

## WAGGGS POSITION STATEMENT

### Talking about sex

**The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) believes that girls and young women need an environment where they can freely and openly discuss issues of sex and sexuality without fear of discrimination or judgment. As the voice of girls and young women, WAGGGS has identified the importance of talking about sex as a priority issue on which to take a stand and speak out.**

WAGGGS provides millions of girls and young women with non-formal education, giving them the opportunity to develop self-esteem, confidence and life skills. Working with Member Organizations in 144 countries, our vision is to be the voice of girls and young women to build a better world through advocacy and action. We aim not only to speak out on behalf of girls and young women everywhere, but also to empower young women to speak out for themselves.

#### Talking about Sex and Sexuality Globally

- Sex is still a taboo topic in many countries today. It is often difficult for girls and young women to get accurate and reliable information about sex and sexuality and to be able to talk freely and confidently about issues they face.
- The average age of sexual debut is reported to be 17, with young women having sex slightly earlier than men. For many girls' first sexual experiences can involve coercion.<sup>1</sup>
- Girls and young women worldwide are exposed to a range of biological, cultural and social risk factors. They are often more vulnerable to sexual coercion, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) - especially HIV - sexual relations with older men for money or services, systematic rape in conflict/post-conflict situations, harmful traditional practices, honor killings/suicides and trafficking.
- Sex education is a controversial topic in many countries. Issues around age of sexual debut, the details of sex education, human sexuality, birth control, pregnancy outside of marriage, teenage pregnancy, premarital sex, morality, abstinence and STIs are widely debated. The AIDS epidemic has given this discussion more urgency.
- Sex education – formal, informal and non-formal - should take into account the needs of young people, also of those who may be out of touch with services and schools including young refugees and asylum-seekers as well as young people in care, in prisons, and living on the street<sup>2</sup>.
- In many countries schools can choose not to provide sex education<sup>3</sup>.
- The involvement of young people themselves in developing and providing sex education programmes has increased as a means of ensuring the relevance and accessibility of provision. Consultation with young people at the point when programmes are designed

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1 Brown, A., et al. 2001. Sexual Relations among Young People in Developing Countries: Evidence from WHO Case Studies (WHO/RHR/01.8). Occasional Paper. Geneva: Family and Community Health, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, WHO; and Jejeebhoy, S., and S. Bott. 2003. "Non-Consensual Sexual Experiences of Young People: A Review of the Evidence from Developing Countries." Paper presented at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1-3 May 2003.

2 Sex Education that Works, AVERT\*\*, June 2007

3 Adolescents In Changing Times: Issues And Perspectives For Adolescent Reproductive Health, United Nations Social and Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific, authors Suman Mehta, Riet Groenen and Francisco Roque, March 1998

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helps to ensure that they are relevant. The involvement of young people in delivering programmes may reinforce messages as they act as role models to their peers<sup>4</sup>.

- Scientific studies have shown that detailed and comprehensive sex education, giving individuals the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions regarding their sexual behaviour, does not necessarily increase sexual activity in young people or lower the age of sexual debut. It often in fact does the opposite<sup>5</sup>.
- In 2005 a global survey on sexual attitudes and behaviours of more than 317,000 people in 41 countries showed that the average age for first experience of sex education was 13. In China, Vietnam and India it was as old as 15 or 16. However, the agreed average age that sex education should start was 11<sup>6</sup>.
- Many adults feel uncomfortable talking about sex with children and young people. Parents are often reluctant to initiate a discussion, yet research shows that positive communication between parents and their children can help young people establish individual values and make healthy decisions. Parents who believe that young people should have the right to accurate sexuality information are often parents whose children will generally delay the initiation of intimacy and use contraceptives when they choose to become sexually active<sup>7</sup>.
- Globally the increasing access to the internet, television, radio and popular magazines means the mass media are one of young people's most common and important sources of information about sex. Studies have shown that the images prevailing in much of the entertainment media suggest that sex is largely risk-free, that everyone is doing it, and that planning for protection spoils romance<sup>8</sup>.
- For many young people their friends and peers are the primary or only source of information on sex and sexuality. 85 per cent of those young women surveyed in the WAGGGS' global survey on adolescent health (2005) said they would feel more comfortable talking to girls their own age about sex.

