

AWARE'S COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION (CSE) PROGRAMME: Report of the Review Team

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AWARE's Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Programme: Report of the Review Team

1. INTRODUCTION

AWARE's Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programme became the target of criticism in April-May 2009 during what was dubbed by the media as the 'AWARE Saga'. The faith-based group of women who gained leadership of AWARE at the AGM on 28th March 2009, and Dr Thio Su Mien, their self-styled 'feminist mentor', alleged that AWARE, in running the CSE programme in schools, was promoting homosexuality and lesbianism.

These women resigned from the leadership of AWARE after a majority of members voted, at the EGM of 2 May 2009, in favour of a motion of no confidence against them. But they and / or their supporters continued their campaign against the CSE programme and encouraged parents to write to the Ministry of Education to complain about it. The ministry subsequently suspended the programme.

One of the first decisions of the 2009-2010 Exco following its election at the 2 May EGM was to conduct a thorough review of the CSE programme. Five Exco members - Chew I-Jin, Margaret Thomas, Nicole Tan, Hafizah Osman and Nancy Griffiths (who resigned from the Exco before the review was completed) – formed the review team. They set out to examine:

- the intent and development of the programme
- its content
- its delivery by trainers
- the questions that had been raised about it
- any areas that might need improvement.

The team interviewed eight trainers who conducted 47 of the 50 CSE workshops that were held between May 2007 and March 2009, as well as two members of the programme development team. The team also reviewed CSE development files, the Basic Instructor's Guide (IG), and the material that was used by students during the workshops.

2. INTENT OF THE CSE PROGRAMME

The CSE programme was initiated in 2006 in response to reports about the growing numbers of young people who were being diagnosed with STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections) and of teenage pregnancies.

Data released by the authorities in 2005 had shown a sharp, three-fold increase in STIs amongst teenage girls in the five years since 2000, and a study by the National University of Singapore in 2006 revealed that over a hundred girls under the age of 20 had an abortion in that year alone.

These statistics reflected a severe lack of information regarding safer sex and contraception amongst teenage girls. As a leading women's group, AWARE decided to run a programme that would help to address this gap.

The aim was, as the initial proposal put it, to provide teenagers, especially young girls, with "the tools, the knowledge, the skills and attitudes to make responsible choices about their sexual health".

A major focus of the programme was to equip young girls with the understanding and skills to better handle relationships, including how to say “no”.

3. PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

The CSE programme was developed over the course of a year in consultation with parents, youth social workers, teachers, and academics from a range of institutions. A major reference source was material developed by the International Women’s Health Coalition, a New York-based organisation that aims to promote and protect the sexual and reproductive rights and health of women and young people.

The whole premise of comprehensive sexuality education is that sexuality is not just about sexual intercourse. It encompasses a broad range of human experiences that are central to who we are as human beings, and this includes self-esteem, emotions, and interpersonal relationships.

The developers of the CSE programme conducted an extensive literature review of international and local sexuality programmes which consistently showed that when given accurate information, young people are more likely to make wise, realistic, and informed decisions about sex.

During the development of the programme, a focus group was conducted at a post-secondary institute. The picture that emerged was that sex was not discussed at home. The students got their information about sex from friends, the internet or magazines, none of which were necessarily sources of accurate information. Furthermore, while they might appear to know a lot about sex they might lack the social skills to apply this knowledge in their relationships.

It was clear that young people needed reliable information about sex, the opportunity to talk about sex and sexuality in a non-judgmental way, and guidance on handling relationships.

The CSE programme was thus designed to approach sexuality education from a health perspective, with a focus on the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of the individual. One major segment of the three-hour workshop provided facts about STIs and pregnancy, and how to prevent both.

The other major segment dealt with relationships, peer group pressure, and how to say no to pressure to have sex. Games and role play were used to help participants understand the dynamics of relationships and to give them a chance to practice how to handle different situations that might lead to sex.

4. CONTENT AND CONDUCT OF PROGRAMME BY TRAINERS

4.1 Aims of CSE (as listed in the Basic Instructor’s Guide)

Training Objectives - Participants to:

1. Develop a healthy and positive attitude towards sexuality
2. Be empowered in their decision-making about their sexual life.

