Women’s Sex and Reproductive Education
Effects and Advocacy

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Orange-taffy colored panty liners create a nauseatingly pastel warzone on my tile floor.

A red sea of failed feminine products, blood, and exasperation not even Moses could part. This, this was it, my imminent entry into the mythical world of womanhood. The famed phenomena only discussed in health class and at the 7th grade lunch room tables. Those before me, the 8th grade girls, had told tales of this, as well and their own glorified entrances through the golden gates of Menstruation. They were basically veterans at age 14. There was this bizarre air surrounding the topic of “getting your period”, that I couldn’t understand. It was this horrible thing women complained about but girls couldn’t wait to get. Perhaps it was just a social mile marker and rite of passage, but the details were always hazy and seldom discussed. Looking back now, as a “veteran” of 6 years, I’m grateful for what little education I did get regarding menstruation and the women’s reproductive system. It’s become extremely apparent millions of girls across the world lack access to knowledge about their own bodies. What is an already terrifying and awkward time, is infinitely worse when a girl’s entire community and education system lacks principle knowledge about women anatomy. I was fortunate enough to live in a society where young girls gave each other high fives in the bathroom stalls on aunt flo’s debut. While millions, and millions of girls are excommunicated from their towns, shamed, and taunted for being impure. I was not viewed as an immediate child-bearer or genitally mutilated by my elders, but instead occasionally taunted by “that time of the month” jokes. There is an extreme deficit in sex-education field between first and third world countries. This vast educational gap should be a primary concern, one that should be actively progressed. It’s become incredibly prevalent that the implications of insufficient health education effect those
entire civilizations and undoubtly determines the quality and general education of women everywhere.

One of the most perplexing and evidential signs of insufficient girl’s education is the interaction between culture and women. Women commonly face embarrassment from the overall taboo of sexuality, but unfortunately it often stretches far deeper than petty stigmas. A woman’s livelihood and personal wellbeing weighs in the balance of her education system, or lack thereof. In underdeveloped regions such as Eastern and Southern Africa, sex-education is scarcely taught and poorly instructed. This presents a wide range of knowledge gaps including education on reproduction, menstruation, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy prevention, as well as healthy relationships. Only ~40% of residents in Southern and Eastern Africa have substantial STD awareness and prevention (Logan) which is startling considering Africa is the birthplace of nearly 70% of the worlds STDs. HIV alone causes not only individual suffering but impoverishes the children of the 10.5 million affected by AIDS. (Logan) It also halts the education of the 2.5 million young adults and adolescents effected. (Logan) This insufficient curriculum also fails to acknowledge fundamental reproductive biology. This is evident by the 10.8% fertility rate per live birth in girls 15-19. (Logan) This estimate represents a lack of pregnancy prevention education and healthy relationships, given the incredibly young age range. Child marriage and genital mutilation are recurrent trends in southern regions. This is where women often face the greater consequences of a corrupt system. Without proper guidance and destruction of preexisting cultural acceptance, 38% of African girls will be married before they’re 18, and 12% before they’re 15. (GirlsNotBrides) Early on-set marriages inhibit young girls’ continuation of education. Many are forced or coerced to end their life in the
classroom following marriage. This is if they even have the opportunity to attend school in the first place. Sub-Saharan Africa has approximately 49 million girls who will go their lifetime never stepping foot in a classroom. (UNICEF) Girls are commonly rejected and shamed from pursuing academia via cultural norms. In conservative regions of the world, sexist stipulations deter females from school. Deep-rooted biases argue that lack of intelligence, weakness, and vulnerability deem women unfit for any greater responsibility. Menstruation is a reoccurring argument as it goes misunderstood and is seldom discussed in the community. The overarching taboo of the subject generally means an absence of private, female oriented latrines. Harassment and sexual violence associated with co-ed restrooms further deters female attendance in schools. (Malala) These incredibly prevalent issues exemplify the strong parallel between an absence of sex education in a culture and its direct effects on female education as a whole.

