

COMMON GROUND *Sexuality*



*C*ONTENTS

Introduction	2
Sexuality	4
Sexual Health	5
Sexual Rights	7
Sexuality Education	9
Values	11
Guiding Principles	13
Conclusion	16
Suggested Readings	17
Participants	19

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is part of human life. All human beings are sexual and have developed their sexuality from a variety of influences, including social, cultural, biological, economic, and educational factors. Sexuality shapes people's identity and relationships and is linked with gender power relations, health, economics, livelihoods, and social development.

Because sexuality is so multifaceted and sensitive an issue, there is often confusion about how best to address it. In order to address a broad range of people's needs for emotional as well as physical well-being it is important to expand the understanding of sexuality.

In India, sexuality has become a growing area of focus in the fields of gender and development, HIV/AIDS, human rights, reproductive health, education, violence prevention, legal issues, women's rights, and the media. Within all these areas, the understanding of sexuality varies and has been approached from different perspectives.

Because sexuality is so multifaceted and sensitive an issue, there is often confusion about how best to address it. Agencies sometimes address sexuality only within the context of physical health and disease prevention. In order to address a broad range of people's needs for emotional as well as physical well-being, it is important to expand the understanding of sexuality.

In order to do this, a group of agencies that work on sexuality and related issues evolved a consultative and collaborative process to develop a shared understanding of sexuality through a joint exploration of the values and principles that guide programs, services, and education efforts on sexuality. This led to a three-day meeting in Naukuchiatal, in May 1999, of activists, educators, researchers, and professionals from areas such as reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, mental health, gender and development, sexuality, violence prevention, women's rights, medicine, media, and donor agencies. This booklet is based on the discussions during the collaborative process.

This booklet has been developed to articulate common ground on sexuality and sexual health by integrating multiple perspectives from different fields. It is intended to act as a tool to inform program formulation, implementation and evaluation. It can be used for services, outreach, education, and advocacy on issues of sexuality.



COMMON
GROUND
Sexuality

Notions of sexuality, sexuality education, and sexual health and rights have different meanings in different contexts. Furthermore, these notions are understood differently by different people and organisations. For example, some traditional family planning programs and family life education programs have focussed primarily on the physical aspects of sexuality. Some other organisations adopt a broader understanding that includes mental, social, and cultural factors that influence sexuality.

Because these concepts are broader than any one narrow definition, there is value in weaving together multiple perspectives into a common, broad understanding of sexuality, sexuality education and sexual health and rights. This is important because a broader, holistic definition of sexuality more accurately reflects the needs and lives of women and men. It also helps different organisations to work together more efficiently and effectively.

SEXUALITY

Sexuality encompasses personal and social meanings as well as sexual behaviour and biology. A comprehensive view of sexuality includes social roles, personality, gender and sexual identity, biology, sexual behaviour, relationships, thoughts and feelings. The expressions of sexuality are influenced by various factors including social, ethical, economic, spiritual, cultural, and moral concerns.

Sexuality expressed positively, through consensual, mutually respectful and protected relationships, enhances well-being, health, and the quality of life.

Key elements of sexuality are that:

- ▶ All people are sexual, whether or not they engage in sexual acts or behaviour.
- ▶ People express their sexuality through both positive and negative attitudes and behaviors.
- ▶ Sexuality expressed positively, through consensual, mutually respectful and protected relationships, enhances well-being, health, and the quality of life.
- ▶ Sexuality expressed negatively, through violence, exploitation, or abuse, diminishes people's dignity and self-worth, and may cause long-term harm.
- ▶ Being sexual is not only about sexual acts and behaviour; it also includes thoughts, attitudes, and feelings.
- ▶ Sexual pleasure is expressed in a variety of ways that include emotional and biological responses.
- ▶ Society exerts strong controls on sexuality, especially women's sexuality, through social norms, values, and laws.
- ▶ The understanding of sexuality has considered only men's experiences and needs and has ignored, negated and devalued those of women.
- ▶ Many people are initiated into sexual activity in negative ways through experiences of abuse, coercion, or violence.

SEXUAL HEALTH

COMMON GROUND *Sexuality*

Sexuality and sexual health are concepts that are often used interchangeably. However, sexual health is a component of sexuality. A definition of sexual health is:

“Sexual health is women’s and men’s ability to enjoy and express their sexuality, and to do so free from risk of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, coercion, violence and discrimination. Sexual health also means being able to have an informed, enjoyable and safe sex life, based on self-esteem, a positive approach to human sexuality, and mutual respect in sexual relations. Sexual health enhances life, personal relations and the expression of one’s sexual identity. It is positively enriching, includes pleasure, and enhances self-determination, communication and relationships.”

