

# The Significance of Disseminating Sexual Education Among Adolescents in China

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## Abstract

In China, most adolescents do not have access to formal sexual and reproductive health education and services. This essay delves into the critical role of sexual education in enhancing the well-being of Chinese adolescents. The exploration begins by addressing the evolving cultural concepts surrounding sexuality in China, challenging traditional norms influenced by Confucianism. Subsequently, it underscores the significance of sexual education in mitigating health risks, offering insights into successful international programs as potential models. The discussion extends to the pivotal role of comprehensive sex education in promoting gender equality, combating discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, and addressing issues of consent. Despite the recognized importance of sexual education, challenges persist in its implementation, primarily due to resistance and personal biases from educators and policymakers. The essay concludes by proposing effective strategies to overcome these challenges, emphasizing the role of higher education, gender science, and decolonizing education in shaping a more inclusive and informed approach to sexual health among Chinese adolescents.

**Keywords:** sexual education, adolescents, China

## 1. Introduction and Context

Sexual health and the general well-being of adolescents are profoundly impacted by the pivotal role of sex education. Adolescence, as defined by World Health Organization (2018), includes the years between 10 and 19 and is characterized by a period of transformation, maturation, exploration, and opportunities. It's a stage of life where young individuals experience physical, psychological, and sexual development and often show a heightened interest in relationships and sexuality (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). Additionally, sexual education can be defined as a range of educational experiences intended to promote informed choices and behaviours that contribute to sexual well-being. Educational efforts focused on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) are an important component in promoting the well-being and healthy growth of adolescents (Garzón-Orjuela et al., 2021). The concept of SRH can be interpreted as the right of the individual to optimal health in all matters concerning the reproductive system and its functions and processes related to sex, not only including the right to a satisfying and safe sex life, the ability to have children, the right to decide the sex partner, and the autonomy to choose whether, when and how often to reproduce, but also encompassing the right to avoid sexually transmitted infections and accidental pregnancies and the access to education and health care in the field of sex (UN, 1994). It emphasizes a positive and respectful attitude towards sexual behaviour and relationships, and the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free from coercion, discrimination and violence (WHO, 2006). Moreover, as stated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, sexual health is also considered one of fundamental elements for achieving the broader objective of a sustainable and just society.

Particularly in China, the majority of adolescents lack access to formal SRH education and services (Ma et al., 2022). According to Zhao (2019), an extensive survey was undertaken across 11 Chinese provinces to evaluate

adolescent knowledge of SRH. The findings revealed an alarming pass rate of merely 53%. Consequently, the researchers deduced that the overall grasp of SRH knowledge among Chinese adolescents remains notably deficient. Similarly, in China, despite significant results in reducing adult sexually infections and deaths (Zou et al., 2023), there is a concerning likelihood of sexually transmitted infections in adolescents. Illustratively, during the period from 2008 to 2017, the incidence of HIV infection among this group demonstrated a continuing upward trend, showing an annual growth rate as high as 21.9% (Zou et al., 2023). Therefore, these recent data and issues have shown that the imperative of sexual education for adolescents has attained heightened significance in China.

This essay aims to explain the importance of pushing sexual education in Chinese adolescents from three aspects. It begins by discussing the connection between teenagers' changing sexual concepts and the need to promote sex education. It then lays out the effectiveness of sexual education in helping adolescents improve their awareness of sexual safety and reduce associated health risks. Subsequently, it explores the key role of comprehensive sex education for adolescents in promoting gender equality.

## **2. Sex Education and Changing Cultural Concepts**

The dissemination of sexual education constitutes a proactive response to evolving cultural concepts within the Chinese socio-cultural context.

