



## Unveiling the Gaps: A Content Analysis of Gender Roles, Language, and Cultural Norms in Sri Lankan Sexuality Education

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### Abstract

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is crucial for addressing sexuality and reproductive issues, enhancing sexual health outcomes, and promoting gender equality. This study examines Sri Lankan sexuality education curricula to identify gaps in addressing key components of CSE: representation of gender and relationships, language and tone, and cultural sensitivity. Content analysis was conducted to assess Sri Lankan sexuality education components for Grades 1 to 11, focusing on government-approved textbooks. Data analysis involves a coding scheme based on the framework, with two independent reviewers coding to ensure reliability and validity through Cohen's Kappa. Results showed a substantial agreement for gender and relationships (Kappa = 0.623), a moderate agreement for language and tone (Kappa = 0.543), and a complete agreement for cultural sensitivity. The content analysis reveals significant gaps in Sri Lankan sexuality education curricula, including insufficient coverage of gender equality, diverse sexual orientations, and positive relationship dynamics. The language used often reinforces traditional values and stigmatizes certain behaviors, while the tone is frequently alarmist and driven by fear. Additionally, the curricula lack cultural sensitivity, failing to address respect for cultural diversity or inclusive representation. Results demonstrate significant gaps and inconsistencies with global CSE standards. Addressing these gaps is crucial for aligning Sri Lankan sexuality education

with international best practices and improving educational outcomes for all students.

**Keywords:** Comprehensive Sexuality Education; Cultural Sensitivity; Gender Representation; Language

### Introduction

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a proven protective measure for addressing various sexuality and reproductive issues. An effective CSE needs to be age-appropriate, culturally relevant, gender-sensitive, right-based, unbiased, and scientifically accurate (Yankah, 2016). As defined by UNESCO (2023) CSE is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and sexual aspects of sexuality. Strategically CSE leads to effective health outcomes, as individuals are likely to use contraception effectively, have fewer unintended pregnancies, and lower STIs rates.

According to 'National Youth Health Survey' 2012/2013, the overall knowledge of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) was unsatisfactory since nearly 50% were unaware of the most aspects of basic physiology and common SRH issues (UNICEF, MOH, & UNFPA, 2015). Even though studies consistently emphasize the significance of improving SRH among adolescents in Sri Lanka, Mataraarachi et al. (2023) concluded that the content of the sexuality education module has not been notably effective in improving the learners' sexual health knowledge. Sri

Lanka reports 4-5% of teenage pregnancies annually (Hettiarachchi, 2022). A minority of school-going adolescents become sexually active and vulnerable without adequate services (Hewageegana, 2014). Further, Jayantha & Chandrakumara (2022) identified that the knowledge-biased content of the curriculum fails to provide suitable facilitation on affection and sexuality skills.

Asian countries including Bangladesh, China, Nepal, Philippines, and Vietnam incorporate CSE from primary grades (Asian Pacific Resource and Research Center for Women (ARROW), 2018). However, in Sri Lanka, both 'Health and Physical Education' and 'Science' which include information on SRH are for grade 6-11 students (Amunugama, 2008). Though Biology in G.C.E Advanced Level contains SRH-related knowledge, as a subject it is only for biology stream students. Therefore, the present study focuses on 'Health and Physical Education' and 'Science' curricula in Sri Lanka from Grade 6-11.

This research has been guided by the following objectives: 1) Assess how curricula address gender equality, traditional roles, and LGBTQ+ inclusion, and evaluate their impact on understanding diverse relationships. 2) Evaluate the use of scientific terminology for accuracy, and assess inclusivity, empowerment, and the presence of any judgmental or fear-based language. 3) Review the curricula for respect toward cultural diversity, including religious beliefs, and examine the representation of ethnic groups and the avoidance of biases.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study employs a content analysis approach to examine how cultural norms and scientific education are integrated into the sexuality curricula of Sri Lankan schools. The aim is to comprehensively analyze the curriculum for Grades 1 to 11, focusing on Sri Lankan government-approved educational materials. The analysis includes textbooks explicitly used for sexuality education in Sri Lankan government

schools, from Grades 1 to 11. Materials from private schools or alternative curricula are excluded to ensure consistency with the national curriculum. Relevant sections, chapters, and units from the chosen textbooks are identified and extracted. A systematic data extraction process is applied using coding sheets, which help capture relevant information consistently and comprehensively.

