

The Necessity of Teaching Sexual Education in General Educational Institutions

Salome Khazhomia

PHD Student

Grigol Robakidze University

Abstract

Sexual education helps young people develop the right attitudes towards personal relationships and health. It includes information on sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and gender equality. The main goal of its teaching is to assist young people in developing a positive perspective on various issues. Sexual education promotes healthy and harmonious relationships and helps individuals understand the essence of gender equality. Although in some countries sexual education is taught by educators, in others it is prohibited, which is sometimes the reason of increasing sexual violence and unwanted pregnancies. In this context, teaching sexual education plays a significant role in spreading information among young people and helping them make informed decisions.

In certain countries, such as Sweden, sexual education is integrated into school curricula, which reflects positively on the reproductive health. One of the progressive countries is The Netherlands, where children are taught human biology and sexual education starting from kindergarten age. In Georgia, this issue is still a topic of discussion, influenced by religious and cultural factors. The situation has partially changed since 2018, with the introduction of the subject "Me and Society" in schools, which addresses sexual education, gender, equality, and other related topics. As a result, students have some knowledge about sexual education.

The paper is based on theories from the field of educational sciences that convey the essential idea of why sexual education is important. One of these is the holistic approach to education, which is grounded in the idea that sexual education is necessary both to deepen knowledge about biological anatomy and to address emotional and social issues. According to the theory of holistic education, sexual education encompasses a comprehensive understanding of human sexuality.

It is also important to emphasize the theory of health education, as sexual education includes mechanisms for protecting against unwanted pregnancies and various diseases. If young people have knowledge of sexual education, they will also know more about their own reproductive health. For the correct dissemination of information, it is essential to train teachers and select appropriate textbooks.

The main goal of the research is to find methods for integrating sexual education into the educational sector, both in Georgia and internationally. Additionally, it aims to reflect on the outcomes of its teaching on the formation of young people's relationships and to highlight the barriers to implementing sexual education.

This paper focuses on the potential outcomes of teaching sexual education in general educational institutions. It also discusses recommendations based on examples from different countries on how young people can make safe and beneficial choices regarding sexual and gender issues.

The work is based on the methodology of comparative analysis of international and local practices regarding sexual education. The research relies on both qualitative and quantitative methods, which include statistical analysis as well as interviews, textbooks, reports from international organizations, and the practices and statistics of different countries.

Its research framework covers the impact of sexual education on young people's reproductive health and personal relationships. The primary target groups are students, parents, and teachers.

Keywords: Sexual Education, Sexuality, Unwanted Pregnancy, Reproductive Health

Introduction

Sexual education includes methods through which young people gain knowledge about human sexuality, accompanied by the development of certain attitudes. It covers the psychological changes, also pregnancy, methods of preventing unwanted pregnancies, violence, and other important issues. Sexual education enables young people to receive necessary information about sexual anatomy and reproduction, while also helping them develop a positive sexual perspective within an emotional and social context.

Sexual education is not only knowledge about sexual anatomy and reproductive functions, but also it is awareness of equality, gender, and sexual orientation issues. These subjects are particularly important in developing countries, including Georgia, where sexual education is often not discussed, and there are many obstacles related to it.

The significance of the research topic is highlighted by the fact that trends, practices, and attitudes toward sexual education vary significantly between countries, creating fertile ground for exploring the ideas and approaches studied in this paper. Reviewing examples and approaches from different countries provides valuable knowledge for Georgia to refine and integrate sexual education into local educational programs.

The paper discusses examples from various countries that were selected based on the diversity of sexual education teaching and attitudes. Several countries stand out in terms of the level of integration of sexual education within their educational systems, including Sweden, the Netherlands, and the USA. Certain countries, such as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, were chosen due to the delays in the implementation of sexual education, primarily influenced by cultural and ideological views.

The selected countries are from America, Europe, and the Caucasus region, which together provide an overall picture of the environment regarding sexual education. Through the examples of these countries, we learn about the impact of sexual education practices on reproductive health, the awareness and development of young people. Based on existing models, it is possible to reduce teenage pregnancies, diseases, and violence, as well as increase awareness of sexual and gender-related issues.

