

## ACCEPTING CULTURAL VALUES – WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THAT?

“I am just 16 years old but my boy friend is 23. He wants to have sex with me, I am not totally against but I am scared, what should I do?”

This is one of the many questions of young people I have received through our project website. Young people, especially women, are trapped in between the life they would like to live- the choices they would like to get and the life the society demands them to live.

I have been involved in SRHR for more than 6 years and I'm coordinating A Youth Story Campaign which advocates for youth SRHR in Turkey. For the last year, I have been answering young people's questions through campaign website and refer them youth friendly services if needed.

As one of the member of Y-PEER network, we have been implementing peer education programmes in Turkey. Y-PEER is a network which promotes ***meaningful participation of young people in decision making related to their health in order to have equal access to information and services to live a healthy, content life. In order to do so, Y-PEER promotes and implements peer education approach and advocates for youth SRHR.- is active in more than 40 countries.***

No matter how liberal that person would be, if one fails to look at SRH issues from gender perspective in a human rights framework, one will lose to reach the core of the issue. For example, Young people are getting sexually active before the age most academicians and or adults think to be. “Being sexually active” is widely considered as having vaginal intercourse which is not accepted in patriarchal societies as mine.

In this case of “virginity” as in the example above, young women have to remain virgin till marriage. But young people always can find a way to get out of cultural barriers. Young people commonly (heterosexual couples) experience sexual behaviours of heavy petting and/or anal sexual intercourse in order to “keep” virginity and enjoy sexuality. Of course this might have other side effects like, women can not choice what she wants and usually say yes to sexual experiences like anal sex just because her boy friends asked her to do; since they lack basic information on SRH and protection, they might face with unwanted pregnancies and STIs.

Issue of accepting cultural diversities, values is challenging and it has both sides. Like in this case, the traditional cultural values and/or religious beliefs lead them into these kind of situations, young people do not talk about sexuality openly. *Young people are diverse group like in every group in societies. Hence, SRHR programmes targeting young people should be framed considering these diversity; their needs and expectations.* Therefore peer education efforts are very valuable to reach young people and involve young people into programmes.

*Each and everyone of us have different cultural backgrounds therefore different values. All education so do peer education programmes should shaped according to those values. All young people no matter their religion, language, cultural background should access same quality of education and information regarding sexuality. However we need to know which cultural values we are referring to. For instance one can promote practices which harms young people especially women. One can claim*

*that child marriages can be their cultural or say its not culturally appropriate for a woman to have a relationship without marriage.*

*In order to avoid these, in our peer education programmes we do not only tell scientific facts of health issues, have adopted more comprehensive approach and discuss gender relations, values, cultural values.*

*For instance we are aware that young people are mostly reluctant to get tested for STIs not usually because of they are not aware of those services or scare of the result but mostly they are afraid of the possible reaction of service providers or judgmental approach. This is even more serious for young unmarried women who would like to get abortion. Even though abortion is legal for unmarried woman, young women face lot of mistreat or judgmental comments from service providers regarding their sexual life.*

*Perception of male sexuality is very positive among society and thus encouraged by most of the members of society, female sexuality carries negative attitudes which also effects young women's level of access to information and services regarding SRHR. This is why I find youth peer education activities more beneficial for women and empowering than it is for men.*

*Through peer education, young people can learn about their rights and how to access services and complain about bad treatment. As well as discussions about gendered relationships...*

*However challenges still remain;*

- Even though as successful as it is, peer education is only small part of a big solution. If political will is not there, youth friendly health services are not available, only peer education can not save the world.
- *Lack of progressive language; even in ICPD, we still have words like "protection of family". Human rights advocates shouldn't forget, these kinds of words which are taken for granted might themselves discriminate and alienate young people.*
- *Funding; Lack of funding or unwillingness to fund SRHR issues...*

Peer education programmes are complementary element of comprehensive sexuality educations which needs to be in school curriculum and available to all young people. Peer education programmes should be implemented in a comprehensive way and based in human right based approach.