



My Body My Rights

Rangeen Khidki Foundation
✕ Tashi Namgyal Academy

Zero Point, P.O. Raj Bhawan
Gangtok, Sikkim – 737103

25th - 27th March 2022



Introduction

Rangeen Khidki Foundation conducted the My Body My Rights Program with 32 teachers at the Tashi Namgyal Academy (TNA) located in the idyllic setting of Gangtok, Sikkim from 25th to 27th March, 2022.

TNA offers its students an environment for learning and development in all spheres of life and strives for holistic development of the students, intellectually, emotionally, morally and physically. Thus building capacities of their teachers with comprehensive sexuality education was a priority for the school to ensure overall well being of their students. Children and adolescents are unable to reach their fullest potential unless they have a supportive and healthy ecosystem, thus building capacities of stakeholders becomes crucial, so that they are able to help students navigate through various life journeys.





The first day of the session began with a discussion around why and how comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is different from sex education. It was clarified to the participants that providing information on sexuality is not the same as teaching someone how to have sex. It includes an understanding of gender roles and identities, information on sexual anatomy and physiology, on how sexuality is related to well-being, on how one's gender and sexuality interacts with family or community, the impact it has on one's growth, how it affects their choice making processes, expressing one's identity, all of this collectively contributes to the overall well being of children and adolescents. CSE aims to provide a space where young people can understand and feel comfortable about their sexuality in a non-judgmental environment, rather than having to repress it or view it through a negative lens; a space where they have the people to talk about sexuality-related concerns, as well as the access to correct, unbiased information about these sexuality-related concerns. Sexuality education provides young people the knowledge, skills, and values they require to be able to grow up happy and healthy. It builds the capacity to take personal decisions, to understand and identify options and to exercise the rights to choose in a responsible way. Thus it is crucial for schools and teachers to be able to provide a safer space for their students where they can feel comfortable and be the best version of themselves without any fear or judgement.



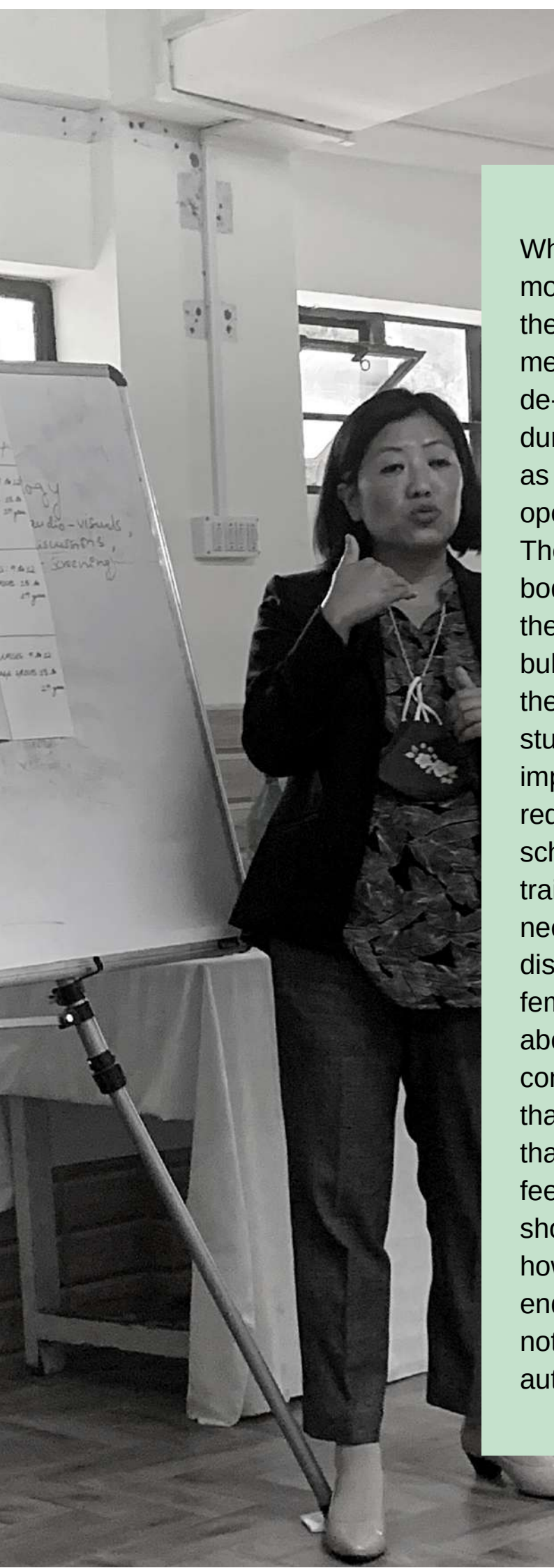
Something that repeatedly came up during the conversations was that the teachers did not have enough understanding of CSE owing to the shame and stigma around these topics. The discomfort and awkwardness was visible during the entire session but the fact that the teachers sat through the sessions despite the awkwardness indicated their zeal to break away from the same. There were a lot of discussions on how lack of safe judgement-free space makes it increasingly challenging for students and young people to access the information they need and may, in turn, force them to seek information from sources that may not be reliable or accurate and age and stage appropriate. As facilitators, we wanted to encourage our teachers to be open to learning the knowledge and skills required to become an effective CSE provider and to help make schools and colleges a safe and inclusive space for young people. Teachers may also be worried that they could lose their students' respect if they taught sexuality education. On the contrary, many studies have firmly established that young people are in need of this information.



