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From choice, a world of possibilities

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THIS ISSUE

Sexuality and religion

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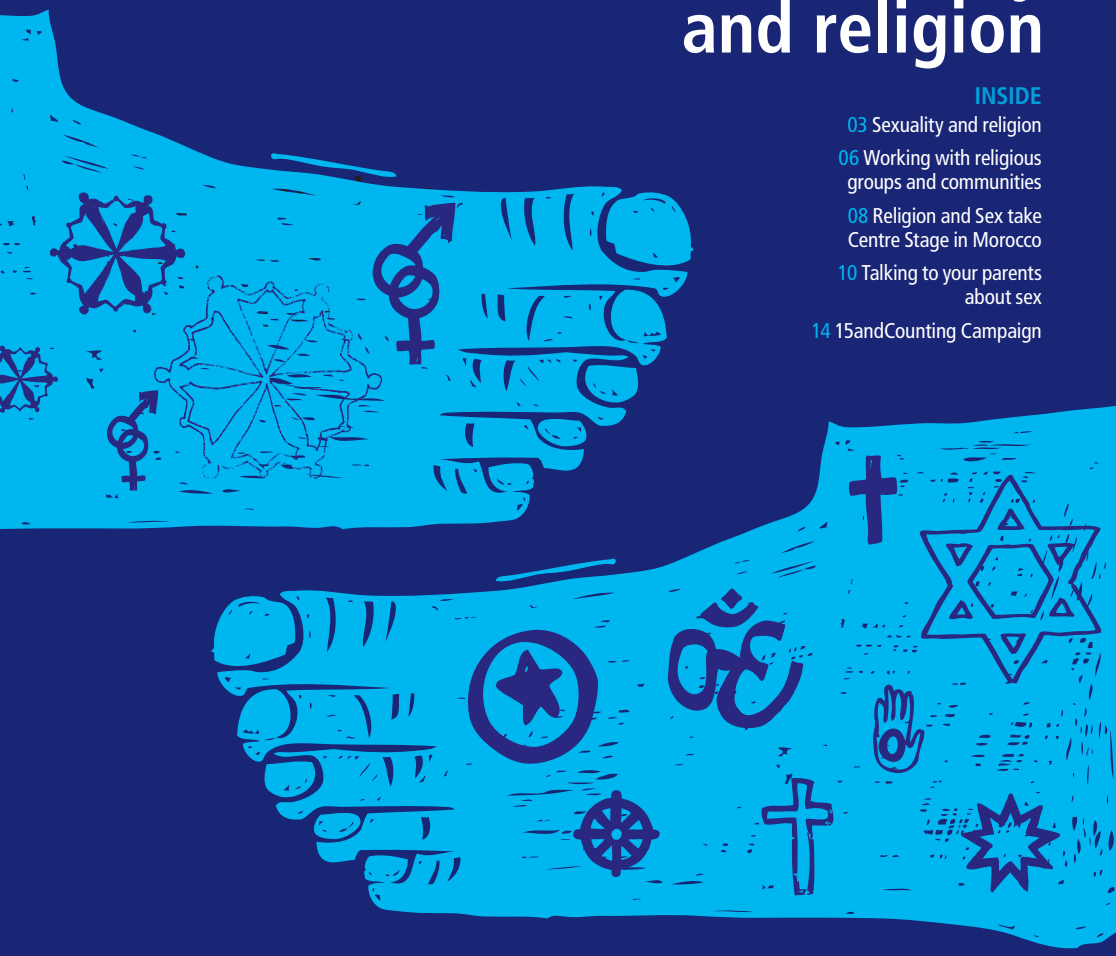

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Welcome

'Religion and sexuality' is our theme for this issue of X-press. Faith and religion can play very important roles in many young people's lives; they can influence your choices, values and your way of life. Faith also helps you make choices about your sexuality, your relationships and your sexual and reproductive health.

In this issue we also talk about the role of parents and give some tips on how to improve communication and resolve conflicts between parents and young people on sexual matters.

