

# Affirming Sexuality: A Counselling Programme for Young People in Vietnam

Sexuality has been and still is considered as a sensitive and taboo issue in Vietnamese society. Yet this does not mean that Vietnamese people do not talk about sexuality. Sexuality issues are discussed in daily life, but mostly in the form of jokes or sexual innuendoes. Talking about sexuality as a serious issue in communications, education, training and research programmes is still limited in the country.

Accounting for 20.9% of the total population of 86,116,559,<sup>1</sup> young people between 15 to 25 years old are an important component in all social and economic programmes and policies in Vietnam. Specifically in the health sector, accumulated data has shown a high need for educational programmes on sexuality, reproductive and sexual health for young people in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. Young people aged 14-29 years comprise 56% of the HIV prevalence in 2008. Of these, 52% belong to youth aged 20-29 years old, making this the group with the highest HIV infection rate among all ages.<sup>2</sup> In the most recent national survey, 33% of urban unmarried boys 22-25 years old and 26% from rural areas said that they had pre-marital sex.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the use of contraceptive in unmarried youth is much lower than that of married couples (4% versus 75%).<sup>3</sup> Though reliable data is not available,<sup>4</sup> this high unmet need for contraceptives of young people brings them at a higher risk of unwanted pregnancies and greater need for abortion. In one paper, Belanger and Khuat have called attention to repeated abortions among young women.<sup>5</sup>

While the need to for sexuality education is established, the question raised often is what approach and message to convey. Should 'pure' friendship and love without sex (abstinence) be encouraged, or should the 'safety' element only be emphasised? Many policymakers, teachers and parents worry that sex education will expose youth to inappropriate sexual information which will bring sexual desire and sexual activity.<sup>6,7</sup> One common expression using a Vietnamese idiom is that giving sex education to the youth is like "showing the way for deers to run." However, more liberal people argue that the "deers" (young people) run anyway so it is better to provide sex education to help them "run in the right way." This debate is still seen in



different public forums nowadays. There are also increased youth voices speaking up about their needs for sex education<sup>8,9,10</sup> and that pre-marital sex and even pregnancy are ways for them to affirm their sexuality, especially in the context of constant changes in Vietnam society.<sup>11,12</sup>

Within this context, the Consultation of Investment and Health Promotion (CIHP), under the financial support of Ford Foundation, piloted in 2002 the first free online counselling programme for young people on sexuality issues, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS through the website [www.tamsubantre.org](http://www.tamsubantre.org) (Youth Sharing). The program was innovated by the author when she recognised how common 'online chatting' was used by the youth to share their intimate and sensitive feelings and thoughts on daily life and to build networks. While 'online chatting' is very much blamed by parents and educators to bring risks for young people, especially girls, the author thought to use this powerful and attractive format to communicate with young people. Anonymity and immediacy are big advantages of internet communication compared with other formats. Especially with the speedy development of the internet in Vietnam in recent years, this channel has a good chance to reach young people in different geographical regions in Vietnam, even in the more remote areas.

Recognising the challenges in both abstinence and safety approaches, Tâm Su Ban Tre employs the healthy sexuality framework which is rooted on principles created by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) that emphasise mutual consent, satisfaction and safety in sexual relationships. This definition also underlines that decisions related to sexual activities should be situated within equal, non-violent and non-abusive relationships. The programme acknowledges that young people's sexual rights include the rights to have sex and to enjoy a safe and happy life, and to have access to comprehensive and effective information and counselling regarding sexuality.

Through the website, counselling and information provision activities are being conducted from a non-judgmental viewpoint to empower young people to make their own decisions. This is a

critical difference from other existing counselling programmes in the country that are focussed on advice provision. The programme addresses issues ranging from general reproductive health issues such as contraceptive methods, reproductive tract infections and modes of HIV transmission, to more 'sensitive' issues such as shapes and sizes of male and female genitals; difficulties in communicating with regards to sexual relationships, love and sex; problems met during sexual activities; 'abnormal' sexual preferences; virginity; sexual harassment; and so on.

The programme especially pays attention to the sexual affirmation of young women, since women in Vietnam are traditionally sanctioned to be passive and repressed in sexual relations. In this respect, the programme has received many questions from young women asking about how they should behave while having sex and about virginity. Some examples include:

*"I don't know if I should cry or moan so that he knows I am also enjoying it. I'm afraid that he would think I am not a 'good' woman if I do so. However, if I don't do anything, I am afraid that he may be sad. What should I do?"*

*"I also want him to use condoms. I even have condoms with me, but I am afraid that he will question why I am so experienced. What should I do?"*

*"I have been in love with him for three years. Now, I realise that we are not really compatible but I dare not say goodbye because we have had sex. I am afraid of being judged when I fall in love next time."*

*"I am not a virgin but my lover does not know. Should I tell him? I am afraid of losing him if I tell him. But if I don't, how can I face him on the first night?"*

To answer these questions, Tăm Su Ban Tre always affirms that young women have the right to a mutually consensual, safe and satisfactory sexual relationships, and that no one has the right to judge them. The programme equips young women with the necessary communication skills so that they can talk and discuss openly with their lovers and partners. This approach has made young people, especially female ones, to become stronger and overcome their difficulties. A lot of them have written back CIIHP to thank the programme and share their positive feelings after dealing with their own problems themselves.

The programme also opened up e-forums for young people to participate in discussions about sex, love and other issues. The male and the female corners are jointly discussed by young people. Launching an e-discussion on a sensitive issue or complicated situation is an effective way for young people to jointly talk and feel more confident when dealing with their own and their friends' problems.

Tăm Su Ban Tre does not only address the sexuality issues of young people in general; issues of others perceived as 'special' or 'minority' youth groups—such as people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA); people with disabilities; lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered and intersexed people (LGBTI); and so on—are also discussed in counselling and in the e-forums. These activities

have not only assisted the young people in those groups and their relatives to get rid of stigma, but it has enabled other groups to have more information and have a more affirming and respectful attitudes and viewpoints as well.

By affirming the existence of young people's sexuality and needs, the programme has received the support of young people from different towns and cities throughout Vietnam, as well as of those living and studying abroad. Young people consider it as not only a reliable venue to provide information on unwanted pregnancy or HIV prevention but also a supporter and a guide for their future life and emotional and sexual relationships. The number of users of the website's services has increased rapidly. At the moment, the website has more than 95,000 members and 25,000–40,000 visits per days.

Although there are still many difficulties in running the counselling and information provision programmes, the achievements made so far have confirmed the suitability of a healthy sexuality framework in Vietnam—a viewpoint to affirm the sexuality of young people, making them more powerful and confident in improving their own sexual and reproductive lives.

## Endnotes

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This Supplement is produced by the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), as part of the production of the Vietnamese edition of *ARROW's for Change* (AFC) bulletin Vol. 13 No. 2 in collaboration with CCIHP. The English edition of AFC Vol. 13 No. 2, the Vietnamese edition, this Supplement and all past issues of AFC can be downloaded for free at: [www.arrow.org.my/index.php/publications/arrows-for-change.html](http://www.arrow.org.my/index.php/publications/arrows-for-change.html).