Unlike Western countries where sexual topics are openly expressed or discussed, the open discourse surrounding sexual issues remains predominantly constrained by societal taboos within the context of China (Lyu et al., 2020). As a consequence of the enduring impact of Confucianism and the prevailing cultural traits of sexual conservatism or repression, sexual health education continues to manifest in an implicit or evasive manner (Ma et al., 2022). Confucianism considers that sex has to be bound by a formal arrangement, namely marriage. In other words, its significance emphasizes the social responsibility of reproducing the next generation rather than satisfying people's normal desires. Therefore, sex outside of marriage is not condoned (Liu et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, within a relatively short period, there have been noteworthy transformations in Chinese perceptions and actions related to sexuality: a blend of more inclusive sexual attitudes and traditional sexual ethics coexists with the discords. Starting from the 1980s, China has progressively embraced global influences, leading to increased exposure to sexual information in the media. In this context, teenagers' own sexual concepts are constantly developing and changing. Teenagers generally have a relatively permissive stance on sexuality (Wu et al., 2021). As an illustration, their perspectives on extramarital relationships have evolved from firm and explicit disapproval to a more empathetic and understanding stance, particularly in situations involving the loss of a spouse or coerced marriages (Chi et al., 2015). Supporting data exemplify this shift: in 1991, 10.7% of college students in Beijing reported engaging in premarital sex, a figure that increased to 16.9% in 2001 and further escalated to 32% in 2006 (Lyu et al., 2020). Additionally, strengthening sexual education may assist teenagers surmount scepticism regarding scientific information related to sexuality and curtail the propagation of sexual misinformation, thereby effecting shifts in social bias associated with sexual stigmatization (Canavese et al., 2023). For instance, there is a stigma attached to the LGBT community. In traditional Chinese cultural and familial norms, non-heterosexual orientations are viewed as bringing shame to the family (Wong, 2015). In recent years, the stigma against LGBT people has eased with the development of sex education, especially among teenagers, who have become more tolerant of non-heterosexual attitudes. Concretely, a study conducted in Changsha in 2002 revealed that 37% of students considered homosexuality as illegal, and 35% expressed a willingness to cease interactions with someone identified as homosexual (Huang et al., 2005). In contrast, by 2017, among a group of 1,355 teenagers, 34% acknowledged homosexuality as a normal sexual orientation, with only 11% considering it abnormal (Zhao et al., 2019).

Although Chinese schools strive to provide better sex education to adapt to changes in adolescent thinking, the actual results may not be satisfactory. To be more specific, Steinhauer (2016) stated that Chinese adolescents usually start taking courses on puberty in middle school, but the content of these courses is superficial and simple, and the course format is to separate male and female students. After entering high school, sex education still did not become a dedicated course, but was included in basic biology courses, which were also brief and not the focus of the curriculum. By the time many students enter universities, they are still largely deprived of learning the basics of sexual behaviours and sexual protection. Some universities are beginning to offer more specific sex education courses, including contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and infections, abortion, and childbirth. However, due to the influence of social traditions and Confucian culture, as well as the fear of encouraging sexual behaviours, these courses are still missing a lot of content. At the same time, they are not required courses, so most students do not take these courses even though they have some interest in learning about sex.

Therefore, there is still a considerable distance to cover in the field of sex education. Developing a comprehensive sex education curriculum is not only a move in line with the more open and inclusive cultural

concepts of modern society, but also an approach that respects the wishes of contemporary teenagers.

### **3. Sex Education and Sexual Safety**

The introduction of sexual education can enhance sexual safety awareness of adolescents, thereby mitigating health-related risks.

In China, an annual incidence of pregnancy among young women exceeding 20% leads to nearly six million induced abortions, a figure that demonstrates an escalating trend. Such situations inflict substantial physical, psychological, and socioeconomic burdens on individuals, families, and society at large (Ding et al., 2019). Additionally, the increasing incidence of HIV seems to be related to high-risk sexual behaviours and poor awareness of HIV/AIDS prevention. By the end of 2018, 149 000 people with newly diagnosed HIV/AIDS had been reported, 95% of which were sexually transmitted. Therefore, it is significant to improve systematically sex education for adolescents. Addressing this dilemma, sex education classes have the potential to offer support to teenagers. Some successful instances of comprehensive sex education programs in other nations could serve as a source of inspiration for sex education among Chinese adolescents. One such example is the Horizon Project in the United States, which focuses on African American teenage girls. This program emphasizes racial and gender pride, HIV awareness, communication skills, condom use, and cultivation of harmonious relationships. The outcomes of this intervention revealed a notable 35% decrease in the risk of infection among project participants, as well as an increase in condom usage (DiClemente et al., 2009). Another noteworthy program is a school-based initiative in Kenya, designed to raise awareness among young women regarding the risks associated with intergenerational sexual behaviours. This intervention successfully cut down unintended pregnancies by 28% (Dupas, 2011).

