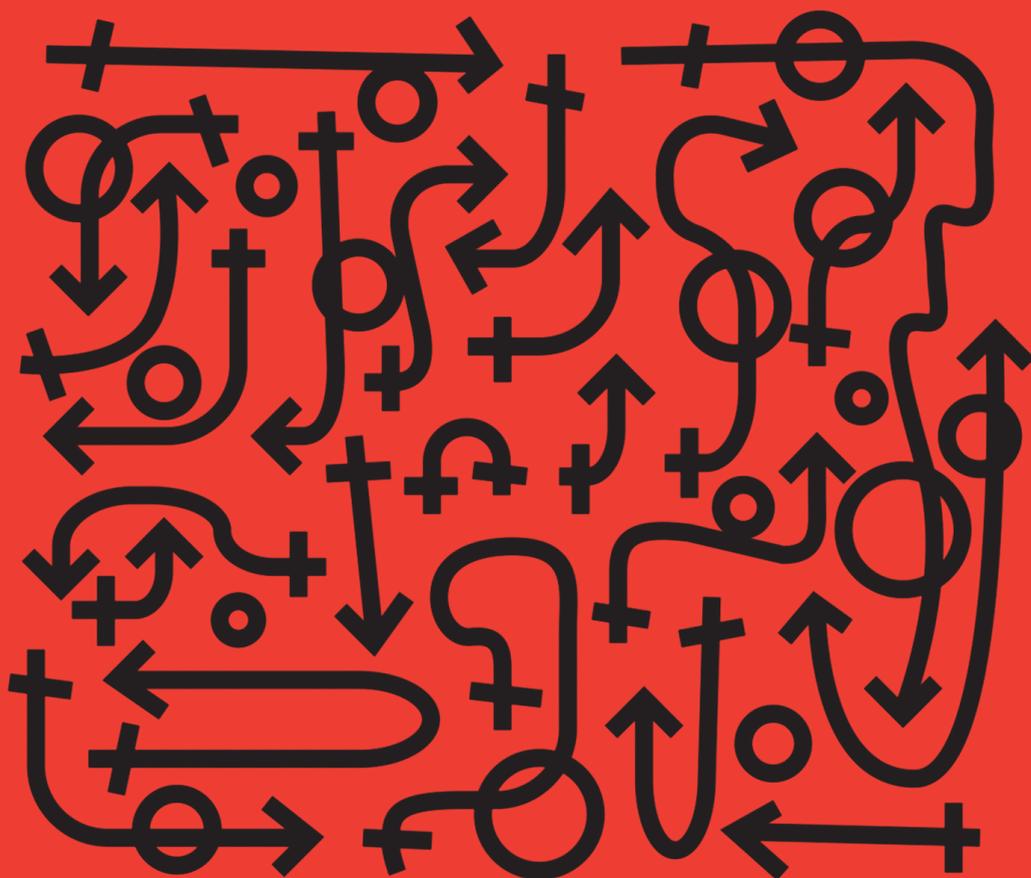


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

Sexual rights and the internet

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SEYCHELLES

SEX EDUCATION, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE INTERNET IN SEYCHELLES



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Introduction

The Seychelles, an archipelago of 115 islands in the western part of the Indian Ocean, is often referred to as the “islands of love”.¹ Tourism websites and promotional material successfully use the expression to appeal to couples, honeymooners and those looking for a romantic getaway. For the islands’ inhabitants there is no escape from the fact that this microstate of 90,000 inhabitants is currently beset by acute and somewhat disproportionate social problems, many of which affect young people in particular. Some of these problems clearly point to difficulties that adolescents and youths face when trying to cope with the various aspects of sexual maturation.

National context

Internet services

The country currently tops the list of African countries for use of the internet among the population. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 54% of the Seychellois population used the internet in 2014.² Access is unrestricted and the authorities do not regulate internet content. Therefore, use of the internet is essentially self-regulated by users who decide what or what not to access. The country’s Department of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) offers detailed and thorough information on its website about staying safe online,³ although recently reported incidents of Seychellois business people being scammed by overseas sites indicate that the useful information provided by the ICT department may not be fully appreciated.

A country report by the United States government on human rights practices in the Seychelles⁴ refers to claims that the government blocked access to opposition party websites and that electronic traffic such as emails, internet chat room content and blog sites were monitored. This report was officially rejected by the Seychelles Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵

Sexual and reproductive health indicators

There are alarming trends in teenage and youth sexual and reproductive health in the country. Recorded figures show that the teenage fertility rate per 1,000 women grew from 39.5 in 1999 to 68 in 2012.⁶ The total annual number of new HIV/AIDS cases has dropped, but data show that the 21 to 25 age group is currently the most affected segment, representing 24% of new cases in 2011, with the 16 to 20 age group representing 17% of new cases in that year. In 2012 there was a 67% increase of new reported cases of HIV-positive pregnancies compared to 2011, and about 40% of these were in the 15 to 24 age group.⁷

The Youth Health Centre’s Annual Report for 2009 clearly showed that underage sex, unwanted pregnancies and abortions among adolescents are a “huge challenge” in the Seychelles.⁸

Legal context: Sex and sexuality

The age of consent to sex is 15 years. The age of majority is 18 years. Young people under 18 need parental consent to have access to contraception (except for condoms), even in cases where they have already had children. This discrepancy has

1 This notion was probably launched in the 19th century when General Gordon claimed that Praslin, Seychelles’ second largest island, was the site of the Garden of Eden. There, he had come across the *coco de mer*, an endemic plant with female trees producing a large double coconut resembling the female pelvis and male trees producing a giant catkin. archives.chicagotribune.com/1899/04/03/page/5/article/site-of-garden-of-eden

2 www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx

3 www.ict.gov.sc/publicInfo/security.aspx

4 US Department of State. (2014). Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2013: Seychelles.

www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2013/af/index.htm

5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2014, 13 March). Seychelles issues strong message against United States of America’s State Department country report.

www.mfa.gov.sc/static.php?content_id=36&news_id=726

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2013). Millennium Development Goals Status Report 2013. www.nsb.gov.sc/archives/2521

7 Republic of Seychelles. (2014). Global AIDS Response Full Country Progress Report. www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/seychelles

8 Ibid.

been the subject of a discussion which started in the early 2000s and which culminated in a debate at the National Assembly in November 2014. No concrete action has yet been taken. Condoms are accessible to teenagers⁹ but youths complain that “the authorities refuse to distribute condoms [to youths] or tell young people how to use them.”¹⁰ The 2012 Seychelles HIV, AIDS and STIs Knowledge, Attitudes, Practice and Behaviour (KAPB) Study¹¹ shows that out of the 1,691 people surveyed aged 15 to 64, 10% reported first sex under the age of 15, and 36% reported first sex between the ages of 15 and 17, admittedly after the age of consent but under the age of majority.

Same-sex activity between men is criminalised although the law has not been enforced for decades. According to many, there is generally little visible discrimination against gays and lesbians. In mid-June 2015, the British High Commissioner in Seychelles officiated at the first same-sex marriage in the Republic – the ceremony was held at the Commissioner’s residence and therefore technically on British territory.¹²

Sex education in the Seychelles

The personal, social and citizenship education (PSCE)¹³ component of the school curriculum is intended to provide age-appropriate sex education, but an official of the Ministry of Education states that “the problem... is that topics dealing with sexuality are becoming more and more taboo at school. Yet... there have been surveys that show that the youth are not sufficiently informed about all aspects of sexual education.”¹⁴ A representative of Youth Action Movement (YAM) Seychelles affirms that “in Seychelles society, people generally avoid the subject of young people’s sexuality, even in schools. Many teachers (including personal and

social education teachers) refuse to talk about it.”¹⁵ There is a tendency to think that sexuality is shameful. This leads to problems; often students do not know enough so they either make things up or they remain ignorant.”¹⁶

Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in the Seychelles also feel that young people are not given comprehensive information on sexuality. A 28-year-old gay man comments that “sexual rights” is a “very taboo subject”. “Some people are very open about their sexuality,” he says, “but many people remain closeted. Pressures come from religion, culture and small-island mentality. In schools, they avoid the topic [of homosexuality] and it is not mentioned as a normal variation of human sexuality, leaving LGBT teens feeling alone.” He tells of the almost unbearable loneliness he felt as an adolescent: “My teenage years were very dark ones. I felt extremely alone, with no-one to talk to about my feelings. I had internet access at home, and through some internet cafés, I was able to freely access information online and realised that I was not alone as a gay person.”¹⁷

Some organisations are attempting to remedy the situation. YAM Seychelles, which was set up in 2012 within the Alliance of Solidarity for the Family (ASFF), is engaged in community work and in tackling youth issues related to sexual and reproductive health; it has 200 members aged 15 to 25, a Facebook page, a Facebook group and a WhatsApp group. According to a representative, YAM has not yet launched major internet-based activities because the group is quite new and still rather small, although this kind of work is being planned.