– Health, Empowerment, Rights and Accountability (HERA) Statement.

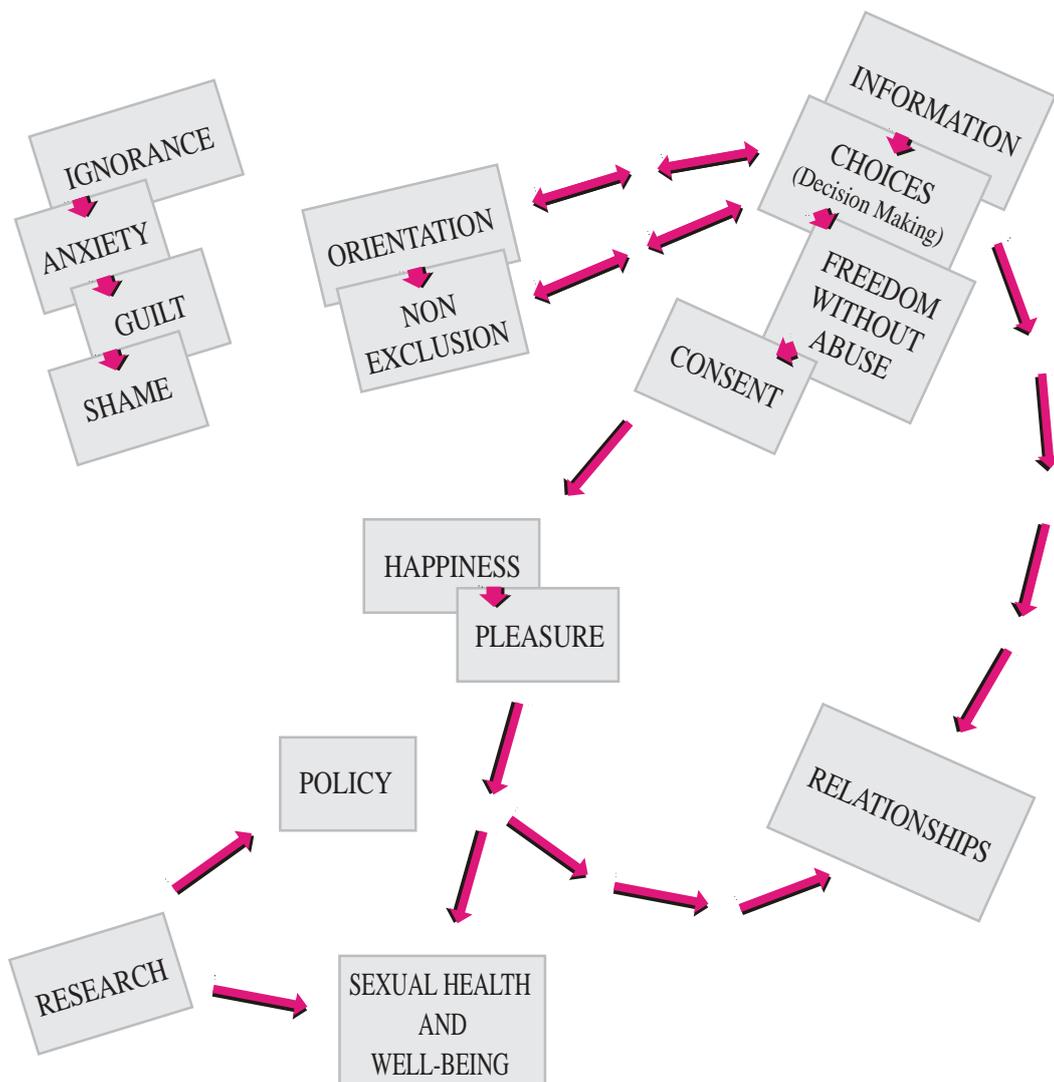
Sexual health, then, refers to a state of overall well being. Given this understanding of sexual health, programs and services can promote optimal sexual health and an affirmative view of sexuality by encouraging women and men, and, girls and boys to:

- ▶ Accept and be comfortable with one’s body and one’s sexuality.
- ▶ Be able to decide when and how one should develop and engage in consensual relationship/s and/or sexual activity.
- ▶ Have clarity about one’s values, and respect others’ values.
- ▶ Have an understanding of one’s needs, as well as those of one’s partner/s.
- ▶ Communicate respectfully one’s sexual needs to one’s partner/s.
- ▶ Enjoy sexual pleasure without guilt, fear or shame.
- ▶ Respect others’ rights, autonomy, sexual orientation, preferences, and values.