Furthermore, sexual education curricula may produce favourable outcomes in the prevention of dating and intimate partner violence as well as in the precaution of child sexual abuse (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Statistical data indicates that 29% of girls aged 15-19 with a sexual partner have encountered sexual violence (Starrs et al., 2018). Likewise, sexual harassment and violence persist as significant challenges for young individuals in China. As of February 2018, a survey identifies sexual harassment as the second most critical issue, accounting for 27%, while sexual violence is ranked eighth at 12% among the key concerns for women and girls in China (Ipsos, 2018). It's crucial to recognize that, although predominantly impacting women and girls, sexual violence and harassment can also affect men and boys, particularly during adolescence (Starrs et al., 2018). Encountering sexual violence can lead to various health issues for youngsters, including psychological trauma, stress, varying degrees of physical injuries, and, in extreme cases, death (Starrs et al., 2018). On one hand, adolescents who have undergone intimate partner violence are tend to have poor physical health, increased mental health challenges, and even suicidal tendencies. On the other hand, teenagers facing non-partner sexual violence are also at an elevated risk of substance abuse and mental health disorders.

Numerous researchers argue that the primary method for addressing sexual violence should be the judicial process. However, it is suggested that sex education can play a more profound and effective role in preventing and reducing sexual violence (Howlett, 2021). Many young individuals who experience violence may refrain from reporting it due to concerns about disbelief, the desire to keep the abuse hidden, or feelings of shame, guilt, or embarrassment (Moulin-Stozek, 2021). Consequently, relying solely on legal measures may not provide immediate protection for the victim. According to Moulin-Stozek (2021), sex education serves as a platform to impart the skills and insights necessary for navigating issues that arise in relationships. In essence, ethical sex education, which prioritizes the well-being and consideration of others, aids in making informed decisions regarding what constitutes sexual violence and why it is inappropriate in intimate relationships. Additionally, sex education can enhance adolescents' self-efficacy, communication abilities, and the establishment of positive interpersonal relationships. Through comprehensive sex education, young people can proactively minimize the occurrence of violence before it occurs (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021).

### **4. Sex Education and Gender Equality**

The advancement of gender equality is contingent upon the Implementation of comprehensive sexual education for adolescents.

First, sexual education holds promise in ameliorating issues of homophobia, caring for LGBT individuals, and fostering a deeper comprehension and appreciation of gender diversity for adolescents (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). China's one-child policy exerts significant societal and familial pressure on sexual and gender minorities, compelling them to marry and have children for the sake of preserving family reputation (Chi et al., 2015). Additionally, a negative self-image and low self-esteem developed by stigma of non-heterosexual may contribute to sexual risk behaviours and high rates of sexually transmitted diseases. Hence, the adverse effects of discrimination against sexual and gender minorities pose a substantial global public health concern, and this is likely to be applicable in China as well (Tu et al., 2022). However, sexuality education may change this situation

powerfully. For example, in a study by Chi et al. (2015), a 9-week sexual health knowledge and attitude training program was conducted on 80 college students aged 18-26 in southwest China, with a comparative control group consisting of 92 students. The findings revealed that comprehensive sexuality education courses had a positive impact on students' attitudes towards the LGBT community. After nine weeks of sex education, the control group maintained negative attitudes similar to previous levels. Conversely, in the experimental group, students' attitudes became more tolerant and accepting.

Second, the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine (2023) states that consensual sex is an important component of a healthy sexual relationship. Numerous young individuals might have encountered non-consensual sexual experiences during their formative years, potentially impeding the development of enduring and healthy intimate relationships later in life (Zhang & Yu, 2023). Non-consensual sexual incidents often encompass unwanted penetration, attempted rape, unwarranted touching, verbal harassment, and coerced exposure to pornography. For instance, Zou's (2018) investigation analysed the non-consensual sexual encounters of 1,099 college students (430 males and 669 females) across four universities in Shanghai. The findings revealed that the most commonly reported experience was unwanted touching, cited by 27.2% of males and 63.3% of females. Additionally, around 7.7% of males and 13.9% of females disclosed instances of unwanted caressing. Therefore, the ability to communicate or refusal with the partner or others about any physical or sexual contact is necessary for a respectful, mature and intimate relationship (Guo et al., 2020).

Finally, enabling access to sexual education represents a concrete expression of essential human rights, including the right to the highest achievable standard of health, the right to make informed decisions, and the right to personal privacy and confidentiality (Ferguson et al., 2019). Numerous global organizations have launched initiatives for this cause. In particular, in both 2009 and 2012, the Commission on Population and Development endorsed resolutions urging governments to provide comprehensive education to young people. This education should not only cover human sexual and reproductive health, but also include topics such as gender equality and human rights. The aim is to enable individuals to actively and responsibly address various issues (Haberland & Rogow, 2015). Similarly, international agreements like the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion outline the impact of underlying or enabling conditions on health. These documents underline the interconnected nature of sexual health issues, gender disparities, and violations of human rights. They emphasize that the objectives of sex education must inherently encompass these interconnected areas.