In 2014 a Seychellois judge facilitated the visit of an Irish legal expert to the Seychelles to give a presentation on LGBT rights. The meeting fostered considerable networking and two young members of the community subsequently drafted a constitution for an NGO whose aims are to educate the Seychelles public about LGBT issues, to tackle the laws that criminalise homosexuality, and to attempt to bring about marriage equality.¹⁸

9 Seychelles Nation. (2008, 9 October). National Assembly-Government supports churches in tackling social ills. *Seychelles Nation*. www.nation.sc/article.html?id=220980

10 Bodwell, A. (2012, 8 August). Why Seychelles should do more to tackle teen pregnancies. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/society/2012/aug/08/seychelles-tackle-teen-pregnancies

11 www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/seychelles

12 Uranie, S., & Amla, H. (2015, 13 June). First same-sex union in Seychelles takes place at British high commissioner’s residence. *Seychelles News Agency*. www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/3128/First+same-sex+union+in+Seychelles+takes+place+at+British+high+commissioner+residence

13 The PSCE is both a curriculum topic (like Social Sciences) and a class subject. See Seychelles National Curriculum Framework 2013, p. 24. www.ibe.unesco.org/en/worldwide/unesco-regions/africa/seychelles/curricular-resources.html

14 Today in Seychelles. (2014, 6 October). PSE threatened? *Today in Seychelles*. <https://www.facebook.com/todayinsey/photos/a.417785501592599.84226.414719135232569/726401287397684/>

15 In 1976, just before independence, the last British Governor of Seychelles had referred to the general discomfort with issues relating to sexual reproduction as follows: “Whenever one mentions population growth or planned family policy in Seychelles one notices a general cooling of the atmosphere. Some people look embarrassed and others seem to feel uneasy as though one is discussing an unmentionable subject.” Rosalie, M. (2000). *Population Processes in the Seychelles*. Unpublished PhD thesis, p. 190.

16 Bodwell, A. (2012, 8 August). Op. cit.

17 R. Gendron, email message to the author, 19 May 2015.

18 Today in Seychelles. (2015, 22 June). The Big Interview with Fabianna Bonne. *Today in Seychelles*.

In April 2015 the Seychelles National Youth Council (SNYC) launched the telephone-based Youth Coaches Programme,¹⁹ sponsored by telecommunications company Cable and Wireless. The aim is for retired teachers, nurses and social workers to interact with young people by answering their questions or discussing problems they have. The company also offers free internet access to all primary, secondary and post-secondary schools in the Broadband for Schools Programme,²⁰ which includes a “Secure and Managed Internet Sharing Solution”. Another telecommunications company, Airtel, has opened ICT resource centres at the Ministry of Education and in two post-secondary institutions targeting the Seychelles Institute for Teacher Education, the School of Advanced Level Studies and the School of Visual Arts. While these initiatives do not have a sex education dimension they make it possible for youth to find relevant information online while also being protected by the internet security measures in place. Meanwhile, Airtel in conjunction with the SNYC offers the Youth Mobile Plan for young people aged 16 to 21 who are involved in SNYC programmes. The scheme gives members a 70% discount on Airtel’s products.²¹

Each year, health workers give talks and organise activities on HIV/AIDS day in December and during the ABC of Safer Sex campaign²² in February, but this is described by a worker in child protection as “limited and fragmented”.²³ A young medical doctor started a Facebook page in mid-2014 to increase local health literacy online. The service has over 2,000 likes and followers. This doctor comments that the page “has become popular mostly for health posts that have little to do with sexual issues... [Sexual] health education is not so popular as nobody wants to be seen as seeking sex information. Adding it as part of overall health education has made a bigger impact.”²⁴

Parents, on the other hand, are concerned about the increased use of technology by their children.²⁵ A psychologist working for the National Council for Children (NCC) urges parents to limit or control the

use of “chat” on the phone or access to TV channels or internet websites with adult content. The NCC has been advocating internet safety for kids through the use of filters and through parents learning to manage and follow their kids online, as there are currently no safety mechanisms in place.