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- ▶ Respect others' bodies and bodily integrity.
- ▶ Express one's sexuality without violence, coercion, or exploitation.
- ▶ Protect oneself and one's partner(s) from infection and disease.
- ▶ Choose if, when, and how many children one wants.
- ▶ Seek information, services, resources, and options to enhance and optimise sexual health.



“Sexual rights are a fundamental element of human rights. They encompass the right to experience a pleasurable sexuality, which is essential in and of itself, and, at the same time, is a fundamental vehicle of communication and love between people. Sexual rights include the right to liberty and autonomy in the responsible exercise of sexuality.”

– HERA Statement

Because sexuality is a basic part of being human, the notion of sexual rights is part of the larger body of human rights. Human rights affirm the dignity, worth, respect, equality, and autonomy of all people in all aspects of their lives. Sexual rights are necessary in order for women and men to express and enjoy their sexuality, and promote overall health through access to information, education and services regarding their sexual health.

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Therefore,

- ▶ Sexual rights are not privileges or favours, but are entitlements of all women and men.
- ▶ Sexual rights protect the individual as well as the collective.
- ▶ The concept of sexual rights, like that of human rights, provides a framework to ensure non-discrimination, and therefore cannot be used to privilege any one individual or group over another.
- ▶ Sexual rights are as valid as other rights such as the right to food, health and housing.
- ▶ Sexual rights affirm entitlements, such as the right to bodily integrity, as well as rights that protect against violations, such as the right not to be coerced into sexual activity.

- ▶ Sexual rights are based on certain ethical principles (Correa and Petchesky). These are the principles of:
 - **Bodily Integrity** – the right to security in and control over one’s body. This means that all women and men have a right to not only be protected from harm to the body but also to enjoy the full potential of the body.
 - **Personhood** – the right to self-determination. This means that all women and men have a right to make decisions for themselves.
 - **Equality** – all people are equal and should be recognized as such without discrimination based on age, caste, class, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, religious or other beliefs, sexual preference, or other such factors.
 - **Diversity** – respect for difference. Diversity in terms of people’s sexuality and other aspects of their lives should not be a basis for discrimination. The principle of diversity should not be misused to violate any of the previous three ethical principles.

Sexual Rights Include:

- ▶ The right to sexual pleasure without fear of infection, disease, unwanted pregnancy, or harm.
- ▶ The right to sexual expression and to make sexual decisions that are consistent with one’s personal, ethical and social values.
- ▶ The right to sexual and reproductive health care, information, education, and services.
- ▶ The right to bodily integrity and the right to choose if, when, how and with whom to be sexually active and engage in sexual relations with full consent.
- ▶ The right to enter relationships, including marriage, with full and free consent and without coercion.
- ▶ The right to privacy and confidentiality in seeking sexual and reproductive health care services.
- ▶ The right to express one’s sexuality without discrimination, and independent of reproduction.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION

COMMON GROUND *Sexuality*

In order for women and men to express their sexuality and to be free to make informed choices about their sexual health and behavior, there must be an enabling and supportive environment provided through education and services. Given that sexuality is a broad concept, sexuality education is both an informal and formal process. Sexuality education enables individuals, through information, skills building, and values clarification, to make choices about their sexuality and be in charge of their sexual lives. Sexuality education can be offered as a discrete activity or can be integrated into other activities, programs, and services depending on the context.

Ideally, sexuality education:

- ▶ Enhances well being and the quality of life.
- ▶ Affirms sexuality in a positive way.
- ▶ Acknowledges, accepts, and respects diversity of orientation, needs, views, practices, attitudes and preferences.
- ▶ Prevents violence, exploitation and abuse.
- ▶ Is conducted in a non-judgmental, non-threatening, and interactive manner.
- ▶ Is an ongoing process throughout all stages of life.
- ▶ Includes scientifically and medically accurate information about biology, anatomy, reproductive health, physiology, and sexual behaviour.
- ▶ Includes emotions, attitudes, values, and relationships.
- ▶ Includes skills building and the opportunity to practice decision making, communication and negotiation skills.
- ▶ Strengthens an individual's self-esteem and self-worth.

Sexuality education enables individuals, through information, skills building, and values clarification, to make choices about their sexuality and be in charge of their sexual lives.

- ▶ Empowers individuals to make their own choices through understanding and in accordance with their own values while respecting the values of others.
- ▶ Is available equally to both boys and girls without gender discriminatory values.
- ▶ Encourages gender equity and respect.
- ▶ Is conducted in a culturally and locally appropriate and sensitive manner.
- ▶ Is provided by educators, counselors, practitioners, and service providers who have the comfort, knowledge, and skills to discuss and communicate issues of sexuality and sexual health with others.

VALUES

COMMON GROUND *Sexuality*

Sexuality is greatly affected by how people think and feel, by their belief systems and those of the people around them. Because sexuality is complex and linked with so many other areas of life, it is important for us to be aware of the fact that people have personal values that give meaning to their lives and shape their behaviour. Values underlie how people express and act upon their sexuality. Values are dynamic – they change over time and are shaped by experience, belief systems, and the socio-cultural milieu within which people live.

Values may be congruent with each other or may be in conflict. A conflict does not imply that different values are mutually exclusive of each other. It might mean simply that certain values take primacy over others. There may be times when a person’s values co-exist in a state of tension. If this tension is resolved well, it can lead to a greater clarity, understanding, and sense of agency within individuals. Reflection and exposure to information also leads to a clarification of values.

Cultural and social values and norms also regulate women’s and men’s sexual and other behaviour. Some of these may be harmful to people’s health and well-being. For example, there is a ‘culture of silence’ around talking about issues of sexuality. Consequently, many people, especially women, do not seek professional help for reproductive health problems when they need it. They feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, or ashamed to talk about what is regarded as an intimate and private matter. Unfortunately, their fears are often justified because when they do muster up the courage to seek help, they are not treated with dignity or are judged negatively.

Because programs, services, and education about sexuality are operated by people and are a part of society, they are based on certain values. Programs, services and education about sexuality are not ‘value-free’ even if they are formulated on so-called ‘scientific’ or ‘clinical’ principles. Sexuality education, for example, however scientifically it may be designed, is not value free. As one of the participants at the meeting put it, “No education is neutral anywhere”. Some sexuality education

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programmes are based on a disease-prevention model, some use an abstinence-only framework and some others emphasise choice and informed decision-making.

Therefore, it is important for those who work on issues of sexuality to be aware of the values that underlie their work. When those who work on issues of sexuality are clear about their values, they will be more effective in their work. They will be then be able to better assist people in making choices about their sexual and reproductive lives. They will also be better equipped to enable individuals in resolving value conflicts in ways that increase autonomy.

Core Values

The basic values of choice, dignity, diversity, equality and respect underlie the concept of Human Rights. These affirm the worth of all people. Choice, dignity, diversity, equality and respect are words used frequently but what do each of them mean in the context of sexuality?

Choice: Making choices about one's sexuality freely, without coercion, and with access to comprehensive information and services, while respecting the rights of others.

Dignity: All individuals have worth regardless of their age, caste, class, gender, orientation, preferences, religion and other determinants of status.

Diversity: Acceptance that women and men express their sexuality in diverse ways and that there is a range of sexual behaviours, identities and relationships.

Equality: All women and men are equally deserving of respect and dignity, and should have access to information, services, and support to attain sexual well-being.

Respect: All women and men are entitled to respect and consideration whatever be their sexual choices or identities.

These values can and do sound abstract. It might at times, seem difficult to make a connection between these values and on working on issues of sexuality. Therefore, it might be useful to explore and articulate some guiding principles based on these values. These are principles that promote sexual well-being in women and men and girls and boys. These principles can be integrated into different strategies and mechanisms to address issues of sexuality. For example, they can be used to develop or evaluate curricula, policies, programmes, publications and services on sexuality.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

COMMON GROUND *Sexuality*

Affirmative Approach to Sexuality: Sexuality is a part of everyone's life. Sexuality is complex. It can be a pleasurable, satisfying and enriching part of life. It can also be painful, harmful and place one at risk of disease, violence and other unwanted negative consequences. Most of the time, the messages that people receive about sexuality centre around its negative aspects and evoke feelings of fear, shame or guilt. Most programmes deal only with the safety aspects of sexuality. They focus on unwanted pregnancy, STIs, and HIV, for example, as dangerous consequences of sexuality without acknowledging the fact that pleasure is an equally important aspect of sexuality. Using a positive, affirming approach to sexuality, rather than one based on fear, addresses both the pleasure and safety aspects of sexuality. A perspective that positively affirms sexuality encourages safer sexual practices, relationships and improved sexual well-being.

Autonomy and Self-Determination: Autonomy means that individuals have the ability to make choices and to make their own decisions. Women and men have the right to make their own free and informed choices about all aspects of their lives including their sexual lives. Their choices must be respected. Making decisions on behalf of others does not encourage or respect autonomy. For women and men to be able to make informed choices they must have full information about the range of options available.

