.

The focus on promoting health and well-being also relates to the need to initiate healthy conversations on the sensitive theme of sex and sexuality within faith communities. This emerges from the awareness that sex-negative theologies tend to demonise sex and sexuality, thereby creating or deepening cultures of silence, secrecy and shame.<sup>35</sup> Faith communities are striving to embrace sex-positive theologies and equip young people to have positive attitudes, while upholding the moral ideals within their faith traditions. The following citation from within the Muslim community helps to clarify this appreciation of positive values within the religion:



We need to be reminded that the Qur'an is a book of guidance, and Allah, the Almighty, discusses all the aspects of our life, including reproduction, creation, family life, menstruation, and even ejaculation. The Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him) discussed many aspects of sexuality and sexual life, including sexual positions with his companions.<sup>36</sup>

### Addressing Human Rights/ Promoting Human Dignity

Faith communities also approach CSE as providing opportunities to pursue the issue of human rights or, as the faith communities prefer to say, human dignity.<sup>37</sup> Many religious traditions emphasize the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. This

value can be applied to discussions on sexuality education by promoting respect for oneself and others, emphasizing consent, and addressing issues of discrimination, harassment, and violence.

With religions being implicated in child marriage, there have been efforts to utilise CSE to address this challenge. Comprehensive Sexuality Education

33. The United Methodist Church Zimbabwe Episcopal Area (2020a)

34. The United Methodist Church Zimbabwe Episcopal Area (2020b)

35. See, e.g. Kaoma (2018)

36. Khan et al (2020): 23.

37. See, e.g., Long and Paterson (2016).

equips adolescent girls and young women to be better prepared, as they would be possessing greater awareness. Some reviews have highlighted the fact that women and girls tend to have less access to information on sexual and reproductive health and rights.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, CSE is regarded

as an effective medium for empowering them "...to make healthy, deliberate and respectful decisions about sexuality and relationships."<sup>39</sup> An earlier study that focused on Southern Africa established that religious leaders were motivated to support CSE by the values, beliefs and teachings of their traditions:

Whereas it has been generally expressed that religious leaders tend to be opposed to rights-based approaches, arguing that there are fixed "divine standards" that must be upheld, the study found that respondents across the different countries were convinced that children had inalienable rights to information, quality health-care services and full knowledge of their bodies<sup>40</sup>

While the theme of sexual diversity in general, or the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQI) persons continues to be divisive within faith communities globally, there is a growing awareness of the need to uphold the rights of LGBTQI persons. In particular, some faith communities and faith-based organisations (FBOs) are challenging violence against LGBTQI persons.<sup>41</sup> Further, the promotion of freedom of religion (FoRB) within faith communities has the potential to secure the rights of LGBTQI persons.<sup>42</sup> This emphasis on the rights and dignity of all persons has also facilitated valuable interactions between some religious leaders and sex workers in Africa.<sup>43</sup> It is such developments that have enabled some religious leaders and FBOs to embrace interfaith approaches that promote CSE. They utilise passages from the Bible and the Quran, and other religious teachings that every human being is "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139: 14) to accept the coverage of sensitive topics in CSE.

### Providing Guidance on Navigating Life



38. See, e.g., Draft Report (2023): 34.

39. UNESCO (2021): 11.

40. INERELA (2016): 13

41. See, e.g., Matela (2020)

42. See, e.g., Endsjø (2020)

43. See, e.g., INERELA (n.d.)

Faith communities regard CSE (in its various renditions) as integral to their mission. They have a vested interest in how individuals and families grow and flourish, from the cradle to the grave. They understand themselves as having the sacred duty of ensuring that they should equip children, adolescents and youth with the relevant knowledge and skills to make informed decisions in life. For example, many Christians cite the passage, "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (Psalm 22: 6, NRSV) to underscore the importance of CSE.<sup>44</sup>

Religious teachings often emphasize the importance of sexual integrity, which can encompass concepts such as self-control, modesty, and the avoidance of exploitative or harmful sexual behaviours. Discussions on CSE can explore how these values can be applied to personal decision-making and responsible sexual behaviour. For faith communities,



the overall goal or mission is to promote the holistic development of individuals. They regard CSE as having an important role to play in this quest. This has been explained in detail the following words:

A central goal of comprehensive sexuality education is the development of interpersonal skills in the areas of communication, decision-making, assertiveness, and peer refusal. Faith communities offer a variety of opportunities for people to develop significant relationships beyond the nuclear family with teachers, mentors, and clergy. In acquiring these skills, people develop a sense of self as they learn how to relate to others. Many religious traditions affirm sexuality as a divinely bestowed blessing and assist people in developing the capacity for caring, supportive, non-coercive, and mutually pleasurable sexual relationships. Comprehensive sexuality education programs provide people with the skills and knowledge they need to develop their own moral capacity. Comprehensive sexuality education addresses abstinence and resisting pressure for sexual intercourse, and encourages the use of contraception and other sexual health measures when people do become sexually active.<sup>45</sup>

44. Faith to Action Network (2023)

45. Jones (2011): 15.

## Facilitating Greater Parental Involvement

An analysis of the various manuals produced by faith communities (denominational and interfaith) shows that there is keen interest in ensuring that parents and guardians are actively involved in the physical, mental and spiritual development of their young people. Faith communities regard CSE as providing a platform for parents to have greater interest in, and opportunities for interacting with, young people. Both Christianity and Islam consider parents and guardians as the first and most critical teachers. For example, Islam emphasises that “[L]ove and honesty, faith and love for goods, intimacy, unity and communion can tackle numerous problems.”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the facilitator’s guide on the interfaith caravan on family planning and reproductive health uses various citations from the sacred texts of Christianity and Islam to promote flourishing within families.<sup>47</sup>

The strategic role of parents in CSE can be discerned in that they are meant to reinforce what the learners would have internalised at school (and, ideally, from the religious leaders as well). There is a serious disconnect if the learner realises that parents (for whatever reason) dismiss what s/he would have imbibed while at school or from the religious leaders.



