

## **AWARE director: Is focusing on 'abstinence before marriage' still realistic sex ed in S'pore today?**

Lim added that parents who are not comfortable with their children going through a more comprehensive programme should be given a chance to opt out.

*Mothership*, 29 May 2021

COMMENTARY: "It is so, so crucial for the voices of young people to be included in the creation of a sex education programme that meets their needs. The youth have said the sex ed programme is too focused on abstinence, risk and disease."

Corinna Lim, executive director of AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) and the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 8th S R Nathan Fellow delivered a lecture on masculinity in Singapore and its impact on gender equality.

In her [lecture](#), titled Reset: Men, Women, Violence, she looks at how the internet and porn has affected gender relations in Singapore, calling for sexuality education in schools to promote healthy relationships.

We have reproduced an excerpt from her lecture here.

---

### **By Corinna Lim**

Pornography is now widely available on the internet.

We don't know how widely it is used in Singapore.

### **Boys are exposed to porn from an early age**

But a search on SimilarWeb for the top-visited websites here, showed that one adult site was ranked 11th ahead of Netflix, Reddit, Whatsapp and LinkedIn.

What's alarming is that our boys are exposed to porn from an early age. Nine out of every 10 teenage boys between 13 and 15 watched or read sexually explicit materials in 2015, according to a survey done by Touch Cyber Wellness.

And more than half of them intentionally sought it out. Some of them were exposed to it even before they started primary school.

In contrast, only 8 per cent of girls — less than one in 10 — were exposed to pornography, either intentionally or by accident.

## **Disturbing and unhealthy depictions**

What's also worrying is the type of porn that is available on the most easily accessible sites.

This is a UK study which reviewed over 150,000 titles on the three most popular porn sites in the UK. This is what they found:

- One in eight titles contained depictions of sexual violence;
- The most common category of sexual violence was sexual activity between immediate family members, father and mothers being the main perpetrators;
- The second category of sexual violence was physical aggression and sexual assault - women being gagged, choked or slapped; and
- The third highest was images taken or uploaded without consent including 'revenge porn', 'upskirting', and images taken by spy cameras.

In the past, there were concerns that porn would lead to more rapes. But there is no clear evidence of this.

However, that does not mean that porn consumption and addiction is harmless. Most mass-market pornography conveys the beliefs that:

- Sex is divorced from intimacy and that's the Playboy masculine norm; and that
- Women are always ready for sex.

This often leads to men being quite dissatisfied with their own sex life, which of course, is a problem.

Those who watched violent porn were also more than six times as likely to have engaged in sexually aggressive behaviour. An increased use of porn by adolescents predicted more sexist attitudes and perpetration of sexual harassment two years later.

## **Porn as a default sex educator**

What should be our biggest concern is this: The fact is that many young people are turning to porn as their default sex educator. A study of 18- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. found that a quarter of them listed porn as their most [helpful source of sex information](#).

Porn is not going to go away. It's pervasive. So the only effective antidote is to put pornography into the right context so that young people understand that what they see is fantasy and doesn't represent healthy, consensual relationships.

Humiliation, shaming, or scare tactics don't work. What we need more than ever before is good sex education.

So, let's pause for a moment to consider: Whose role is it to carry out this education? Who should be the primary sex educator in Singapore?

### **Is it the school? Or is it parents?**

The Ministry of Education (MOE) says parents are in charge.

The [MOE website](#) says: "As parents, you play a primary role in your child's Sexuality Education. No matter where they get their information from, you, the parent, are the best person to teach them what is right or wrong."

Do parents actually live up to this role? No, they don't. AWARE's 2018 survey showed that seven out of 10 youths did not talk to their parents about sex.

A [second survey](#) with parents showed that parents knew that it was their responsibility to talk to their kids about sex but only 50 per cent of parents were comfortable to do so.

Given that many parents don't know how to have frank discussions with their children, schools should then play a bigger role.

Let's look at how effective the schools' sex education programme has been so far. AWARE has been tracking this for many years. The feedback from youths has been consistently negative.

### **What is MOE's stated approach to Sex Education?**

"Sexuality Education in schools promotes abstinence before marriage, and teaches facts about contraception, consequences of casual sex, prevention of diseases, and how to say "no" to sexual advances."

Is "abstinence before marriage" realistic in Singapore today considering that people here tie the knot much later these days: 29 for women and 30 for men?

### **How can sex education in Singapore be improved?**

AWARE's recent focus group discussions on sex education affirms the earlier youths' views that school sex education is inadequate. They also shared that:

First, pornography is either avoided altogether or dismissed as taboo.

And secondly, there isn't enough discussion about youths engaging in activities like sexting and cases where intimate photographs are shared without consent.

One problem is that there isn't much public data and research available. We have seen an increase in media reports on voyeurism, upskirting and nonconsensual sharing of young women's intimate photos, many of these involving incidents on campuses.

So, as part of the Gender Equality Review, I urge the Government to initiate or support research to find out more about the sexual behaviour and the sex ed needs of our youths today.

The research should include information on:

- Where youths get their sexual information;
- What sexual behaviours they are engaging in and at what age;
- What challenges they face in their sexual lives, especially in relation to porn, sexting, sexual exploitation;
- Youths' values, skills and knowledge on sexual matters; and
- Their views on how school sex education programmes can be improved.
- It is so, so crucial for the voices of young people to be included in the creation of a sex education programme that meets their needs.

### **Education that addresses gender norms and promotes healthy relationships**

The youth have said the sex ed programme is too focused on abstinence, risk and disease.

The United Nations and the World Health Organisation advocates for countries to provide comprehensive sex education or CSE which go beyond abstinence-focused sex ed.

Abstinence is not a permanent condition in most people's lives, and young people will soon need the skills when they become adults.

What else should it include? Here are some key points:

First, CSE must focus on consent and respect, and healthy relationships.

Second, it should cover gender norms and stereotypes. Research shows that curriculum that is focused on gender issues and power dynamics are five times more effective at reducing the rates of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy than curriculum that ignores gender.

Third, it must include peer pressure, bullying, harassment and gender-based violence.

And lastly, it must educate on the use of digital sexual communications and on the availability of porn.

### **Government should be bold in its review**

Our government is reviewing the school's sexuality education as part of the Gender Equality Review.

I urge the government to be bold in its review and implement a comprehensive sex education programme for all schools, based on best practices.

If we don't get this right, the default educator is porn. Which our young boys are already accessing at 13.

We are failing our kids if we don't provide these critical life skills that they need to navigate their sexualised world.

Parents who are not comfortable with their children going through a more comprehensive programme should be given a chance to opt out. But they should not hold back the education of the next generation of kids.