

**Let's Talk about Sex (an 2016 AWID Forum event planned with BodyWise Dance and GreeneWorks partners AJWS, CARE and IWHC) was organized around the belief that child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) is driven by the desire to control girls' sexuality.<sup>1</sup>**



Deeply rooted gender inequalities stemming from patriarchal norms and fear of female sexuality lead families to marry off their daughters early. This puts girls' rights, health, and education at great risk. It also traps girls and their families in a cycle of poverty by sharply limiting their livelihood opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

Because control of sexuality is a key driver of CEFM, those who seek to end the practice or to improve the overall status of girls need to be at ease with sexuality and its linkages with gender inequality. To bring about change, researchers need to study, programmers need to integrate and policymakers must address sexuality and its impact on the lives of girls.

Workshop participants were asked to respond to these questions:

*How did you find out about sex and what did you learn about it?*

*How did being a boy or girl impact what you learned?*

The responses to these questions made the connections between sexuality and gender abundantly clear. Understanding how fundamental the management of sexuality – especially girls' – is to other aspects of their lives, gives us insights into gender scripts. Although these scripts disproportionately constrain adolescent girls, they are imposed on *everyone*, and can foster risk-taking and unhealthy behaviors throughout people's lives.

The difficulties most people face in talking about sexuality reflects the ambivalence, double standards and even stigma surrounding sex. In most parts of the world, young people and adults alike lack basic information about their bodies and are uninformed about sexual and reproductive health and rights, autonomy, pleasure, and choice. This lack of knowledge, awareness and the skills necessary for negotiating healthy sexual relationships contributes to unintended pregnancy, the spread of sexually transmitted infections and coercion. Harmful misconceptions about human biology and behavior reinforce gender stereotypes and harmful practices.<sup>3</sup> (Think about your own conversations about sex with friends during adolescence. Were they factually accurate? Did those conversations about sex leave you even *more* confused and curious?!)

Adolescents and young adults – and their parents! – need to understand the realities of sex as a natural part of human development.<sup>4</sup> Only with a comprehensive understanding of the possible pleasures,

<sup>1</sup> GNB Global Meeting, Sexuality Brief, AJWS Expert meeting March 2016 and 2016 CSW event, Sexuality Paper

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. 2005. *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund; UNFPA. 2012. *Marrying Too Young*. New York: UNFPA. (p. 6); <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/what-is-the-impact/>; CARE. 2015. *Vows of Poverty*. <http://vowsofpoverty.care.org>.

<sup>3</sup> "Making sex normal". 2013. TedTalk by Debbie Herbenick. Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CE3tL9MMk3U>.

<sup>4</sup> WHO. 2011. *The Sexual and Reproductive Health of Younger Adolescents: Research Issues in Developing Countries*. WHO: Geneva; SIECUS. Kempner, M and Rodriguez, M. 2005. *Talk about Sex*. Retrieved from [http://www.siecus.org/\\_data/global/images/TalkAboutSex.pdf](http://www.siecus.org/_data/global/images/TalkAboutSex.pdf); The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. 2009. *Sexual Development and Behavior in Children: Information for Parents & Caregivers*. Retrieved from [http://nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/caring/sexualdevelopmentandbehavior.pdf](http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/sexualdevelopmentandbehavior.pdf)

emotions, fulfillment and responsibilities of this new stage can they enjoy a healthy and pleasurable sexuality while protecting themselves and each other.

Our interactive workshop attracted people working to end CEFM, improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, expand girls' opportunities and engage men and boys for gender equality and positive masculinity. All joined BodyWise Dance to examine and portray visual vignettes based on stories from community responses to challenges posed by sexuality and programs attempting to integrate a focus in this area.<sup>5</sup> The "Woman with Sword" method combines theater with expert testimony, serving as a powerful and inspirational tool in learning environments.

BodyWise Dancers used a technique called *moving pictures* to demonstrate the multiple tensions between girls and their families and communities. Their performance art showed why sexuality and gender inequality must be addressed by people working to end CEFM and improve the lives of adolescent girls. The troupe portrayed the struggles girls face and the challenges of incorporating activities touching on sexuality into programs working with girls. It draws *all* participants in to engage actively as they feel comfortable. Woman With Sword enters the scenes as warrior who, through her strength and determination, empowers us to change the course of things.