This is the last time X-press is printed in hard copy. That doesn't mean it's the end – the new X-press will be online so you can continue to give your ideas and opinions, whether you want to write an article or just comment on what you've read. Get in touch at x-press@ippf.org

Thank you to all who have contributed to this edition!!

Sexuality and religion

Faith, spirituality and religion can play an important role in your life and the society you live in. There are no other institutions in the world that touch as many people throughout their life span.

'My faith makes me feel connected to the most powerful force in existence; it makes me feel comfortable deep inside. My faith helps me to be more creative, more self confident.
I can give more and more because I am sure that someone is taking care of me and will never let me down'

Ahmed, Iraq

Whatever religion, faith or spirituality you have; it shapes your values and the way you take decisions about your life, including your choices and decisions about your sexuality. That said, it is also important to remember that morals, values and ethical views are not exclusive to people who are religious people. Non-religious or atheist people can have equally strong convictions about morals and ethics...

‘When I was younger I spent a long time searching for a faith that I could relate to my personal principles. I used to be really involved with Christianity, and studied a lot ... but it definitely didn´t work for me. I now have less respect for the Catholic Church and I think it´s because of the role they have in my country and elsewhere in Latin America. They frighten people (especially poor ones) with their political propaganda against contraceptives and sex. The Catholic Church and extreme Catholic groups such as Opus Dei, which are very important here, have so much power, politically and economically, that they even are allowed to advocate against sexual and reproductive rights and services on television and on the streets’

Ignacia, Brazil

Religious leaders and institutions can, and often do, play a central role in many public policy discussions, including issues that affect the sexual and reproductive health of young people. For example, Desmond Tutu, former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, has always been supportive of positive sexuality education and the promotion of contraceptive use for young people. Also the international organization Catholics for Free Choice promote safe abortion and comprehensive sexuality education and services for young people.

At the same time, many religious leaders feel that youth should be ‘protected’ from education about sexuality or should only learn about abstinence. They think that if they talk to young people about sex they will encourage them to have sex, something that several scientific studies have found not to be true.

> “Religious values help to strengthen intimacy, faithfulness and trust in sexual and married life. It helps at times of challenge and confusion. Faith or spirituality encourages us to build a healthy and intimate sexual life which is free from coercion and violence.”

> Faith and spirituality have their pros and cons. On one hand, it puts up a set of rules and regulations which if followed properly, can make you a better person. On the other hand, it stifles some issues which are important for present day adolescents…"

Catholics for Choice, 2009

Resistance to providing information or starting a debate about sexual issues – either in faith communities or in secular settings – often comes from people's unwillingness to question firmly-held beliefs. However, the rewards can be great: young people may find that having sexuality education classes in their faith communities – a place where any question will be answered and where guilt and fear are not used as a way to control them – has been the best gift their church, mosque or temple has ever given them.

> Most religious adolescents in sexual relationships do so secretly and will do anything to avoid the consequences of being found out. This could result in HIV infections and even unsafe abortion. However, most religious youth and adolescents prefer to avoid pre-marital sex altogether.

Working with religious groups and communities

> Our difference, our diversity is what makes every human life irreplaceable. Which is why we must never forget that God has given us many faiths, many races, but only one world in which to live together…

Jonathan Sachs, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, London

> …the Member Association of Bangladesh has started a project to support the Madrasah students, teachers (and Imams) as well as young people who don't go to school but live in the vicinity of Madrasahs.

FPAB, 2009

Peer education in Uzbekistan

'We are conducting sexual and reproductive health and rights information seminars for religious groups, for example about safe abortion, contraception and basic information about STIs, but because of the religious aspects we are trying not to discuss controversial questions because the group may react negatively.'

Safar, Uzbekistan

Madrasah Students Initiative for Adolescents Health in Bangladesh

The Madrasah system is a religious style education, segregated by sex, which often appeals to poor and deprived communities. The curriculum in Madrasahs is centred on Islamic studies and acquiring greater understanding of Islamic principles that govern the day-to-day lives of Muslims. Due to political and religious sensitivity to issues surrounding adolescent sexuality, the Madrasah restricts access to information, counselling and services and there's limited opportunities for students to talk about their feelings, queries and anxieties about sex.

To help bridge this gap, the Member Association of Bangladesh has started a project to support the Madrasah students, teachers (and Imams) as well as young people who don't go to school but live in the vicinity of Madrasahs. They do this through a combination of peer education programmes, monthly interactive sessions on sexual and reproductive health and rights, student/teacher forums and youth friendly services. So far the project has reached around 20,000 people.

Afroza Khanam Sume, Bangladesh

FPAB, 2009

Useful web sites

http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/
http://www.condoms4life.org/
http://www.religiousconsultation.org/
http://www.youthandreligion.org/
http://www.thebody.com/content/living/art2439.html
http://www.islamonline.net/
http://www.religioustolerance.org/

Religion and Sex take Centre Stage in Morocco

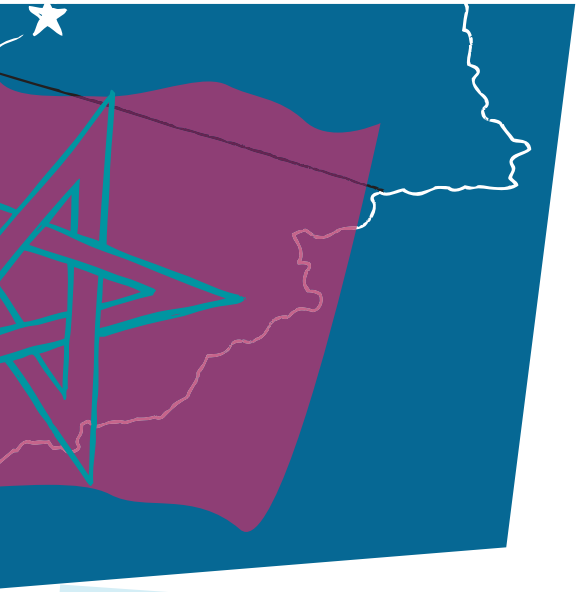
From the beginning of human history, religion and sexuality have shared certain characteristics like desire, mystery, ritual, passion, ecstasy and union. But all too often talking about sex and religion together can be a controversial and uncomfortable discussion.

Religious leaders play a key role in the dialogue about sexuality, sex education and HIV prevention, yet they find it hard to engage in an honest and realistic way with these issues.[1]

One of IPPF's core values is to work in partnership with young people to improve their sexual and reproductive health and rights. We believe that, if young people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds can meet together to discuss sexuality, we could have an enormous impact on their sexual and reproductive health. That is why we decided to give young people in our organization a voice on the issues of religion, faith, spirituality and sexuality.

It began in November last year, when IPPF held a Youth Meeting in Rabat, Morocco, with young volunteers and staff from all parts of the world. They came from Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Ireland, Uzbekistan, India, Cameroon, Ghana, Brazil, Chili, Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt to discuss the links between faith, religion, sexuality and young people's

1 World Council of Churches' Plan of Action: the Ecumenical response to HIV/AIDS in Africa.



"You know how I felt about religion before I came here? We were asked our expectations of this meeting and this girl just looked at me and said: 'I hope we leave our stigmas and discrimination aside, I mean religious and non religious people'… it hit me… I felt ashamed and thankful... I really had a stigma against very religious people... so... maybe it is time to leave it in the past?"

IPPF, 2008

"Does your faith actually talk about sexuality? This question flashed in my mind...I can tell you that I was never even introduced to issues about sexuality from my faith as a Buddhist…Today's discussion really gave me the opportunity to see how other countries and religions work with faith and religion…today's session motivated me to look for the first step to work on this issue."

sexual health and rights. Some were Muslim, Catholic, Buddhist, or Christian, and others didn't feel that they belonged to any specific church or religion.

Each evening participants wrote a letter home, to family, friends or anybody else they wanted to share their experience and feelings with. Many of the letters were insightful and inspiring. They covered the aspects of the meeting that they thought went well – and those that didn't go so well – as well as the things that challenged and inspired them. Here are some of their thoughts.

What we learned from the meeting is that it is possible to have a positive dialogue between young people and adults about the meaning of faith, religion and spirituality in their lives and how it affects their views and ideas on sex and sexuality. The participants also identified opportunities to better promote young people's sexual health and rights in a religious context, and how to address a range of complex issues from condom promotion to preventing unwanted pregnancy.

If you want to know more, check out the web link: **http://www.ippf.org/en/Resources/Reports-reviews/9th+Youth+Working+Group+Meeting+Report.htm**

We hope it will inspire you to arrange a similar debate in your own community?

"At the moment I miss home. I still remember how [my mum and I] sat down and had a heart to heart talk about my life story. But we never talked about sex I told myself it is our culture that stops us from doing so. I truly understand that. Mummy, I really would like to let you know, I would like to share this experience with my children in the future."

"I cannot describe to you how amazing the meeting was today. Everyone is speaking from their heart with no limits… we are not used to speaking about sex and religion, but it did happen, my friend."

talking to your parents about sex

Whether you're living in Uganda or in the USA, scientists and researchers agree that communication between young people and their parents is a critical factor for healthy adolescent development.

It's worth remembering that parenting is often not just about your father and mother, other adults such as siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles or other care givers can take on different 'parenting roles', all helping to influence and guide you.

Parents talking to their children

Parents often find sex and sexuality one of the most difficult things to discuss. Learning about sex and sexuality has long been misunderstood by parents. For many, it simply means a hasty lecture on reproduction, like where babies come from, or an anatomy lesson showing that men have a penis and women have a vagina. Others may wait until their child reaches puberty to talk about bodily changes such as menstruation though it seems that parents rarely ever mention wet dreams! With very few exceptions, these kinds of discussions are initiated and carried out by the mother or another woman in the household. Rarely do fathers provide any direct sexual information to their children, especially to their daughters.

Discussing sexuality requires a certain skill. Unfortunately, most parents feel uncomfortable talking about sex with their teenagers, perhaps because they are unsure of the facts themselves.

'My children never asked me anything, but I think I gave out signals that I wasn't feeling comfortable discussing sex with them.'
(Gary, father, UK)

'Talking to your children about sex is never easy. I shared my own adolescent experiences with my daughters, and that created a chance for us to connect as women and friends.'
(Nono, mother, South Africa)

Young people's sexual rights: the role of parents

Can adults make decisions on sexual and reproductive health issues on behalf of young people? Only if they are in the young person's best interests.

One of the articles of the Convention of the Right of the Child (CRC) says that the best interests of the child must be the primary concern when adults and parents are making any decisions about them. The CRC also states that young people have the right to participate in decisions being made on their behalf.

When an adult acts in the *best interests of a child or young person* then their decision must be in line with that young person's other rights.

For example, a parent might argue that female genital mutilation (FGM) is in the best interests of their child because it is traditional. However FGM is a violation of a young person's right to health, bodily integrity and to be free from harmful practices. Therefore it would never be in a young person's best interests to undergo FGM.

In another example, a parent might refuse to allow their child to receive comprehensive sexuality education at school. If the child was going to be given the education at home then his/her right to information and education on sexual and reproductive health would still be met. However if the parent did not intend to give that information at home – *and was denying the child the possibility of getting it at school* – then this would violate their right and would not be in their best interests.

The UK Family Planning Association provides a range of useful resources for parents on talking to young people about sex. For more information visit: **http://www.fpa.org.uk/Shop/**

Parents and sexuality education

Growing up in Ireland as a teenager in the 21st century, it was far from normal to talk to your parents about sex or sexuality. Our parents – and Irish society – held traditional views and many social issues were still taboo. Divorce, for example, was not legalized until 1995. It was a case of 'no sex before marriage' and 'one man for one woman' until recent years.

Now just over a decade later, the situation is almost ironic.

Recent reports from The Well Woman Clinic in Dublin have shown a sudden rise in the demand for services and in STI diagnoses among 40 and 50 year-olds. The reason for this lies in the legalization of divorce. This generation of divorced and separated people are starting relationships once again and learning to play the casual sex game. They are of an era in Ireland where sex education did not exist. As a result they are now learning the hard way about sexually transmitted infections and diseases.

If some parents are so far from educated themselves, how do we propose they talk to their children about such issues?

'Don't get me wrong, we should continue to expect parents to play an educational role when it comes to sexuality education. After all, out of all the sources of information on sexuality, parents rank the highest when it comes to young people's confidence and trust. It's obvious young people want to be able to talk to their parents. So if we want to tackle the taboo around talking to our parents about sex, we first need to educate our parents about sex!'

Ruth Ennis, 21, Ireland

Young people talking to their parents

Currently an increasing number of workshops and classes are held to support parents. There are also books and brochures written for parents on how best to talk about sex with their child. But there is hardly anything written from a young person's perspective. What is the best way to talk to your parents when it comes to sex and sexuality? Are they the ones who need to know everything about your personal life? Can you ask them anything you want or are you too embarrassed to do so? Would you like to be able to discuss these things with them?

'It's not cool, parents don't understand; they act like they have never done anything wrong.'
(boy, 16 USA)

'My father is OK but my mother is too obsessive; she wants to know everything. I am sure she will tell her friends about anything I confide in her.'
(girl, 16, Netherlands)

'Opening up to adults and especially to your parents is quite tough and has always been, but I feel it is important as you not only learn from them but they learn from you too.'
(girl, 20, Zambia)

'Personally I think it is really good if you can tell your parents what you feel, as long as you are not being disrespectful to them or anything.'
(girl, 15, Sri Lanka)

Chloe Hall, 2007

Let's talk about sex.

Projects that are helping young people and parents talk together

- In **Senegal** parents learned to discuss sexual and reproductive health issues with their children in the *Parents as Partners* project.
- In the **UK**, the Family Planning Association educates parents on talking to their children about sexuality and sexual health form a very young age – These parents in turn become peer educators for other parents.
- **Kenya's** *Adolescent Reproductive Health Project* showed that participating parents of both sexes were more knowledgeable about ways to avoid HIV infection and other STIs than those living in areas with no activities specifically aimed at parents.
- In **Bhutan**, qualitative evidence demonstrated that parents who took part in the *School-Based Parents Education and Awareness Project* had a better understanding of adolescent development and other challenges facing young people and reported that this had helped them to become better parents.
- Parents who participated in the project *Improving the Outlook of Adolescent Girls and Boys of* ***Mongolia*** became involved in the support and development of out-of-school adolescent clubs.
- In **Lithuania**, parents of adolescents with substance use problems attended the self-help group as part of the *Parents in Partnership* project and began to seek help and advice on a consistent basis from other professionals.
- Most of the adolescents whose parents had been exposed to the *Cool Parents Guide* in **Malawi** indicated that they had noticed a change in the way their parents talked to them: parents shouted less and seemed more understanding!

(source WHO, Helping parents in developing countries improve adolescents' health, 2007)

TIPS

for talking about sex for you and your parents

For you

- You can help parents to overcome their awkwardness by being always open and honest.
- Find the right moment: sometimes it helps to talk about sex without looking directly at your father or mother; while doing the dishes for instance.
- Don't give up, walk away or get angry if you feel your parents don't listen or don't understand you; they need some time to understand and adjust to the fact you are growing up and have your own opinions.
- Share leaflets and brochures on sex education with your parents; they might need the information as much as you do.
- Ask your father or mother how they coped with their sexuality and their questions when they were young.
- At the end of the day, your parents are still captain of the family 'ship'; but that doesn't mean that you cannot help them to guide them safely into the harbour.