The content analysis framework is divided into three main elements: Representation of Gender and Relationships, Language and Tone, and Cultural Sensitivity. 1) Representation of Gender and Relationships: This element examines how gender equality and respect are portrayed, traditional gender roles, heteronormative assumptions, LGBTQ+ representation, and positive relationship dynamics. It assesses the inclusion of gender equality and respect, the portrayal of traditional gender roles, the presence of heteronormative assumptions, and the representation of LGBTQ+ themes. It also evaluates how relationships are depicted to support health and well-being. 2) Language and Tone: This component focuses on the use of scientific and medical terminology, inclusive and empowering language, and the presence of judgmental or stigmatizing language. It also reviews whether the language used is fear-based or alarmist and ensures cultural sensitivity. 3) Cultural Sensitivity: This part assesses respect for cultural diversity, sensitivity to religious beliefs and practices, inclusive representation of ethnic and cultural groups, and the avoidance of stereotypes or biases. It examines how materials acknowledge cultural diversity, respect religious beliefs, include various ethnic and cultural groups, and avoid cultural biases.

The data analysis begins with the development of a comprehensive coding scheme derived from the content analysis framework. The coding categories for 1) Representation of Gender and Relationships and 3) Cultural Sensitivity were derived from the eight key concepts outlined in the sexual education curriculum by UN Women and UNICEF (UN Women &

UNICEF, 2018). The coding for Language and Tone was guided by the broader principles of using accurate scientific and medical terminology.

Two independent reviewers coded the data to ensure reliability and validity. The coding process involves systematically identifying and categorizing relevant content from the educational materials. To measure the agreement between the independent reviewers, Cohen's Kappa was calculated. Cohen's Kappa was chosen for its ability to account for chance agreement, making it more reliable than simple percentage agreement (McHugh, 2012). It is ideal for categorical data, such as the coding categories used in this study, and ensures consistency between reviewers.

Ethical considerations are paramount, with strategies to minimize researcher bias and ensure objectivity. These include using independent reviewers, transparent coding procedures, and statistical measures for reliability.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis for the representation of gender and relationships showed a Kappa value of 0.623 (SE = 0.114, T = 4.624,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a substantial agreement. For language and tone, the Kappa value was 0.543 (SE = 0.233, T = 4.074,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating moderate agreement. The analysis of cultural sensitivity showed a complete agreement (Kappa = .a, N = 44), resulting in constants. The level of inter-rater reliability enhances the credibility of the findings and ensures the robustness of the content analysis framework employed in this study.

Despite global guidance recommending CSE from age 5 (WHO, 2023) Sri Lanka's primary curriculum entirely lacks sexual education content similar to Asian Countries like India and LoA PDR (ARROW, 2018). The 'Health and Physical Education' textbooks from grades 6 to 11 provide more repetitive content focusing on human sexual anatomy, sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancies, and STDs with limited

coverage of other critical areas including gender equality and positive relationship dynamics. The National Science Syllabus contributes minimally, except for the grade 10 textbook.

### (a) The representation of gender and relationships in the Sri Lankan sexuality curricula

Themes related to gender and relationships are addressed solely in Grade 9 'Health and Physical Education' textbook, especially in the lesson "Let us identify gender responsibilities". This deficiency in Sri Lanka's sexual education curricula contrasts with studies which highlight the need for comprehensive coverage of healthy relationships (WHO, 2023).

**Gender equality and respect:** The content analysis found a lack of discussion on gender equality principles, diverse gender identities, and the importance of equal rights, opportunities, and respect regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. It shows the struggle in reconciling new conceptions of equality (Abesekara, 2008). The content tries to challenge the negative effects of socially attributed gender roles.