The effects of social discrimination and female based violence are not secular to Sub-Saharan Africa. Women make up two thirds of the worlds illiteracy. This is derived primarily from numerous “third world” regions similar to Sub-Saharan Africa, including parts of India, Southeast Asia and especially Nepal. Unfortunately, the negative implications of these methods don’t damage just the female and general population in its entirety. The psychological and physical effects on an individual woman are even more heartbreaking. Consistent exclusion and derogatory treatment from one’s community can lead to severe mental instability. The bodily harm some face is equally terrifying. 200 million girls have been estimated to have been genitally mutilated in over 30 countries. (UNICEF) Without a moral education system to combat this almost “acceptable” behavior, there is little progression in the realm of women's safety.
Without education, women live ignorant of their own personal health and safety. There is a present cycle in the effected populations. Girls fail to access sufficient health education, then face discrimination and violence, and are then deterred by any further general education that could in anyway promote them in a societal position. This chain of reactions is not one that can be easily be broken. Ending this perpetual cycle is complicated, especially considering how ingrained sexist culture is in certain populations. Therefore, outside action is imperative to providing better lives and safety to woman everywhere. “If all girls received 12 years of education, the frequency of early births would drop by 59% and child deaths would decrease by 49%” (Malala) This statistic from the Malala Project embodies the incredible, immediate benefits of women’s education. If greater effort and aid is provided to insufficient communities, woman have the opportunity to not only comprehend their biology, but pursue greater livelihoods. If an entire population is educated on STD prevention, pregnancy, and relationships, attitudes will shift. (Viens) As discussed before, discrimination is rooted in ignorance. Ignorance of what women are, their capabilities and their physiology. If an adequate curriculum was enacted, misconceptions among all member of a community would be eliminated. The same misconceptions that fuel bias and violence. This could potentially lead to safe spaces and classrooms for young women. If child marriage is combatted millions of girls could continue education and later contribute to progression and innovation in their communities. This wouldn’t be the sole benefit to a population. The staggering decrease of early births and child deaths would stabilize an entire population, if properly informed.

What is being done to expand female education and safety now? “The African continent has one of the world’s highest rates of adolescent pregnancy, but many governments
insist on tackling this social and public health challenge by punishing girls and jeopardizing their future,” (Martinez) Like parts of India and Nepal, Africa has acknowledged their problems but have yet to enact any stable legislature or enforcement of their policies. Societal norms still dictate the health and safety of women. Organizations such as UNICEF, Amnesty International, and the Malala project attempt to tackle these issues on a smaller scale. Collectives such as these provide sex education, materials, and inclusive classrooms. UNICEF partners with small legislature practices to ensure secondary education to young woman. They have proven great benefit to the health, safety, and financial status of girls who otherwise would not have the opportunities. While small scale, this definitive success furthers my urgency toward investing in women’s sex education, as well as auditing and breaking down systems in place.

In an unexpected turn, my “global” research of sex education took me to the last place I expected; here in the United States. When discussing my research project with friends and colleagues, it became apparent our own “first world” sex education system is plagued with pitfalls. My initial goal was to understand and promote focus on girl’s education where there is a blatant deficit; with this, I overlooked our own. Only 22 states are required to have any formal sex education in the U.S. Only 13 of those 22 are expected to instruct on the bases of scientific, biological fact. (Guttmacher) This perplexed me and inspired me to conduct a small social experiment as well as research within my own borders. I proposed a survey that questioned the curriculum taught, as well as the effectiveness of said sex education among my peers at SUNY ESF. [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1xfjJxiwFxFzMhzVF0hs74323B__SRXXwr_N9hmGGDxaZU/edit#](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1xfjJxiwFxFzMhzVF0hs74323B__SRXXwr_N9hmGGDxaZU/edit#)

Following this survey, I was able to see first-hand the impacts of gaps in our education system and communities. In a survey group of 26, 85.2% received formal sex education in
school. The other 14.8% by a parent or guardian. Only 22% of surveyor’s felt their sex education was sufficient. 14% felt their education was not at all helpful, and the other 63% said it was somewhat helpful. This statistic alone shows massive cracks in the American Education System. 7.7% of participants were taught abstinence only, all of which felt the practice was completely ineffective. The focus group was compiled of multiple gender identities and sexual orientations, some of which felt greatly excluded in the system. One of the recurring themes I hadn’t anticipated in this research, was the underrepresentation of relationships, sexual orientation and identity. Greater transparency was made in that sex education encapsulates far more than just anatomy and the mechanics of sex. Contrary to the more prevalent issues in third world regions, Gender Identity and Orientation are some of biggest hurdles in the American Education. These are just a few of the most common responses received:

“I think it would be helpful to discuss same sex relationships, masturbation and how it is normal, healthy sex practices, and sexuality.”