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4 Sex Education that Works, AVERT\*\*, June 2007

5 Douglas Kirby, Ph. D.: Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy\*\*\*, 2001, USA

6 Global Sex Survey 2005, Durex, SSL international Plc. For more information see [www.durex.com](http://www.durex.com)

7 Barbara Huberman, RN, MEd, Director of Education and Outreach, Advocates for Youth\*\*\*\*

8 Population Reports, October 1985, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, USA

\*\*AVERT is an international HIV and AIDS charity based in the UK. For more information see [www.advert.org](http://www.advert.org)

\*\*\* Advocates for Youth is an US based NGO working on a wide range of topics. For more information see [www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org)

\*\*\*\* National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a US based charity. For more information see [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org)

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**WAGGGS calls on the international community and national governments to ensure that young women have access to full and accurate information, and are given the opportunity to discuss openly and safely issues about sex and sexuality by:**

- **Encouraging** and enabling schools to include topics of sex and sexuality into their curriculum for both girls and boys
- **Providing** young women with opportunities to be involved in the planning, delivering and evaluation of sexual education
- **Increasing** access for young people to information on STIs and protection methods (e.g. condoms)
- **Acknowledging** that views and experiences are constantly changing and that it is important to talk about issues that are relevant to young people and respond to their needs
- **Addressing** and correcting misinformation, stereotypes and the sexualisation of women's bodies in the media
- **Supporting** youth organizations which provide safe spaces for girls and young women to discuss sex and sexuality free from discrimination

#### **WAGGGS urges Member Organizations to:**

- **Ensure** that girls and young women are well informed about their rights and responsibilities regarding their sexuality and reproductive health
- **Provide** girls and young women with objective and non-biased information through non-formal education about sex and sexuality
- **Provide** a safe environment for girls and young women to openly discuss issues of sex and sexuality and encourage such discussions guided by professional assistance and responsible leaders
- **Support** girls and young women to speak out on issues of sex and sexuality and break down harmful stereotypes
- **Acknowledge** that views and experiences are constantly changing and it is important to talk about issues that are relevant to young people and respond to their needs

#### **How WAGGGS is addressing sex education:**

- WAGGGS actively promotes peer education and non-formal education as ways to educate young people about sexual and reproductive health issues.
- The decision-making skills, life skills and leadership opportunities provided by WAGGGS help to enable girls and young women to make responsible choices about their lifestyles, including about their sexual and reproductive health.
- WAGGGS addresses issues around sexual and reproductive health in some of its leadership and advocacy seminars, for example at its 5<sup>th</sup> Helen Storrow seminar at Our Chalet and at the “leaders in action” seminar in Our Cabaña in 2007.

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#### CASE STUDIES

##### **Adolescent Pregnancy "You Decide"**

The Asociación Nacional de Guías Scouts del Peru is running a programme to encourage adolescent girls to delay the start of sexual activity, emphasising the impact that early pregnancy would have on their lives, promoting sexual education through peer education, and thereby reducing the number of adolescent pregnancies.

The aim is for young people to be well informed about their sexual health, and able to make responsible decisions on when to have children. An estimated 700 adolescents will benefit from the programme. This project has been funded in full by the Girl Guides/Girl Scouts of Canada, UK and Finland.

##### **A Measure of Freedom - A Measure Of Responsibility**

This project run by the Association of Belarusian Guides aimed to promote responsible attitudes towards sexual issues. Leaders were taught about how to deal with sex education among Girl Guides. The Guides then learned about issues such as changes during puberty, the consequences of sexual intercourse, responsibility for others and avoidance of sexual aggression. Parents also gained information and skills in order to help their children. The project has already included a seminar, training course, camp and the production of resource materials.

**“The consequences of Government not taking action to make sex and relationships education compulsory will be continued poor levels of sexual health across all groups in society, and especially the young.”**

**“None of us are born with the facts about sex and reproduction we are taught them. If this doesn’t happen, myths start getting into circulation and people end up not being able to tell fact from fiction.”**

*Anne Weyman, Chief Executive, Family Planning Association*

***Please also refer to WAGGGS position statements on adolescent pregnancy and fighting HIV/AIDS.***