Modern and comprehensive sexual education will help young people better navigate gender and sexual challenges, which, in turn, will have influence on well-being of society.

1. Definition and Goals of Sexual Education

Sexual education includes some changes occurring during puberty, also, pregnancy, methods of preventing unwanted pregnancies, physical and psychological violence, and so on.¹

Through sexual education, young people can obtain the necessary information about reproductive health. Its main goal is gain the knowledge and skills needed to have a positive understanding of their emotional and social development.²

Sexual education is directly related to the term of sexuality. It includes biological, psychological, spiritual, and emotional feelings and behaviors connected to the expression and satisfaction of sexual desire. It can also be clarified as an innate need of the human body, expressed through thoughts, fantasies, and attitudes. Some characteristics of sexuality are genetically determined, while others are shaped during the process of socialization.³

¹ World Health Organization (WHO). Sexual and Reproductive Health. https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_1 [L. s. 15.01.2025].

² UNESCO. International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. <https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/knowledge-hub/comprehensive-sexuality-education> [L. s. 15.01.2025].

³ The American Psychological Association (APA). Human Sexuality – Sexual orientation and gender diversity. <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq> [L. s. 15.01.2025].

Young women are particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which also includes the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).⁴

According to UNICEF data from 2021, approximately 15 million underage girls are married worldwide. The risk factors connected to adolescent pregnancy create biological, emotional and economic challenges.⁵

1.1. Advantages of Teaching Sexual Education

Understanding the essence of sexual education helps young people avoid pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Reproductive education promotes healthy and harmonious relationships, where both parties respect each other. It also helps individuals become familiar with gender equality and values, and to understand each of them.⁶

In 2012, the National Sexual Education Standards were launched which were updated in 2020. Its goal is to provide a consistent and clear guide that includes the essential content and skills for sexual education. It encompasses healthy relationships, knowledge of physiology, sexual development, gender identity and sexual orientation.⁷

Homophobia and sexuality are related to sexual education. On the one hand, homosexuality is into the realm of scientific study, but, on the other hand, homosexuality is known as a disease. The term "homophobia" also implies that the hatred of homosexuals is an unhealthy phenomenon. Homophobia is often expressed through the discrimination of homosexuals.⁸

Transphobia and homophobia are rooted in radical opposition to gender, and it is based on the belief that male and female are mutually exclusive categories, each of these categories possesses unique and entirely distinct attributes, abilities, and desires.⁹

A part of society that shares this belief judges and rejects anyone who does not think in the same way, because they find it as a threat to the idea of the difference between man and woman.¹⁰

Hostility based on sexual orientation exists as shared knowledge, which is ingrained in cultural ideology and establishes norms for sexuality. Based on these norms, boundaries are drawn between social groups, and they are assigned corresponding values.¹¹

2. Sexual Education in Georgia

In certain developed countries, sexual education is taught in schools from an early age, while others consider this type of education inappropriate for adolescents. The debate in society continues to this day, with questions about whether sexual education is necessary and whether it conflicts with religion and mentality.¹²

There are textbooks that partially cover issues related to sexual education, both of which are biology textbooks for the 8th grade. One of these textbooks is 174 pages long, with only 6 pages dedicated to the topic of sexual education.¹³

⁴ Starrs AM, et al. Accelerate progress - "sexual and reproductive health and rights for all", report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission. Lancet, 2018. P-139.

⁵ Azevedo WFD, et al. Complications in adolescent pregnancy: "systematic review of the literature." Einstein (São Paulo). P-13. 2015.

⁶ Human Rights Campaign - Legal Resources. Constitutional Law and Sexual Orientation. <https://www.hrc.org/> [L. s. 15.01.2025].

⁷ National Sexuality Education Standards (by the Future of Sex Education Initiative). Future of Sex Education Initiative. 2012. <https://www.futureofsexed.org/> [L. s. 15.01.2025].

⁸ Weinberg, G. Society and the Healthy Homosexual. Historical Studies on Homophobia and Transphobia. 1971.

⁹ Butler, J. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. 1990.

¹⁰ UN Free & Equal Campaign (United Nations). <https://www.unfe.org/>. [L. s. 15.01.2025].

¹¹ Foucault, M. The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction. 1978.

¹² Women's Fund in Georgia. Public Health Studies and Reports from NGOs. <https://2020.womenfundgeorgia.org/en/>. [L. s. 15.01.2025].

¹³ Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. <https://www.mes.gov.ge/>. [L. s. 15.01.2025].

In Georgia, teachers often skip the chapters related to reproductive systems, the sexual organs of men and women, and fetal development, assigning students to read them at home instead. To rely on the Public Defender's report on early marriage, non-governmental organizations encountered difficulties when attempting to prepare a small project on sexual education for students. This type of education is opposed by the Church and also by school administrations and parents, especially in rural areas. Anti-sexual education campaigns have also been held by religious figures in Georgia.¹⁴

According to some psychologists, it is essential to analyze the stages leading up to pregnancy when talking to adolescents, as the issue is complex. They argue that pregnancy among girls aged 14 to 18 could be a result of a lack of information about sexual activity.¹⁵

According to the child psychologist at the Center for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture (GCRT), the main problem is that a large portion of society holds a negative attitude towards receiving sexual education. She also pointed out the myth that sexual education causes children to begin sexual activity at an earlier age. However, in the psychologist's opinion, early marriage occurs precisely because sexual education is not taught in schools. This leads to harmful consequences, as medical professionals claim that a woman's body is not developed enough for the physical demands of pregnancy.¹⁶

2.1. Examples from Other Countries Regarding Sexual Education

The practice of teaching sexual education varies, being widespread in some countries and limited in others. In countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Finland, sexual education is included in the student curriculum. It covers discussions on social and emotional aspects.¹⁷

There is no unanimous opinion on whether sexual education should be taught, as views differ both between countries and among members of society within a specific country.¹⁸

In Armenia, access to sexual education for young people is not provided by schools, as it is considered a sensitive topic. Teachers have not been trained in this regard, and therefore, they do not discuss uncomfortable topics with students. In Armenia, healthcare professionals and psychologists are calling for a refined and improved course for sexual education. Officially, there is no comprehensive, standardized curriculum for sexual education integrated into the national school system.¹⁹

In Armenia, there are some cases of pedophilia and this is directly caused by the lack of sexual education. Young people are unprepared for such situations, as ensuring sexual education is essential.²⁰

Non-governmental and international organizations have made attempts to promote sexual education in Armenia. For example, some organizations have conducted awareness campaigns for youth, teachers, and parents to assess the shortcomings in formal education. These initiatives often focus on reproductive health, gender equality, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections.²¹

Since 2015, Azerbaijan has had a project in schools addressing children's sexual education in educational institutions. Young people tend to avoid discussing certain topics with their parents, and as a result, they mostly acquire their knowledge from the internet, as they lack information on sexual violence and harassment. In Azerbaijan, the number of early pregnancies and selective abortions is particularly high in rural areas.²²

¹⁴ Public Defender's Report. Early Marriage, Challenges, and Solutions. 2016. <https://ombudsman.ge/geo/siakhleebebi/sadjaro-debatebi-adreul-asakshi-qorwineba-gamowvevebi-da-gadachris-gzebi>. [L. s. 15.01.2025].

¹⁵ Respondent's Interview. 2024.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Comprehensive Sexuality Education. 2016. <https://www.acog.org/clinical> [L. s. 15.01.2025].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ UNESCO. Comprehensive Sexual Education. 2023. <https://education-profiles.org/northern-africa-and-western-asia/armenia/~comprehensive-sexuality-education> [L. s. 15.01.2025].

²⁰ Respondent's Interview. 2024.

²¹ See footnote 19.

²² UNFPA. Sexual and Reproductive Health in Azerbaijan: Challenges and Opportunities. 2015.

Sweden was the most progressive country in this regard. The first project in Parliament advocating for sexual education in educational institutions was introduced as early as 1908. Since sexual education is taught in schools and students have information on various issues, early marriages, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancies have decreased. The core of sexual education is taught in 5th, 8th, and 9th grades.²³

In Sweden, sexual education helps young people lead a more responsible and informed sexual life. Sexual education assists them in making the right decisions. In Sweden, there is also an ongoing discussion about closely linking sexual education with gender equality education. This type of education has a long tradition in Sweden, and parents support it. In Sweden, sexual education teachers only need to complete short training courses.²⁴

In Albania, the law on comprehensive sexual education for youth was approved in 2012 through an initiative by the Ministry of Health. Information on sexual education is provided to students through three different subjects: Biology, Health Education, and Physical Education. Topics are divided according to age: for 10-12, 12-16, and 16-18-year-olds. The Albanian Center for Population and Development (ACDP) has been conducting an intensive teacher training educational program since 2011. As a result of this program, teachers are able to adequately deliver material on sexual education to students.²⁵

Other progressive countries in this field include the Netherlands, where children are taught human biology and sexual education from kindergarten age. The Netherlands has the lowest adolescent pregnancy rate in the world. Sexual education covers topics such as gender equality and homosexuality. No issues related to sexual education are taboo, especially in higher grades. Regarding sexually transmitted diseases, the Netherlands has much lower rates than the U.S. and the U.K. Additionally, the teenage pregnancy rate in the Netherlands is very low.²⁶

In American schools one thought is based on the idea of abstinence until marriage, while the second encompasses comprehensive sexual education, where students are encouraged to abstain from sex until marriage as a positive example, but at the same time, contraception methods are also taught.²⁷

Regarding the first, the abstinence-only program, studies have confirmed that American adolescents lag behind their European peers in terms of reproduction and safe sexual practices.²⁸

In the case of the UK, there are differing opinions among professors and religious leaders. Professors consider sexual education essential, while religious leaders oppose it.²⁹

Sexual education plays an important role for young people, enabling them to make decisions about their choices with full responsibility.³⁰

Conclusion

Sexual education involves comprehensive knowledge about human sexuality, covering physical, emotional, and social aspects. It includes the study of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and other sexual health issues, helping young people make better decisions.

School students are provided with information about human anatomy, the reproductive system, and emotional aspects, but this is only part of what sexual education encompasses. From an early age, children should be given information about sexuality, gender, and other relationships.

²³ UNESCO. International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. 2018.

²⁴ Swedish Government Report. Sexual Education in Swedish Schools: A Historical Overview. 2015.

²⁵ Ministry of Health, Albania. National Reproductive Health Strategy 2012-2020: A Focus on Youth Education. 2012.

²⁶ UNFPA. Sexual Health and Rights: Evidence and the Netherlands. 2021.

²⁷ Guttmacher Institute. Sexual Education in U.S. Schools: Abstinence-Only vs. Comprehensive Approaches. 2017.

²⁸ Journal of Adolescent Health. "Abstinence and Comprehensive Sex Education: A Review of U.S. Programs". 2014.

²⁹ National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. "The Role of Parents and Religious Groups in Shaping Sex Education Policies in the UK". 2019.

³⁰ World Health Organization. "Sex Education and Young People's Health: A Review of the Evidence". 2013.

For adolescents, sexual education covers topics such as sexually transmitted diseases, reproductive health for both men and women, gender identity, emotional connection, and more.

Globally, there are various practices and approaches to teaching sexual education, because societal views differ. Information on sexual health is often first provided by parents and then supplemented by school-based learning. Young people's thinking on this issue develops in several stages.

In some countries, specific guidelines have been established, which include standards for teaching sexual education. There are updated and refined approaches to sexual education based on advice from psychologists, sexologists, and specialists.

Modern sexual education covers issues such as violence prevention, the protection of rights, and tolerance toward gender identity. Some countries face difficulties in this regard, as they do not consider promoting sexual education to be appropriate.

Sweden, the Netherlands, and other European countries are particularly progressive in this area, where sexual education is mandatory and begins at an early age. In these countries, adolescents receive comprehensive knowledge that includes both biology and issues related to sexual desire and gender equality.