In a TV debate²⁶ among leading educators in May 2015 about mobile phones at school, only one participant from a private school expressed the view that the judicious use of phones at school was acceptable, as it was sometimes the only means for some children to download homework which was posted on that school’s website.

Cable and Wireless appears to be the only internet service provider in the country offering internet security packages to clients²⁷ although these are not very visible in the marketing of their internet services generally. Imported commercial internet security packages are also on offer in electronics shops, but their cost is prohibitive for the average internet user. Some rely on free downloads which might or might not offer the kind of protection they need. There also seems to be no helpful information readily available for parents on monitoring internet usage, setting restrictions, blocking access or limiting apps on computers or smartphones.

Conclusions

The above clearly highlights the reluctance of many responsible adults in the Seychelles (parents, teachers or others) to give adolescents and young people ready access to information they need to a) understand their own sexual development and b) make appropriate, safe and healthy decisions regarding sex. This tends to disregard and minimise the physical, emotional and mental “challenges” that adolescents face at this stage of development. It may leave them unprepared for entry into mature sexuality and ill-equipped to make wise choices when growth spurts occur and the effects of hormonal changes kick in.

There seems to be an overwhelming fear that teaching youths about sex will lead them to practise it. But as the YAM representative aptly puts it: “We are all very aware that students are having sex. It is impossible to stop underage sex, so we should provide students with the necessary precautionary measures.”²⁸ Data from a study on adolescents in the islands of the South-West Indian Ocean confirms that premarital sexual activity during adolescence

19 www.pfsr.org/national-highlights/snyc-youth-department-launch-youth-coaches-programme

20 www.cwseychelles.com/about-us/media-center/press-release/2007/04/schools-go-online-free-broadband

21 <https://www.facebook.com/todayinsey/posts/827652647272547>

22 www.nation.sc/article.html?id=241179

23 Email message to the author, 3 June 2015.

24 Dr. Naomi Adeline, email message to the author, 10 June 2015.

25 Meriton Jean, S., & Barnerias, S. (2015, 9 February). L’utilisation des technologies aux Seychelles, inquiètent les parents. *Seychelles News Agency*. www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/2336/Lutlisation+des+technologies+aux+Seychelles,+inquietent+les+parents.

26 Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation. (2015, 18 May). Zoom – TV debate.

27 www.cwseychelles.com/internet/internet-vas/safenet

28 Bodwell, A. (2012, 8 August). Op. cit.

is viewed by Seychellois adolescents themselves as normal and acceptable.²⁹

It might also be useful to consider if a lack of information (or “ignorance” in sexual matters) might not actually promote experimentation and whether treating sex as a taboo subject does not add to its allure precisely because it is then seen as the proverbial forbidden fruit.

The track record in regard to sex education targeting young people is rather dismal, and sex education on the internet specially targeting the youth in the Seychelles is virtually non-existent, despite some brave efforts by a few representatives of civil society, and some good intentions of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, which, unfortunately, seem limited in coverage, reach and implementation. Civil society groups and NGOs clearly need to play a greater role in convincing parents and adults generally of the need for sex education.

The internet and social media allow young people to reach out for support and information, locally and internationally, but the relatively unhampered access is a source of concern for parents who may neither fully understand what they need to do, nor have easy access to the tools required to protect their children from online dangers.

Action steps

The following advocacy steps are suggested for the Seychelles:

- Review the approach and content of PSCE sex education classes. To make up for possible parental shortcomings and existing social taboos, classes should cover sexual feelings, sexual choices and sexual behaviour in addition to the biological aspects of sexual maturation. The internet and related media could become invaluable aids in making the delivery of classes easier and possibly more effective, especially given current Seychellois cultural norms.
- Target a change of perception through sustained popular activities and meetings around the theme – to be organised by a wider range of NGOs and civil society groups. Simple “how to” tips could encourage more parents to engage with their children on this topic.
- Organise public media campaigns to make everyone a) conscious of the need to remain safe online and b) aware of the support provided by the ICT department. It is probably not enough to make good online security information available only on an official website.
- Find ways to ensure that easy and affordable online protection, as well as self-help information, are as readily available to users as the easy and affordable internet packages that are so vigorously marketed.

29 Calves, A., & Gopaul, M. (2009). Adolescent perspective on sexual debut in the South-West Indian Ocean: a regional study. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 21(1), 15-27.

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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2015 Report

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