Further, parents are also exhorted to be on high alert, as many young people are “switched on,” that is accessing information relating to sex and sexuality in digital spaces.<sup>48</sup> While the fear is that young people might access problematic ideas relating to sex and sexuality online, it is also important to acknowledge the opportunities available for providing effective CSE online. Some organisations utilised WhatsApp to deliver CSE to adolescents and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>49</sup>

46. Aran and Nayebkabar (2018): 181.

47. Faith to Action Network et al (2019)

48. See, e.g., UNESCO (2020)

49. See, e.g., IPPF (n.d.)

## Challenges

Whereas the report has so far highlighted the positive role of faith communities in promoting CSE, it is helpful to summarise some of the accompanying challenges. Since a separate report is required to do justice to these themes, this section shall draw attention to the key issues without discussing them at length.<sup>50</sup>

- **Limited Access to Accurate Information on Comprehensive Sexuality Education**

Many religious leaders do not have full access to information on CSE as delivered in schools. As a result, they are sometimes swayed by the alarmist reports that are generated by opponents of CSE. They are led to believe that CSE is ungodly, anti-religion, value-free and dangerous. This has led some religious leaders in, among others, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and Zambia to oppose CSE.

- **The Circulation of Conservative Religious and Political Agendas**

There are some individuals and groups who are generating and sustaining spirited opposition to CSE. They utilise various arguments, including citing sacred texts, formulating theological standpoints, deploying financial resources and other strategies to counter CSE. In the case of Africa, they also marshal the argument that CSE is being financed by the global North to recolonise the continent, that it is against African culture and that it is a ploy to smuggle in the issue of sexual diversity in Africa.<sup>52</sup> From the academic side, some allege that the current discourse needs to be decolonised, with African values receiving emphasis.



- **Perceived Threats to Parental Authority**

Some religious groups and individuals regard CSE as threatening the role of parents in teaching and guiding their children on matters of sexuality.<sup>53</sup> Concerns about the content and delivery of CSE programmes, particularly when they are implemented in schools, may arise from a desire to protect parental authority and control over the values and information conveyed to their children.

50. For a simplified but highly effective graphic, see, e.g. KIT (2023)

51. Faith to Action Network (2023): 6.

52. See, e.g., Nehuleni et al (2023)

53. See, e.g., Ngabaza (2022)

## Proposed Strategies



The contribution of the faith community to the successful delivery of CSE remains highly strategic. The following strategies (shortened and summarised) have been effective in attracting and enhancing the contribution of the faith community:

- Flexibility and Accommodation in Naming the initiative**  
It is strategic to embrace names and concepts that are used locally, including those that evoke traditional offices/personalities that were responsible for sexuality education (aunts, uncles, etc.), as well as context-specific adaption.<sup>54</sup> This also implies linking CSE to local/national SRHR issues.<sup>55</sup>
- Intergenerational Safe Space Conversations**  
Bringing religious leaders/parents and adolescents/young people into the same space for conversations is very important. It enables religious leaders/parents to become more familiar with the issues that adolescents and young people are grappling with.<sup>56</sup>
- Ongoing Capacity Enhancement of Religious Leaders**  
Due to the rapid changes in the field of SRHR, as well as the revolving responsibilities of religious leaders, their ongoing capacity enhancement is critical. This will enable them to sharpen their knowledge and skills on CSE, thereby enabling them to accompany parents and young people.
- Co-creation of Resources for Ownership**  
The availability of updated faith-based manuals on CSE is extremely relevant to the success of the engagement of religious leaders. However, in order to deepen the quality and to promote ownership, it is strategic to promote the co-creation of resources to be used in trainings.
- Collaboration with Diverse Experts**  
For greater effectiveness, it is valuable for religious leaders to collaborate with diverse experts. This will enable them to gain a deeper appreciation of CSE and its contribution to the health and well-being of young people.

54. Faith to Action Network (2023): 7.

55. KIT (2023)

56. See, e.g., ActUbumbano (2022)

## Conclusion



Religious leaders and the faith community come to CSE from the vantage point of their values, beliefs and teachings. Whereas critics charge that this makes their approach parochial and runs the risk of refusing to uphold scientific findings, this report has highlighted the extent to which the same values give them an entry point. It is the values, beliefs and teachings of the faith community that equip them

to support CSE. Although some challenges remain, it can be safely argued that if the faith community was once a sleeping giant, now the same giant has stirred and is actively taking up a key role in contributing towards the health and well-being of children, adolescents and youth, as well as towards sustainable development.

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