The portrayals of the case studies and testimonies allowed participants to "view" situations from multiple angles, prompting reflection and insights about the stakeholders involved in CEFM. These scenes raised the need for intergenerational dialogue, engaging with men to transform masculinity, and the engagement of the entire community to support girls.

Many *Let's Talk about Sex* participants discussed logistical considerations for incorporating sexuality in programs, such as finding allies, positive deviants, who understand how important it is for adolescents to have this information and how to broach sexual health conversations with young people. Participants underscored the need to work with boys and girls to accomplish the shared underlying goals of weakening support for CEFM by enabling equitable relationships from childhood through adulthood, and making it easier to access and utilize accurate information about sexual health and rights.

End-of-day reflections about the workshop's activities and discussions revolved around the fulfillment participants experienced through connecting mind and body and using the arts to address sexuality, learning and gaining new perspectives on gender, gender stereotypes and sexuality, and new ways to overcome the challenges of working on issues related to sexuality and gender.

The AWID Forum theme was "Feminist Futures", and various artistic displays—photography, singing, painting, dance, video, etc.—were used to portray the hopeful and inspiring visions of feminists from around the world. BodyWise Dance along with all of the presenters and participants embodied *their* feminist visions: girls' and women's bodily autonomy and right to live free of violence, the partnership needed from boys and men to achieve this, and families and communities that empower young people and give them the information and skills they need to thrive.

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<sup>5</sup> For more event details, please see the full event report at [www.greenetworks.com](http://www.greenetworks.com).

## Addressing sexuality around the world

The stories from which the moving pictures drew come from diverse settings:

Alejandra Colom described the Population Council's *Abriendo Oportunidades*, the effort she leads to prevent early marriages/unions among indigenous girls in Guatemala. Colom discussed the violence and threats faced by program staff trying to provide sex education, as well as the team's successful management of these difficulties.

Anthony Keedi, from ABAAD, spoke about child marriage in Lebanon, a situation exacerbated by the humanitarian crisis of Syrians refugees. Like their Guatemalan sisters, Lebanese girls have little autonomy since family and community norms dictate their life trajectories.

Rachel Jacobson of IWHC laid out strategies for advocating at the UN level and with heads of states as well as the ways the UN is working to address child marriage globally. Child marriage was included as one of the targets under Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and the other SDGs will also facilitate making its eradication a priority.

Archana Dwivedi, of India's Nirantar Center for Gender and Education, discussed the entrenched inequality at the core of marriage norms, caste and class hierarchies, and strict gender roles for women and men. She also highlighted Nirantar's efforts to change norms and gain allies, like negotiating space for girls through girls' collectives. This approach gathers together a small group of girls for open dialogue on shared visions and to promote democratic processes and decision-making. This strength in numbers approach bolsters their voice and confidence, emboldening them to engage their community to push for the change they desire.

Marcos Nascimento of Fiocruz/ Instituto Fernandes Figueira explained his research using guy-to-guy approaches to increase men and boys' awareness of binary gender stereotypes. He also described their efforts to challenge the myth of porn as a sexual education method and replace it with accurate information and tools to resist peer pressure, prevent violence, and eliminate homophobia. Recounting a case in which an adolescent father who was part of the guy-to-guy program learned to reject a negative masculinity and become a more involved father, Marcos raised the question of how to "scale up" such projects so more young men get the support and guidance they need to their sex-related curiosities.

Usha Choudry from Vikalp Sansthan recounted violence that her organization's mentors faced in some Rajasthani communities until girls testified openly about the program's benefits. The communities responded by stopping the boys from threatening the mentor. Choudry also explained how the program discusses sex with boys, by asking questions about what those around them think about sex and what their preferences are. This opens up the space for discussion and to reflect on preconceived notions, such as on gender and sexuality.

Dhana Kumari Chowdhury, Usha Amgain, Ayushma Basnyat and Nidal Karim of CARE Nepal's Tipping Point team demonstrated multiple scenarios showing the tight regulation of young women in their communities, such as their appearance, spending time with boys and lacking information about puberty and SRHR. They are creating safe spaces for girls to discuss the challenges they face, learn together in a supportive environment, and to portray positive change, such as good relations between girls and boys to uproot previously held notions.