Training Outcomes - Participants to:

1. Understand what sexuality is and how their perceptions of their own sexuality can impact their choices

2. Have knowledge of how they can protect themselves against STIs, HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancy
3. Become clearer about what they want from relationships, and learn to recognise the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships and realize that abuse (verbal or physical) is wrong
4. Practice the skills of dealing with peer pressure (including how to say “no”), avoiding unclear communication and negotiating condom usage while involved in a sexual relationship
5. Have increased awareness about and acceptance of the diversity of sexual orientation
6. Learn to respect their bodies and learn how this affects the development of positive self-esteem. They also learn to examine the content of beauty – internal and external.

Audience

The intended audience was girls and/or boys in secondary schools, ITEs, junior colleges, polytechnics and special homes. Each workshop was to have a maximum of 25 participants.

4.2 Trainers

The CSE trainers went through an extensive training programme run by the CSE development team. The lead trainer was a qualified social worker employed by AWARE who had been through training on sexuality issues at TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues), a not-for-profit organisation based in New Delhi, India.

The CSE trainers had to attend a three-day training programme that included tests. Those who passed then observed two CSE workshops at schools and then took part in several assisted workshops before they were considered fully trained and able to conduct the workshops accurately and responsibly.

The CSE trainers were equipped with a 34-page IG. This was meant as a reference manual for trainers and included lists of the materials to bring to the workshop, guidelines on how to set up the training room and to manage the participants, and suggestions as to how to answer questions raised by the students in a factual, non-judgmental manner.

The IG was meant strictly for the trainers. It differed substantially from the material that was handed out to students, which included worksheets, case studies and information on STIs and how to prevent them.

4.3 Conduct of the programme

The CSE workshop was designed to run for three hours, with a 15 minute break halfway through. The first half had an ice-breaking activity, a session to discuss whether certain statements about sex and sexuality were true or false, followed by 35 minutes of information and discussion about HIV/AIDS, STIs and contraception.

The second half of the workshop focused on relationships and body image, with a final session where participants were asked to reflect upon what they had learned. The 20-minute module about relationships was followed by 40-minute for role play - the students were given various situations that could lead to sex and asked to discuss behaviour options and their consequences. **[See appendix A: Typical agenda used for the workshops]**

It should be noted that before they took part in the CSE workshop, students were given a note to their parents that explained the intent of the workshop. The note included an opt-out form for parents who did not want their children to go to the workshop.

The allegations that the CSE programme promoted homosexuality were based on statements in the IG that:

- Homosexuality is 'perfectly normal'
- Anal sex can be 'healthy'.

Thus, when interviewing the trainers, the review team paid particular attention to how they had handled these topics at the workshops, and whether religious or cultural views about pre-marital sex and anal sex (performed by heterosexuals and homosexuals) were taken into consideration. The team also looked closely at the various training materials, in particular the context in which these terms and phrases were used.

Homosexuality

The trainers typically spent no more than 5 minutes, sometimes much less, of the 3-hour programme on the subject of homosexuality. It was not a topic dwelt with exclusively but as one of 20 words related to sexuality that participants were asked to categorise as 'positive', 'neutral' or 'negative' during a 15-minute ice-breaking activity at the start of the workshop.

They were told there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. They were encouraged to challenge and discuss why they had put the terms in each category. The aim was to explore how some words have become loaded with meaning because of our culture and how the significance of words can change at different stages of life. The point was made that sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural and moral concerns.

The trainers never told or encouraged students to put 'homosexuality' in the 'positive' category; they suggested that this term be considered 'neutral', in other words to take a non-judgmental approach and not to discriminate against anyone because of their sexuality.

The developers and trainers emphasised to the review team that the CSE programme was based on a health and not a moral perspective, therefore homosexuality was neither promoted nor condemned.

They said homosexuality had to be included in the programme as a comprehensive sexuality education programme would be incomplete if it did not deal with homosexuality. Studies have shown that suicide and depression rates are significantly higher for young people who are homosexual, or unsure about their sexuality. They are more likely to face social ostracism, and are more likely to have sexual health problems

The trainers recognised that if they were to suggest that something was 'wrong' with homosexuals and lesbians, students grappling with their sexual identity might start feeling negative about themselves and withdraw or become insecure. Other students might taunt, reject or bully them. It was important to take a sensitive, factual and non-judgmental approach on this topic.

This approach was recognised and accepted by all the trainers as the necessary one to take. Some of the trainers admitted that they came from a more 'traditional' and faith-based background

and had not given much thought to the reality of a range of sexualities, but the training for trainers opened their eyes to the importance of acknowledging and accepting this.

Pre-marital and anal sex

AWARE decided to develop the CSE programme because it was evident that growing numbers of teenagers were having sex, and at an increasingly early age. The CSE programme sought to provide students with up-to-date information about sex and related matters so they would be able to make informed decisions and so be better able to stay healthy physically, emotionally and psychologically.

The workshops thus provided information about the risks of contracting STIs from sex whether vaginal, oral, or anal. Anal sex was included because it was evident that some young people were practicing it.

The student handouts included a slide that categorically stated that anal sex is 'especially risky because it can result in tiny tears or cuts in the rectum'. Another slide about preventing pregnancy listed abstinence from sex as the top behaviour option. **[See appendix B: CSE Student Handout – Page 9 and Page 11]**

The trainers told the review team that the fact-based and non-judgmental approach at the workshops encouraged some students to share their experience of pregnancy. Some had their babies and others went for abortions, and it was evident that their talking about their experiences had a powerful deterrent effect on the other girls.

Cultural and religious views

The trainers said they were always careful to acknowledge and respect the cultural and religious backgrounds of the students. But while personal beliefs and perspectives were acknowledged, students were encouraged to recognize that there were other beliefs and perspectives that were just as valid. They were encouraged to think through the consequences of their actions on their own lives and those of others. The CSE programme promoted understanding of sexuality and not judgment.

5. IMPACT OF THE ALLEGATIONS ABOUT THE CSE

The faith-based group of women made their allegations about AWARE at a press conference that was extensively reported by the media. Similar allegations were also made in various emails and letters that were circulated, over an extended period of time, amongst church congregations and members of the public.

Additionally, while they were running AWARE and had access to the files in the Secretariat, strictly confidential material related to the CSE were posted on several online file-sharing sites. This material included:

- The list of schools that had run the programme and the names of the teachers who had liaised with AWARE about the workshops
- Documents with the contact details and other personal information about the programme trainers.

These actions affected not just AWARE as an organisation but also several individuals. Specifically:

- The trainers suffered an invasion of their privacy because their home addresses, email and telephone contact details, and their performance at the tests were made public
- One trainer had difficulty finding a job as a counsellor; potential employers were discernibly wary of hiring someone who had been involved in what had become a very public controversy
- At least one teacher was taken to task by her principal because her name and that of her school had been made public.

At the broader level:

- AWARE's reputation has been tarnished with some segments of the population still believing the allegations made by the faith-based group of women
- At-risk young girls and others have been deprived of an objective, factual and non-judgmental approach to the very real questions they have and challenges they face about their sexuality.

The review team found that the faith-based group of women had not met any of the programme developers or trainers before they made their emotional and sensationalist attack on the CSE programme. They appear to have ignored the generally positive feedback given by students who had been through the workshop.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

AWARE's CSE programme was developed to help with a glaring social need. The feedback from the students who went through the programme was that it was informative and useful. Asked what they had learned from the workshop, most responded with statements about what they learnt such as these:

- 'How to say no to my boyfriend if he wants to have sex'
- 'The consequences of having sex'
- 'How to protect ourselves'
- 'We have the right to say no and think twice'
- 'What a healthy relationship is'.

There is no question that AWARE did the right thing in developing and running the CSE programme, which in no way sought to promote homosexuality, anal sex or premarital sex.

The stance taken by AWARE was that it is better to try to give young people the facts about sex and contraception rather than try to dictate that they not have sex. It should be noted, however, that in the segment of the workshop dealing with pregnancy, it was emphasised that not having sex, or abstinence, was the surest way to avoid pregnancy. The CSE programme also sought to get young people to recognise and accept the reality of a diversity of sexual identities. This is, admittedly, a liberal stance and it is perhaps not surprising that it came under attack from a fundamentalist group.

In reviewing the material used for the CSE programme, and in particular the IG, the review team noted that when the references to homosexuality and anal sex were seen in context, they were less startling.

For example, the statement '*Homosexuality is perfectly normal*' appears in the IG in this passage:

Homosexual – people have different preferences for their partners. Homosexuality is perfectly normal. Just like heterosexuality, it is simply the way you are. Homosexuals also form meaningful relationships, and face the same emotional issues that heterosexuals do. The Singapore law does not recognise homosexuality and deems homosexual sexual activities as unnatural.

However they felt that, with hindsight, had several passages and lines been better phrased there might have been less ground for the fundamentalist group to make their allegations.

For example, instead of saying ‘*homosexuality is perfectly normal*’, the IG could have said ‘*To homosexuals, homosexuality is as normal as heterosexuality is to heterosexuals.*’

And the statement in the IG that ‘*Anal sex can be healthy or neutral if practised with consent and a condom*’ could have been phrased this way:

Anal sex – This is a neutral activity so long as it is done between consenting individuals and a condom is used. If no condom is used, it can become a negative activity as anal sex can result in tiny tears and cuts in the anus. And if it is an act forced upon someone, it is clearly a negative activity.

It bears repeating that these statements were only found in the IG, and meant to be used as a reference point for trainers. These statements did not appear in the handouts given to students.

The review team noted that the final version of the IG had been edited and tightened from an original version which was drafted with more elaborate statements and definitions. The editing was done because it was felt that the IG needed to be more succinct.

The review team noted that the editing should have been done with greater care to ensure that there was no loss of meaning or clarity as to the various aspects of complex and sensitive matters. Those who went through the training sessions were well aware of what was meant by a statement such as ‘homosexuality is perfectly normal’ but to an outsider, particularly when the line is taken out of context, it can come across as a startling statement.

Recommendations:

- a) AWARE staff and volunteers should, in future, exercise greater care when writing and editing such material. Audit teams including content experts should scrutinise this material more closely and be ready to challenge statements and positions, and insist that the necessary changes be made.
- b) The work put into developing the CSE should not go to waste. There continues to be an urgent need for young people, and especially girls, to have facts about sex and guidance about handling relationships. The CSE programme was developed precisely for this.
- c) It is unlikely that the Ministry of Education will, in the foreseeable future, welcome AWARE’s CSE programme in its schools. It is clear, however, that while some parents disapprove of the approach taken by AWARE, there are those who very much approve of it. Similarly there are teachers who would like to be able to offer the programme to their students.

AWARE should thus consider other ways of making the programme available to those who welcome the approach taken. One option would be to run the CSE programme outside of the schools. Another would be to put a version of the programme online.

Appendix A: Typical Agenda used for the workshops

Appendix B: CSE Student Handout

AGENDA

09.00 to 09.15	Module 1: Welcome, introduction and ground rules
09.15 to 09.30	Module 2: Ice-breaking activity
09.30 to 09.50	Module 3: What's your view?
09.50 to 10.00	Module 4: HIV/AIDS: Myth or reality
10.00 to 10.15	Module 5: Information about STIs, HIV and contraception
10.15 to 10.30	Break
10.30 to 10.50	Module 6: All about relationships
10.50 to 11.30	Module 7: Skills practice
11.30 to 11.40	Module 8: Body Image
11.40 to 11.50	Module 9: Personal reflection
11.50 to 12.00	Module 10: Evaluation
	End workshop

What are the riskiest kinds of sex?

- Unprotected anal sex and vaginal sex
- Anal sex is especially risky because it can result in tiny tears or cuts in the rectum.
- Unprotected oral sex carries a lower risk but is not risk-free.
- The use of drugs or alcohol can increase the risk of getting a STI or HIV/AIDS.



Many infected people often do not have any symptoms at all!

So you cannot tell by looking at a person
if he or she is infected.



Types of Contraception

- Your own behaviour
- Over-the-counter
- Prescription
- Permanent
- Emergency Contraception



Behavioural Modes

- Abstinence - Don't have sex!
- Outercourse
- Fertility Awareness - Rhythm
- Temperature, Mucous
- Withdrawal
- Continuous Breastfeeding