In Georgia, sexual education is partially included in the school curriculum, but society—especially religious institutions—often opposes it. Although students gain some knowledge through "Me and Society" lessons, it is not enough. As a result, the widespread views and uncomfortable attitudes toward sexual education in society contribute to the rise in cases of teenage pregnancies and sexual violence.

Integrating sexual education into school curricula would significantly reduce the risks of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. It would also support the social and emotional development of adolescents. Teacher training and the provision of accurate information are essential for better equipping young people on issues of sexual education.

The country must adopt a national-level policy aimed at integrating sexual education into school curricula. Additionally, it is necessary to develop courses that are not solely focused on physiological aspects but also cover gender and social dimensions.

The theoretical significance of the work emphasizes the fact that sexual education encompasses aspects of gender equality, reproductive health, unwanted pregnancies, and diseases, and can serve as the starting point for significant changes, which will reflect on the development of young people. The practical significance highlights the experiences of different countries, based on which approaches in Georgia can be modified and refined. The research is also notable for its focus on religious and cultural conflicts.

Based on international experience, sexual education is a necessity; however, in Georgia, this topic is still associated with certain difficulties, which can be explained by cultural or religious views. In Georgia, sexual education should be strengthened, as otherwise, society will face educational and social problems.

Bibliography

1. Azevedo WFD, et al. Complications in adolescent pregnancy: “systematic review of the literature“. Einstein (São Paulo). 2015.
2. Butler, Judith, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. 1990.
3. Foucault, Michel, The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction. 1978.
4. Guttmacher Institute. Sexual Education in U.S. Schools: Abstinence-Only vs. Comprehensive Approaches. 2017.
5. Human Rights Campaign - Legal Resources. Constitutional Law and Sexual Orientation. <https://www.hrc.org/> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
6. Journal of Adolescent Health. "Abstinence and Comprehensive Sex Education: A Review of U.S. Programs". 2014.
7. Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. <https://www.mes.gov.ge/> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
8. Ministry of Health, Albania. National Reproductive Health Strategy 2012-2020: A Focus on Youth Education. 2012.
9. National Sexuality Education Standards (by the Future of Sex Education Initiative). Future of Sex Education Initiative. 2012. <https://www.futureofsexed.org/> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
10. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. "The Role of Parents and Religious Groups in Shaping Sex Education Policies in the UK". 2019.
11. Public Defender’s Report. Early Marriage, Challenges, and Solutions. 2016. <https://ombudsman.ge/geo/siakhleebebi/sadjaro-debatebi-adreul-asakshi-qorwineba-gamowvevebi-da-gadachris-gzebi> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
12. Starrs AM, et al. Accelerate progress—“sexual and reproductive health and rights for all”, report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission. Lancet, 2018.
13. Swedish Government Report. Sexual Education in Swedish Schools: A Historical Overview. 2015.
14. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Comprehensive Sexuality Education. 2016. <https://www.acog.org/clinical> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
15. The American Psychological Association (APA). Human Sexuality – Sexual orientation and gender diversity. <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
16. UNESCO. Comprehensive Sexual Education. 2023. <https://education-profiles.org/northern-africa-and-western-asia/armenia/~comprehensive-sexuality-education> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
17. UNESCO. International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. 2018. <https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/knowledge-hub/comprehensive-sexuality-education> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
18. UNFPA. Sexual and Reproductive Health in Azerbaijan: Challenges and Opportunities. 2015.
19. UNFPA. Sexual Health and Rights: Evidence and the Netherlands. 2021.
20. UN Free & Equal Campaign (United Nations). <https://www.unfe.org/> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
21. Weinberg, George, Society and the Healthy Homosexual. Historical Studies on Homophobia and Transphobia. 1971.
22. WHO - World Health Organization. Sexual and Reproductive Health. https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_1 [Last seen 15.01.2025];
23. Women’s Fund in Georgia. Public Health Studies and Reports from NGOs. <https://2020.womenfundgeorgia.org/en/> [Last seen 15.01.2025];
24. World Health Organization. "Sex Education and Young People's Health: A Review of the Evidence". 2013.