“Needs to be much more prevalent in schools so kids learn what healthy relationships and sex look like. Also needs much more representation for sexual orientations and genders because I think kids would feel more comfortable knowing that it's okay to be different. Hopefully it would help them feel less confused and more accepted.”

“Some of the things we were taught were false (e.g. the hymen breaks when you have sex for the first time) and some topics were covered really briefly - consent, etc. Toxic masculinity was not covered at all.”

“Sexual orientation should be taught more in schools”
“Better clarification of queer safe sex practices. (I.e. dental dams) Safe sex in general, no abstinence only course. An overview of consent!!! What it means, when it is relevant, what ongoing consent is. Overview of rape culture, as well as empowered bystander coverage. Lastly, it’s important to discuss CORRECT human anatomy, especially for women. Covering what’s is normal/not normal and incredibly important. I’d love to see where this survey isn’t going :)

Along with the serious education gaps presented, I realized how eager some participants were in voicing their personal experiences. I considered the intimacy of this topic and was stunned by such an outpour of expression. As my focus shifted from global scale to small community, I felt an augmentation of connection to my research. Going forward, I decided to conduct in-person interviews with young women in academia. All of which had a wide-range of sexual education experiences and plights. I made the decision to record my subjects and was able to capture raw feeling and thought on the topic. I anticipated awkwardly blunt interactions and was happily surprised to see how anxious many were to share their stories. I had two members of the LGBTQ community lead my documentary and express their frustration with the “American Health Class”. In filming, my subjects exhibited vulnerability and passion when discussing their exclusion. For the first time in my research I felt the importance of my argument on an incredibly intimate level. As I re-watched the footage later that night, my heart ached for the underrepresented and the misinformed. My own peers, represented a fraction of women all over the world who lacked a voice and missed out on vital education. So many young girls left uncomfortable in their own communities and in their own self. It was in this the connection between women in both first and third worlds was made. Societal discomfort and
deluded interpretations don’t discriminate country or culture. Ignorance and its subsequent effects aren’t restricted by borders. In both worlds, misinterpretation and limited comprehension negatively impact those who inhabit. Women here and a hemisphere away face inequity, as well as discrimination in the realm of education. Not only are they confronted with blatant exclusion, either in the classroom or surrounding community, they miss out on vital life experiences such as complete education and healthy personal and interpersonal relationships. This parallel between worlds furthers my advocacy for greater focus on worldwide, gender-inclusive education.

When I started this project, I set out to argue the importance and need for improved sex education, primarily in third-world women. I never anticipated how expansive this research would be and were it would lead me. Sex and the education that follows surrounds almost everything in our society and our individual communities. As a Biology major I very much understood how vital reproduction is on a speciel level is but underestimated how intertwined it is our cultural fibers. I hadn’t considered that anatomical education, such as menstruation and safe sex were only the tip of the iceberg. Sex education encompasses gender identity, orientation, and relationships also. All of which, without properly informed can drastically impact the physical and mental health of an individual. Internal uncertainty and societal underrepresentation are the products of this. They lead to deep-rooted psychological warfare and exclusion. One of my biggest discoveries through this was that when an entire culture misinterprets or remains uneducated, not only do those effected experience discrimination and sometimes violence, the entire society suffers as a whole. When women make up roughly half a population, and they are excluded from rightful education and safe places. Thusly, a population
loses half its brilliance. I identified a tight correlation between generally illiterate and uneducated regions of the world (Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, India) and lack of innovative progression. I also found parallel between insufficient sex education in the U.S and substantial members who had face discrimination and discomfort in their communities. There are expansive, educational gaps in both first and third world countries, all of which negatively effect our humanity. Invest in women, invest in your daughters, invest in education, and invest in humanity.
References:


