

Voices from Nicaragua



***“I haven’t had sex, but I now know how to protect myself if I ever do. I won’t get pregnant; I’m only 15!”
15-year old female student***

Asociación Pro-Bienestar de la Familia Nicaragüense (Profamilia): Comprehensive sexuality education

This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called “IPPF Changing lives” which capture the stories of IPPF’s beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed - in some cases, lives saved - and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference.

Asociación Pro-Bienestar de la Familia Nicaragüense (Profamilia), IPPF’s Member Association in Nicaragua, successfully advocated for the integration and implementation of comprehensive, gender-sensitive and rights-based sexuality education in primary and secondary school national curricula. Profamilia’s efforts have had a wider effect, as young people’s lives are changing as a result of the new curriculum.

Profamilia took a lead role in building a national comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) network in Nicaragua, which includes strategic partners such as UNFPA and the Ministry of Education (MINED). The Association helped increase the skills of young people to advocate for their sexual and reproductive health and rights to MINED. Profamilia collaborated with MINED in reviewing the new national curriculum and its new CSE component, and helped to increase the capacity of MINED’s technical committee to implement it in Nicaragua.

Implementation of the new national curriculum started in 2009 in primary and secondary schools. The CSE component covers topics such as personality development, the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, human rights, gender equity, health and national/cultural identity. The CSE component is not a class in itself; rather, it is considered a cross-cutting topic that any teacher can teach during his/her classes. According to the young people who have studied under the new curriculum, it has made a significant difference to their lives in terms of new knowledge, increased confidence and improved relationships with their parents.

¹ www.options.co.uk/peer

“Everything I learned from this new curriculum I wish I had learned from my parents. I’ve always been interested in this topic; it’s something I see as beautiful. And with my kids, I won’t hide anything and I will talk about it like it is normal.”
15-year old male



Achievements

The new curriculum has empowered young people to protect themselves now and in the future, make informed decisions about sexuality-related issues and establish and maintain healthy relationships, whether sexual or not.

The knowledge gained from the new CSE curriculum has equipped young people with the confidence and maturity to make informed decisions about when and how to initiate, engage in and/or abstain from sexual relationships. This type of information is largely absent in their homes, especially as most parents did not receive any of this education when they were young, so receiving it at school has been an enlightening experience for them. Students feel confident about the future, knowing they will be able to enjoy healthy sexual relationships, plan pregnancies and avoid STIs and HIV. In many cases, they have also taught their parents about these issues.

Teenage pregnancy in Nicaragua is common,² and pregnant girls as young as 13 often leave school due to a combination of stigma and lack of support - from parents, school and the wider community. However, there has been a perceived drop in the rate of teenage pregnancy since the start of the CSE curriculum, and many of the students appreciate that they now know how to avoid pregnancy.

The new curriculum has helped clarify myths and misconceptions about sexuality, which are widely circulated in Nicaraguan society and at the students' homes. For example, students discussed that they have learned – and now teach each other – that condoms do not block sensation.

The CSE component of the new curriculum has instilled a sense of self esteem in the young people, the confidence of self expression and the

ability to overcome personal problems, such as coping with the psychological consequences of childhood sexual abuse. Young people are now more open – about sexuality but also in general – with each other, their teachers and their parents. Many of them have overcome shyness and are more able to socialize with their peers.

Students value their newfound maturity and ability to view sexuality as natural and not 'vulgar', and talk about sex and sexuality in a mature, open way with their friends and family, and, in the future, with their own children.

Young people have learned about sexuality in terms of gender and sexual rights. Girls have learned how to negotiate with boys and choose if and when to have sex. Boys and girls discussed how they have learned to protect and respect their – and each other's – bodies and how sex must be consensual. Also, boys now value girls and do not see them as sex objects, but rather as peers and/or as people with whom to have a more intimate relationship, whether sexual or not. One peer interviewer described the changes in an 18-year old male friend: "He has learned to value women. Before, he used to think because they're there, he'll just have sex with them. Now he knows that they're not just there to have sex with and leave them, but to appreciate them and not hurt them, to value them."

Another major change in the lives of many of the students is an improvement in their relationships with their parents. Generally, there is a new level of openness and trust between them, which in many cases did not exist before. Despite the wide generation gap, especially in terms of learning about and discussing sexuality, students have begun to openly discuss sexuality and other issues with their parents, which has helped lead to overall improved communications.

² Nicaragua has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Latin America and the Caribbean, with about 25 per cent of all births being to girls aged between 15 and 19 (Amnesty International, 2009, Available at: http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/NI/AI_UPR_NIC_S07_2010_AmnestyInternational.pdf).

Challenges

Despite these significant achievements related to parents, it has been a slow process because of the massive gap between the two generations in terms of openness and knowledge about the subject. According to the students and teachers, parents represented the most common challenge to learning the new CSE curriculum and putting it into practice. Also, many students still face problems because of a lack of support at home, where myths are perpetuated, sexuality issues are seen as taboo and where family life is often structured around the absence of fathers or the presence of abusive fathers, step-fathers and, sometimes, mothers. Parents' lack of education on sexuality - including the most basic reproductive health education - means that they are unable to teach their children, so students are often unable to reinforce what they learn at school with their parents.

The lack of adequately trained teachers to implement CSE is another challenge. Profamilia has been successful in training teachers, but they have only trained a handful of the thousands of teachers in the country. Teachers do receive training from MINED, but some teachers have said that it is not adequate to teach CSE properly.

Lack of CSE resources intensifies the challenge of inadequately trained teachers. MINED has prepared a CSE manual with support from Profamilia. However, the ministry has not yet published this manual, so CSE is being implemented across Nicaragua without a standard guide. Inadequate training (including the lack of CSE resources) may be leading to the dissemination of messages that are inaccurate or that do not correspond with IPPF's vision, mission and core values. For example, students discussed how they have learned as part of their sexuality education that masturbation in excess causes mental disorders, and sexual intercourse should not be about pleasure - but just about love.

Another challenge to implementing the CSE project has been the extreme conservatism in Nicaragua, including the values promulgated by the hugely influential Catholic Church, especially

within the government. This has likely been a major factor contributing to the CSE manual not being published and distributed, as there is disconnect between CSE topics and some of the traditional Catholic values. Profamilia is addressing this challenge by trying to engage the Church at the municipal level.

Lessons

The importance of ongoing training of teachers is paramount to implementing CSE in Nicaragua, where previous generations have extremely limited knowledge of sexuality, including basic reproductive health and methods of contraception. Publication and distribution of the CSE manual would enable teachers to teach CSE effectively and would help limit the inaccurate messages.

The strategy of involving young people as advocates has been highly successful in implementing the CSE project in Nicaragua. Profamilia decided to engage young people as a way of opening up its relationship with MINED. Young people, particularly those who have benefited from the CSE component of the new curriculum, expressed both skills and passion that could be capitalized on in future advocacy efforts to promote CSE in Nicaragua.

Involving parents and providing training for them in sexuality-related issues has been successful and has supported valuable relationship changes between parents and their children; this should be continued in the future and strengthened. While parents can be a barrier for young people learning about sexuality, many have expressed that they want to be in a position to understand and help their children, especially by knowing how to talk to them about sexuality. Their initial reluctance can be overcome by showing how this kind of information can equip their children with the means to protect themselves in the future.

Given the challenging context, Profamilia's CSE project has been successful in that the new curriculum is being rolled out across the country, and the lives of young people and their parents are clearly benefiting from it.

“They don’t have as much fear to ask us things; we’ve bonded because we’re all learning – kids and parents together.”
Mother



“She can tell her boyfriend when and how they’ll have sex. We learn that if young women don’t want to have sex, they don’t have to. It would be rape. We learn it has to be consensual.”
Peer interviewer describing 15-year old female student

“This programme has helped her to mature because in the past, she thought of sexuality as something vulgar and now she’s realized that it’s something natural and that you should take it with responsibility.”

Peer interviewer describing 17-year old female student



Changing lives ...

Nicaragua	
Country context¹	
Population (millions), 2010	5.8
Gross enrolment ratio (% of school-age males and females), 2010	72.1
Population living below the national poverty line (%), 2000-2006	15.8
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2010	73.8
Context for women and girls	
Maternal mortality rate (deaths per 100,000 live births), 2010 ²	100
Percentage of all births to girls aged between 15 and 19 (%) ³	25.0

¹ UNDP, Human Development Report 2010. Available at <<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/NIC.html>>. Accessed on 20th December 2010.

² Ibid.

³ Amnesty International (2009) Nicaragua: Amnesty International submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review. Available at <http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session7/NI/AI_UPR_NIC_S07_2010_AmnestyInternational.pdf>. Accessed 5th January 2011.



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The International Planned Parenthood Federation is global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

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