In short, comprehensive sexuality education may help achieve gender equality. Its approach is respectively to protect and understand gender diversity, to have consensual sex and to respect the fundamental right to sex education.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The essay explores the critical role of sexual education in promoting the well-being of Chinese adolescents, emphasizing its impact on changing sexual concepts, ensuring sexual safety, and fostering gender equality. First, changing cultural concepts, influenced by global exposure and evolving attitudes, challenge traditional norms. Sex education becomes crucial in addressing shifting perceptions and reducing stigmatization, especially towards the LGBT community. Second, Sex education emerges as a powerful tool in mitigating health risks, addressing issues like unintended pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, and sexual violence. Moreover, comprehensive sex education may positively impact gender equality by combating homophobia, addressing issues of consent, and respecting fundamental human rights.

Nevertheless, there are still certain constraints associated with the aforementioned claims. Firstly, during the implementation of sex education by teachers, policymakers, and educational administrators, they might face challenges completing their educational tasks due to nervousness that the course content challenges traditional values or deviates from mainstream culture (Chi et al., 2015). For instance, in 2003, Fudan University in Shanghai initiated China's first postgraduate course on homosexuality. Despite receiving significant attention from college students, the homosexual community, and domestic and international media, the university discontinued the course in 2004. The reason behind it is that it produced adverse impact on society's mainstream culture, traditional values, and government policies.

Additionally, educators inevitably bring their own sexual biases into the courses. They remain concerned that sex education may inadvertently foster permissive attitudes, sexual immorality, and adolescent sexual behaviours, leading them to avoid topics related to sexual health and contraception (Chi et al., 2015). Moreover, educators may fall short of meeting the essential requirements of comprehensive sexuality education due to their personal biases. For example, teachers might unconsciously advocate for abstinence or abstaining until marriage to prevent young students from engaging in sexually promiscuous behaviours. At this level, issues related to students' character and ethics become central. Thus, teachers may frequently assert that certain effective contraceptive methods, such as condoms and birth control pills, are unreliable and instead recommend abstaining from sex until marriage.

There are some effective methods that could mitigate the aforementioned problems to a certain extent. Firstly, universities play a pivotal role in overcoming various forms of prejudice and discrimination, particularly in teacher training. The literature indicates that the higher the level of education, the lower the level of prejudice (Liu et al., 2015). Therefore, training in higher education should aim to reduce bias related to gender and sexuality issues, particularly in licensure programs. This enables teachers to more effectively advocate for respect for diversity and transformative approaches in schools, given that professionals' perceptions of these topics significantly influence their teaching methods (Santos & Cerqueira-Santos, 2020).

Secondly, employing both the gender science and decolonizing education approaches may play a positive role in shaping students' understanding of gender identity (Mayo, 2022). These methods aid sex education in contemplating gender differently, allowing teachers to incorporate gender-diverse perspectives into the curriculum while encouraging gender-normative students to reflect on their own complexities. The gender science approach assists educators in integrating sex education, biology, and inclusive teaching, addressing issues such as how to teach about 'X' and 'Y' chromosomes without overlooking intersex students, who may have chromosome variations beyond 'XX' or 'XY'. Additionally, decolonizing education involves supplementing sexual knowledge by considering how social arrangements of sex and gender differ across cultures. For instance, Snorton (2017), in his work on Black trans history and experiences, connects Black trans identities to movements that have defined Black life in the United States. Recognizing the ongoing process of decolonization and the need to reevaluate gender understanding. It is possible to recognize that the ongoing process of decolonization is linked to the process of re-understanding gender.

In conclusion, although the essay advocates the provision of comprehensive sex education to Chinese adolescents, certain challenges remain. For example, implementation faces resistance from educators, policymakers, and administrators who worry that the content conflicts with traditional values. In addition, personal biases of educators may hinder comprehensive sex education, such as a general emphasis on abstinence before marriage and a neglect of effective contraceptive methods. Fortunately, several approaches appear likely to alter these limitations. Specifically, overcoming these challenges requires higher education to engage in teacher training to reduce bias. Integrating gender science with decolonial educational approaches can reshape students' understanding of gender identity. These approaches enable inclusive teaching that addresses complexity and diverse perspectives.

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