For your parents

- You can learn to talk about sex. If you are uncomfortable with saying sexual words out loud you can practice them – alone, with your partner, or in conversations with a friend –until they feel natural.
- Listen to your child; show you are open to their questions and opinions.
- You need to brush up on some basic facts to provide your child with accurate knowledge about masturbation, intercourse, safer sex, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.
- You need to provide values about sex. Standards of behaviour are good for adolescents, as well as for adults. Adolescents want and need sensible guidelines from their parents.
- You need to recognize and validate your child's feelings. This is a unique opportunity to get to know your child better.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know the answer to that question." But, be sure to follow up with, "Let's find out together!" Then do so.
- Don't condemn your child; you can disagree with their behaviour but don't humiliate her or him.

15andCounting Campaign

In March this year IPPF launched a global campaign to address the lack of progress made by governments all over the world to improve young people's sexual health and rights: it's called 15andCounting.

Fifteen years ago, at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, 179 governments signed up to a Programme of Action to improve the sexual and reproductive health of everyone. With only five years remaining to meet their commitments, many governments are failing to make progress towards these goals, particularly in meeting the needs of all young people.

These ICPD commitments include:

- To improve family planning and sexual health services
- To reduce abortion rates
- To ensure that all pregnancies and children are wanted; and
- To deliver information and access to affordable condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections

Now, 15 years later, young people are still facing many problems. Governments have not done enough:

- Lack of access to condoms and contraception is a major contributor to poverty and premature death around the world.
- The leading cause of death of girls and young women (15-19 years old) globally is pregnancy and childbirth.
- There are 60 million child brides world-wide. This figure is set to increase to 100 million within ten years.
- Each day, some 500,000 young people, mostly young women, are infected with a Sexually Transmitted Infection (excluding HIV).
- Young people aged 15-24 account for half of all new HIV infections worldwide.
- Only 17 per cent of sexually active young people use contraceptives.
- Two million girls are genitally mutilated every year.
- Today, more than 200 million women do not have access to the modern contraceptives they need.

Because of these remaining problems, the 15andCounting campaign is demanding better access to sexual health services and education for everyone. We hope that you will contribute too. Demand to know what your government has done, or has not done, to deliver better sexual health services and education.

We need to put pressure on governments all over the world to review the promises they made and to speed up programmes so that they fulfil their commitment to provide better access to sexual and reproductive health services for all young people.

Publications feedback

- Was this document useful?
- Did this document answer your questions?
- What other questions would you like us to answer?
- Do you know where to get more information on any of the subjects covered in this issue of X-press?
- Would you like more copies? (and if so, how many?)

Send all responses to xpress@ippf.org

Send your contributions by post or email to:

IPPF Central Office
4 Newhams Row, SE1 3UZ
London, United Kingdom
tel +44 (0)20 7939 8200
fax +44 (0)20 7939 8300
email xpress@ippf.org

registered charity number: 229476

> 15and counting is running in 176 countries world-wide through IPPF's Member Associations

What you can do:

- Sign the petition at **www.15andcounting.org** to demand better access to sexual health services and education for everyone. We will present this petition to United Nations Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon in October.
- 15and counting is running in 176 countries world-wide through IPPF's Member Associations; so get in touch with the Member Association In your country. See **www.ippf.org** for details.
- Download the resource kit from the 15andcounting website and organize meetings and campaign activities with young people in your country.
- You can spread the word in many ways, by:
  - Driving people to the online petition through social networks and websites
  - Working with partner organizations and youth action groups
  - Advocating to politicians and governments
  - Giving out our 15andcounting postcards so that young people without access to computers or mobile phones, particularly in rural communities, can also sign the petition.
  - IPPF is partnering with Instant Messaging providers – for example we're working with mobile phone instant messaging provider MXit, so people without access to a computer (which is crucial in some parts of Africa, for example) can sign the petition through their mobile phone.

Sign up to the petition and download resources for the campaign at www.15andcounting.org

Why not also join the 15andcounting Facebook group, twitter and YouTube.