Another concern that came up was that giving students information about sexuality might encourage them to experiment. To address this concern, it was shared that as per worldwide research, when young people are given age-appropriate information that is accurate, balanced and lays stress on safety, responsibility, and protection, without being judgmental or fear-based, it empowers them to make informed choices. One query that repeatedly came up was what is the right age to start, how much to say, how to say, where to get resources, repercussions from parents. Adolescents and Youth are curious and they will experiment anyway. With access to the internet, no information is beyond their reach. But they are often directed towards misinformation and myths which can have long term ill effects on their sexual wellbeing and health.



Thus spreading awareness and providing accurate information about sexuality and wellbeing is important. Sexuality education reduces not only potentially negative consequences of sexual behaviour like unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and child sexual abuse but also increases well-being by enhancing the quality of life and relationships of young people. The broad topics that come under CSE can be delivered to the students according to their age level and appropriateness, but conversations on them need to start as early as possible. Consent, boundaries, relationships, gender and sexuality plays out in all spheres of our lives. It is inherently a part of who we are as individuals.



When the conversations in the session moved to puberty and growing up, one of the teachers who taught biology mentioned that she tried to normalise and de-stigmatise the process of menstruation during her classes. She said that students as well as adults are shy and hesitant to openly talk about the biological process. The need for CSE in schools goes beyond bodies. Teachers of TNA shared that there had been multiple incidents of bullying within the school and some of them were even violent in nature. The student council of the school realised the importance of sexuality education and requested the authorities for one. The school counsellor shared that CSE training is the need of the hour and that it needs to be taken seriously. During our discussions around gender stereotypes, a female teacher shared her experience about how she feels the need to continuously come across as strong so that people take her seriously, she said that dressing up a certain way made her feel confident and that gender expression should not be judged. This also shows how the world around us views power, we end up feeling that feminine clothes are not powerful enough to gain respect and authority.

Every young person's experiences are gendered and that affects how they live, think, and feel. It affects their self-image and their behaviours. It affects everything. Gender is usually considered 'natural' when in fact it is a social construct. To break out of deeply ingrained gender roles and stereotypes is a challenge we are still trying to overcome. It is important to consciously check ourselves before putting ourselves or the students in gendered boxes, let them explore who they are and become the best versions of themselves.

When the conversation during the session was happening around private and public body parts, there was a male teacher who mentioned that he hated being touched in his legs, below the knees. Other teachers added by saying that they did not like it when anyone touched their hair, or hand and so on. This shows that even though there are distinctive public and private body parts marked separately for male and female bodies, the entirety of all bodies are private. It is important that we encourage young people to freely express their need for space or not wanting to be touched. Towards the end of the session, the teachers of TNA drafted their own action plans, during which they referred to the My Body My Rights curriculum for conversation points and learning activities.



Suggestions

Teachers work under many pressures of school and home, and the intention is not to add to their workload. Depending on TNA's school curriculum and policies, sexuality education need not be a different 'subject'. It is vital for teachers to think of new ways by which these issues can be incorporated into daily teaching; they can think of creative and original ways to introduce these issues by including these topics in debates, discussions, poster making, dance shows, or other activities, once they feel confident and comfortable about these issues themselves. As discussed during the session, even teachers of physics and chemistry can incorporate CSE into their classrooms.

Teachers may also be worried that they could lose their students' respect if they taught sexuality education. On the contrary, many studies have firmly established that young people are in need of this information. Therefore, they are not likely to lose respect for someone who gives them accurate information in a matter-of-fact, reliable manner. Age appropriateness of delivery of information is the key, providing the students with simple information but accurate information, instead of sharing biased information. For example, if primary school students seem curious where do children come from, you can tell them that when parents fall in love, they come together and bring children into this world. Children are usually satisfied with simple answers and simple answers are enough to saturate their curiosity. It is only as they grow older, their questions get detailed.





It is important that teachers as well as parents understand that providing information on sexuality is not the same as teaching someone how to engage in sexual intercourse. It includes information on sexual anatomy and physiology, on how sexuality is related to well-being, emotions, relationships, on how one's sexuality interacts with family or community, how that makes one feel, talking about one's choices in relationships, friendships, expressing one's sexual identity, etc. Questions about sexuality arise early in life. A child may start with wanting to know why a female body is different from a male body, or why "Mothers have breasts". Sometimes, if questions are not answered or information is not given, unnecessary fears may creep in. Adults who feel shame in talking about bodies, can often pass on the shame with their body language and as children are quick to notice body languages, they instantly can pick it up and associate shame with similar topics growing up. Silence or discomfort when dealing with sexual and reproductive anatomy and physiology can lead to misinformation, perpetuate myths, and even affect one's physical and/or mental health. Providing factually sound information in a matter-of-fact manner that is free of judgement may help in breaking down barriers like shame, ignorance and silence as well as promote safe behaviour.

Suggestions



Teachers shared that most girls and menstruators in schools are unprepared for menstruation, their first period can lead to a deep fear that they are bleeding because of some terrible disease and they might die soon. Similarly, adolescent males may not understand why the penis suddenly stiffens up or may feel terribly ashamed about nocturnal emission or think that they are regressing to childhood and urinating in their bed. While innumerable sources of information and awareness have opened up for children and young people, there still remain many confusions and doubts in their minds. By providing the correct information, we end up helping young people make responsible and safer choices in their lives, the school, the teachers and educators ensure that the environment provided to the students is safe and inclusive and furthers their overall well-being.

Suggestions



Contrary to popular belief, female bodied persons need to know about nocturnal emission and male bodied persons need to know about menstruation too. In addition, all students need to know about intersex bodies and be aware of diversity of bodies including those with disabilities. As discussed during our session, gender identities are beyond the binaries; therefore using more inclusive vocabulary will go a long way in conveying messages of existence and respect for diversity.

If schools need to enforce certain dress codes, it is important to explain to students that the reasons behind those rules are to encourage equality among students and not shame those who wish to/appear different. Gender neutral uniforms for all students irrespective of gender may work in some contexts (urban, metropolitan cities) to help students (and parents) pick up messages of equality and inclusivity. We are glad to know that TNA provides a choice to their students on the kind of uniform they want to wear.



Schools and teachers play a crucial role in influencing and shaping young peoples' impressions about themselves. Schools and teachers can help young people question popular stereotypes reflected in the media and highlight the potential of media to affect change. With the growth of social and other informal media streams, alternative narratives are being created and showcased, and these can be discussed in the classroom. When a safe and non-judgmental space is provided to children and young people to discuss their questions, learn information, values, and skills that are relevant to their lived experiences, and that satisfy their curiosity, they develop confidence about their bodies, share their feelings without fear and are better able to understand consent. People who have a healthy self-perception make more well-informed and better decisions than people who think poorly of themselves. That is why it is important that young people develop good self-esteem and a positive body image.



Challenges

Though there is now more discussion about sexuality-related issues in the public domain, there are still many norms and societal and attitudinal barriers that prevent parents, teachers and young people from being able to comfortably be who they are, and from feeling safe and free enough to understand and accept their sexuality in a way that does not harm themselves or anyone else. To be able to push ourselves out of our comfort zone when it comes to talking about sexuality education will continue to pose a challenge. Thus, it becomes important to continuously and consciously unlearn our biases and relearn new ways of creating safer spaces of the students.

Way Forward

In order to chalk out the future steps the teachers formed various groups and selected different topics of sexuality education such as consent, puberty, gender and bullying to design various plans and deliver them in their classrooms in the next few months. Two such action plan designs that were created by the teachers as a way forward are mentioned below. After designing their plans, they presented them to the entire group of teachers for further discussion and feedback. The director of TNA came forward to create a support system and a sense of solidarity organically developed among the teachers.



Group 1

Topic	Timeline	Class	Methodology
Personal Space and Boundaries	1 week	Class 6-8	<p>a) Discussion on what is personal space and boundaries for students.</p> <p>b) Activity: Real Life Situation</p> <p>c) Next Steps: Guidance by teacher, seeking help from experts such as counsellors.</p>
Consent	1 week	Class 6-8	<p>Meaning of consent, educating students with the help of powerpoint presentations and audio visual aids.</p>
Respectful Communication	1 week	Class 6-8	<p>Acceptance of disagreements</p> <p>a) Activity: Real life situation</p> <p>b) Next Steps: Guidance by teachers and seeking help from experts such as counsellors.</p>

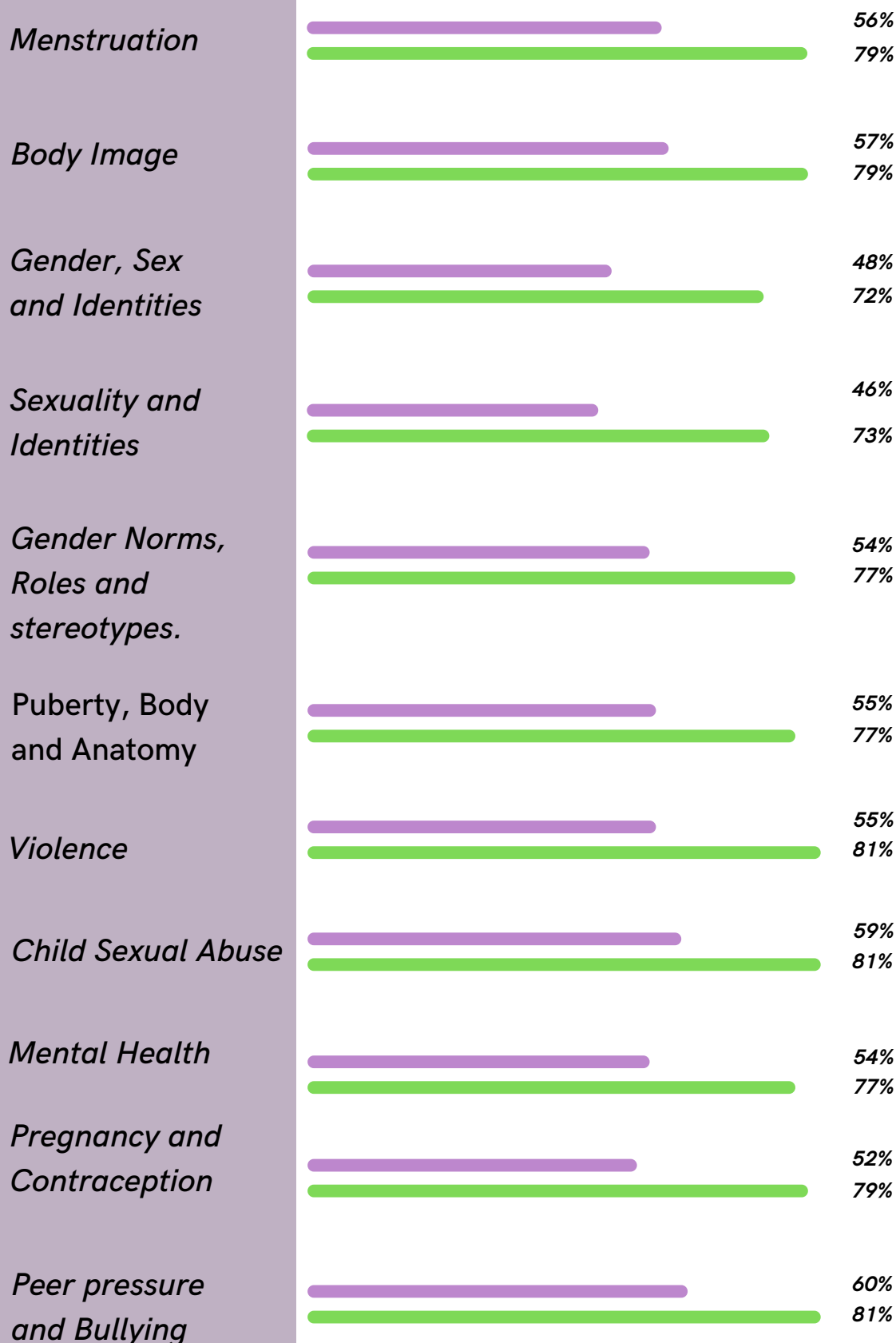
Group 2

Topic	Timeline	Age group	Methodology
Body and Anatomy	1 Month	10 - 20 years	<p>a) Ice breaking session : Activity- pass the thread Testing prior knowledge : Activity- Draw stages b) of human body</p> <p>c) Discourage using euphemisms, share personal experiences.</p> <p>d) Body and Anatomy images</p>
Menstruation	1 Month	10 - 20 years	<p>a) Brief idea and testing prior knowledge</p> <p>b) Puberty</p> <p>c) Normalising onset of menstruation : Not dirty blood, nutritious blood that is supposed to provide nutrition to the embryo.</p> <p>d) Hygiene, mention about menstrual products that are available.</p> <p>e) Role of boys - be supportive, be understanding, do not shame or make fun.</p>

Topic	Timeline	Age group	Methodology
Consent	3 weeks	10 - 20 years	a) Activity: Body Mapping b) Private and Public parts c) Safe and Unsafe touch d) Video of Bakshi Uncle e) Safe Space
Violence	3 weeks	10 - 20 years	a) Activity: scale of violence b) Types of Violence - emotional, verbal, physical etc c) Gender based violence d) Safe space
Gender and Sex Identities	3 weeks	13 - 20 years	a) Identifying the difference between gender identity and sex identity b) Development of gender identity c) Cis gender and Trans Gender d) Activity - Case study and group discussions. e) Safe space f) Gender dysphoria

We strongly suggest that out of the 32 teachers, the school can select a group of 10 or 15 teachers who can together take responsibility of delivering comprehensive sexuality education based classes/sessions throughout the year across different classes and Rangeen Khidki can provide technical assistance in designing such sessions and measuring outcomes etc.

Output



Pre Session Post Session

Reflections



Was partially aware of the difference between Gender and Sex. However, the information on the different kinds of sexualities was very insightful.



Healthy mind is a healthy society so as teachers we need to understand the mental health of the students and mentor/guide/act accordingly.



People should not be judged or stereotyped according to their general expression.