Responsiveness to Changing Needs: Women's and men's needs for sexuality information and services change over time and throughout the life cycle. Also, with social, cultural, and technological changes, the range of options, issues, and concerns that emerge will be different over time. As people go through their life cycle, their sexual concerns change in keeping with corresponding physical, emotional, and social changes. For example, an older woman going through menopause requires specific gynecological services that are different from those that a younger woman might require.

Comprehensive Understanding of Sexuality: Because issues of sexuality are complex and affect many aspects of a person's life, programs and services must address and integrate emotional,

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psychosocial and cultural factors in planning and service delivery. For example, if people's self-esteem is diminished, they may not feel entitled to negotiating safer sexual behaviour; improving self-esteem enhances their desire and ability to take care of themselves.

Different women and men have different needs, identities, choices, and life circumstances. Therefore, all women and all men do not have the same sexual concerns.

Confidentiality and Privacy: Sexuality touches upon intimate aspects of people's lives. Individuals have a right to privacy and confidentiality. If people feel that their privacy and confidentiality are endangered, this will deter them from seeking information and services. Operationally this means that people have the right to not be identified, compelled to share information, and the right to not have information about them divulged to a third party. This translates into services and programs ensuring, for example, that counselling and health services are provided in spaces where confidentiality can be maintained and people feel safe enough to speak about their concerns without being overheard by others.

Cultural Sensitivity: Cultural perceptions about issues of sexuality differ among different groups and communities. Programs and services must consider local and cultural sensitivities. In order to be effective and accessible, the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs and services must be consonant with the cultural and community context. Considering cultural practices, traditions, beliefs and values of a community, and using culturally appropriate language enhances community acceptance of sexuality programs and services.

Diversity: Different women and men have different needs, identities, choices, and life circumstances. Therefore, all women and all men do not have the same sexual concerns. Programs must cater to the diversity among and within groups of people they serve. Also, programs need to consider that people may have special needs based on different factors such as urban or rural location, sexual orientation, illness, culture, age, or disability.

Gender Equity: Programs that are based on gender equity recognize and provide for both women and men, girls and boys, to have equitable access to information, services and education that promote sexual well-being. Messages and programs must cater to

COMMON GROUND *Sexuality*

needs that are specific to each gender, but must not perpetuate stereotypes or double standards about gender and sexuality. For example, program staff should be careful in their words and actions to not perpetuate the stereotype that young men, not women, need to learn about sexuality, and, that women, not men, need to know about contraception.

Prevent Violence, Exploitation and Abuse: Violence, exploitation and abuse are often the conditions under which people, especially women, experience their sexuality or initiation into sexual activity. Programs and services must emphasise that consent and equity between partners are necessary conditions for healthy sexual relationships. Consensual sexual relationships are based on mutual respect and concern for one's own and one's partners' physical, mental and sexual well-being.

Non-Judgmental Services and Programs: People have differing value systems and make different choices about sexuality. Providers and educators must respect the values that others hold and refrain from imposing their own values on others and judging others. A non-judgmental atmosphere encourages people to discuss their sexual concerns and to use sexuality information and services. For example, an unmarried sexually active heterosexual young woman as well as an unmarried sexually active homosexual older man need to feel comfortable enough to use a sexual health service that promises to cater to their needs.

Accessible Programs and Services: Accessibility entails more than availability of services. It includes issues of quality, confidentiality, staffing, and catering to a range of needs. Women and men are more likely to use and be responsive to programs and services that are non-threatening, provided by skilled and sensitive staff, available at times that do not conflict with their other obligations/ schedules, and provided in safe, accessible locations. For example, a sexual health clinic for young people is more accessible if it is located in a place that is well-connected by public transport and is known to offer a range of services. If the clinic is known to offer only treatment for STIs, chances are that not many young people will go there.

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CONCLUSION

This document has been intended to share perspectives from a variety of fields. The Guiding Principles and discussion of sexuality, sexual health, sexual rights, and sexuality education is a basic foundation to build upon and strengthen program services and education efforts.

Sexuality is as much about gender, rights, and values as it is about health.

Sexuality is a complex, multifaceted, and central area of people's lives. It is not only about sexual health, but about overall well-being and human development. Sexuality is as much about gender, rights, and values as it is about health.

As sexuality is increasingly addressed in programs and services, sharing perspectives and strategies can help how providers and educators enhance the sexual well-being of all women and men. This document is only a beginning to addressing issues of sexuality and promoting the sexual well-being of all women and men. Ensuring sexual health and creating a society where all people have a right to enjoy their sexuality will take sustained and long-term efforts. Sharing perspectives and building upon a common foundation is a step towards promoting the sexual well-being of all women and men and girls and boys.

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COMMON
GROUND
Sexuality

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NOTES