

WAGGGS POSITION STATEMENT

Girls' and young women's sexuality education

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) believes that girls and young women must be at the centre of all policy and programme developments that aim to educate them on sex and sexuality. WAGGGS believes that girls and young women need an environment where they can freely and openly discuss issues of sex and sexuality without fear of discrimination or judgment and that a young woman should be empowered to make her own choices about sexual and reproductive health. Ensuring the health of girls and young women ensures that healthier babies are born. The present and the future of humankind are in the hands of our young and future generations and in particular in the hands of girls and young women. As the voice of girls and young women, WAGGGS has identified the UN Millennium Development Goal 4 on reducing child mortality and Goal 5 on improving maternal health as a priority issue on which to take a stand and speak out, with special focus on sexuality education.

WAGGGS provides millions of girls and young women with non-formal education, giving them the opportunity to develop self-esteem, confidence and life skills. Working with Member Organizations in 145 countries, our vision is to build a better world through advocacy, education and action. We aim to speak out on behalf of girls and young women everywhere, as well as empower young women to speak out for themselves and for other girls. Our global action theme 'together we can change our world' encourages WAGGGS members to take actions to help achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals.

WAGGGS calls on the international community and national governments to ensure that young women have access to full and accurate information, and are given the opportunity to discuss openly and safely issues about sex and sexuality by:

- **Encouraging** and enabling schools to include topics of sex and sexuality into their curriculum for both girls and boys
- **Providing** young women with opportunities to be involved in the planning, delivering and evaluation of sexual education
- **Increasing** access for young people to information on STIs and protection methods
- (e.g. condoms)
- **Acknowledging** that views and experiences are constantly changing and that it is important to talk about issues that are relevant to young people and respond to their needs
- **Addressing** and correcting misinformation, stereotypes, sexual violence and the sexualisation of women's bodies in the media
- **Supporting** youth organizations which provide safe spaces for girls and young women to discuss sex and sexuality free from discrimination

WAGGGS urges Member Organizations to:

- **Ensure** that girls and young women are well informed about their rights and responsibilities regarding their sexuality and reproductive health
- **Provide** girls and young women with objective and non-biased information through non- formal education about sex and sexuality
- **Provide** a safe environment for girls and young women to openly discuss issues of sex and sexuality and encourage such discussions guided by professional assistance and responsible leaders
- **Support** girls and young women to speak out on issues of sex and sexuality and break down harmful stereotypes
- **Acknowledge** that views and experiences are constantly changing and it is important to talk about issues that are relevant to young people and respond to their needs

How WAGGGS is addressing sex education:

- WAGGGS actively promotes peer education and non-formal education as ways to educate young people about sexual and reproductive health issues.
- The decision-making skills, life skills and leadership opportunities provided by WAGGGS

- help to enable girls and young women to make responsible choices about their lifestyles,
- including about their sexual and reproductive health.
- WAGGGS addresses issues around sexual and reproductive health in some of its leadership and advocacy seminars, for example at its 5th Helen Storrow seminar at Our Chalet and at the “leaders in action” seminar in Our Cabaña in 2007.

Talking about Sex and Sexuality Globally

- Sex is still a taboo topic in many countries today. This means that timing of first intercourse is often assumed to correspond with marriage and that direct evidence on premarital sexual relations is scarce. International agreements state that adolescents have a right to age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information, education, and services that enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality¹. Yet despite this, it is often difficult for girls and young women to get accurate and reliable information about sex and sexuality, and to be able to talk freely and confidently about concerns and issues that they face.
- The decisions that girls make about sexual behaviour (if they are able to), and childbearing have profound effects, not only on their own lives, but on the lives of generations to come. In low- and middle-income countries, almost 10 per cent of girls become mothers by the age of 16, with the highest rates in sub-Saharan Africa and south-central and south-eastern Asia².
- About 16 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 are sexually active, which results in a pregnancy, and whom give birth each year, accounting for more than 10 per cent of all births worldwide. Some of these girls have little understanding of sex or reproduction. Hence adolescent pregnancy is correlated with extreme poverty and low education levels; indeed early and arranged marriage perpetuates the low status of women by disrupting schooling and restricting future economic participation.
- Girls and young women worldwide are exposed to a range of biological, cultural and social risk factors. Girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women aged 20 to 24³. They are also more prone to diseases related to childbirth: sixty-five per cent of all cases of obstetric fistula occur in girls under the age of 18⁴.
- Adolescent girls are often more vulnerable to sexual coercion, and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), especially HIV, which remains a huge concern. In sub-Saharan Africa, 3.2 million young people are living with HIV and three young women are infected for every young man⁵. Sadly, married girls are at a higher risk than women who marry
- later for sexual and domestic violence at the hands of their husbands⁶. Adolescent girls are also at risk of being exploited and having sexual relations with older men for money or services, systematic rape in conflict/post-conflict situations, harmful traditional practices, honor killings/suicides and trafficking.
- Sex education is a controversial topic in many countries. Issues around age of sexual debut, the details of sex education, human sexuality, birth control, pregnancy outside of marriage, teenage pregnancy, premarital sex, morality, abstinence and STIs are widely debated. The AIDS epidemic has given this discussion more urgency.
- Sex education – formal, informal and non-formal - should take into account the needs of young people, also of those who may be out of touch with services and schools including young refugees and asylum-seekers as well as young people in care, in prisons, and living on the street⁷.
- Unfortunately, in many countries schools can choose not to provide sex education⁸.
- The involvement of young people themselves in developing and providing sex education programmes has increased as a means of ensuring the relevance and accessibility of provision. Consultation and collaboration with young people at the point when programmes are designed helps to ensure that they are relevant. The involvement of young people in delivering programmes may reinforce messages as they act as role models to their peers.
- Scientific studies have shown that detailed and comprehensive sex education, giving individuals the

¹ Paragraphs on adolescence in the Plan of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 1994 and the five-year review by the United Nations General Assembly; and the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995 and the five-year review by the United Nations General Assembly.

² World Health Organization (2008). *Why is giving special attention to adolescents important for achieving Millennium Development Goal 5?*, Fact Sheet WHO/MPS/08.14, 2008, accessed at www.who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/events/2008/mdg5/adolescent_preg.pdf

³ United Nations (2001). *We the Children: End-Decade Review of the Follow-up to the World Summit for Children*. Report of the Secretary-General (A/S-27/3).

⁴ World Health Organization (2008). *Why is giving special attention to adolescents important for achieving Millennium Development Goal 5?*, Fact Sheet WHO/MPS/08.14, 2008, accessed at: www.who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/events/2008/mdg5/adolescent_preg.pdf

⁵ UNAIDS (2008). Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic.

⁶ World Health Organization (2008). *Why is giving special attention to adolescents important for achieving Millennium Development Goal 5?*, Fact Sheet WHO/MPS/08.14, 2008, accessed at: www.who.int/making_pregnancy_safer/events/2008/mdg5/adolescent_preg.pdf

⁷ Avert (2011). *Sex Education that Works*. Accessed at: www.avert.org/sex-education.htm

⁸ United Nations Social and Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (1998). *Adolescents In Changing Times: Issues And Perspectives For Adolescent Reproductive Health*.

knowledge and skills to make informed decisions regarding their sexual behaviour, does not necessarily increase sexual activity in young people or lower the age of sexual debut. It often in fact does the opposite⁹.

- In 2008 a global survey on sexual attitudes and behaviours of more than 26,000 people in 26 countries showed national variations with regard to the average age for first experience of sex education. Respondents from Mexico reported receiving their first sex education at 12, whereas for Chinese respondents this was 15 years and 5 months. The agreed average age range that sex education should start is 11 to 16. According to the Durex global study, this period should be considered as a “window of opportunity” for the most effective provision of sex education¹⁰.
- Many adults feel uncomfortable talking about sex with children and young people. Parents are often reluctant to initiate a discussion, yet research shows that positive communication between parents and their children can help young people establish individual values and make healthy decisions. Parents who believe that young people should have the right to accurate sexuality information are often parents whose children will generally delay the initiation of intimacy and use contraceptives when they choose to become sexually active.
- For many young people their friends and peers are the primary or only source of information on sex and sexuality. 85 per cent of those young women surveyed in the WAGGGS’ global survey on adolescent health (2005) said they would feel more comfortable talking to girls their own age about sex.

⁹Kirby, D. (2007). *Emerging Answers 2007: New Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy - Full Report*, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (US). For further information: www.teenpregnancy.org

¹⁰Durex, (2008). *Global Sex Survey*. Durex, SSL international Plc. For further information: <http://www.durexnetwork.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Research%20-%20Face%20of%20Global%20Sex%202008.pdf>