*"If work is not labeled as "work of women" and "work of men" and it is shared, it will improve everyone's wellbeing" pp.185).*

Further, it simply describes the association between gender equality and human rights.

*"The international concept of human rights ... states that both males and females are entitled to the same rights as humans..." (p.184).*

Present research reveals inconsistencies with the trend of expanding curricula to encompass topics such as gender norms, sexual orientation, sexual expression and pleasure, violence, and individual rights and responsibilities in relationships (Berglas Constantine, & Ozer, 2014).

**Traditional gender roles:** The same textbook mentions some conventional gender roles in Sri Lanka; nonetheless none of these roles is discussed adequately. As Abesekara states, absences of discussions on traditional gender roles convey the authors' attempts at a gender-neutral discussion (2008).

**Heteronormative assumptions:** Studies consistently show that CSE has been conducted from a heteronormative perspective (Schneiderman, Speers & Silva, 2001). Though the content has not been incorporated in the terminology of 'heterosexuality', implicitly it reinforces the belief that heterosexual relationships as the normative or expected sexual orientation.

**LGBTQ+ representation and inclusion:** Aside from noting, homosexual relationships are depicted as a risk factor for STDs in the Grade 11 textbook, the national curricula do not address LGBTQ+ representation or inclusion. Findings incorporate studies that highlight barriers to effective inclusive sexual health education (Schneiderman et al., 2001).

**Positive and healthy relationship dynamics:** Textbooks have identified that sexual relationships founded on love and trust within marriage promote physio-psycho well-being while serving as a protective factor against STDs. Conversely, the content does not cover critical aspects of healthy relationships including open communication, mutual consent, cooperation, and emotional intimacy in fostering strong and supportive connections even though international bodies that promote CSE consistently indicate its significance (UNESCO, 2023).

## **b) Language and tone used in sexuality education materials**

The study reveals that the language and tone used in sexuality education materials often lack inclusivity and sensitivity of learners while reinforcing traditional moral perspectives.

**Scientific and medical terminology:** Topics in national sexuality education curricula have deliberated the anatomical structure of reproductive systems, functions of organs in the reproduction system, physiological process, puberty and secondary sexual features, menstrual cycle, fertilization, and STDs. The primary objective of SCE is to deliver knowledge of sexual and reproductive health scientifically and accurately (WHO, 2023). Even though research has revealed a lower level of knowledge on contraception (De Silva et al, 2023), there is no scientifically accurate information on contraceptive methods.

**Empowering and Inclusive Language:** Lapses still exist due to the inability of the authors to grapple with ideas of equality and empowerment (Abesekara, 2008). Consistently this study identified the content of the sexual education curriculum hasn't been utilized in language that promotes empowerment, respect, and inclusivity towards individuals of all genders, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds.

**Judgmental and stigmatizing language:** CSE must be inclusive, non-stigmatizing, and non-judgmental (UNESCO, 2023). However, except for two textbooks, others convey negative attitudes, stereotypes, or judgments toward certain sexual behaviors, identities, or individuals. The following examples provide evidence of the stigmatizing language in sexual education curricula towards teenage mothers, STDs, and sexual abuse.

*Teenage mothers can develop problems during childbirth... do not have adequate psychological or financial support... social stigma may result in stress... girls' education will be disrupted. (grade 8, pp110)*

The tone in national sexual education curricula reinforces the social stigmatization of rape and sexual harassment rather than introducing strategies to reduce stigma and discrimination.

*...Due to sexual harassment and sexual abuse are unplanned pregnancies, contracting sexually*

*transmitted diseases, mental trauma, disruption to education, and social stigma (grade 8, p 109). However, irresponsible behaviour of victims too can play a role in some instances (G 11, p182).*

**Fear-based or Alarmist tone:** Wilson, Wiley & Rosen (2012) highlight three problems with fear-based instruction; exaggerating negative consequences of sexual behavior; demonizing sexually active youth; and cultivating shame and guilt to discourage sexual activity. Health and physical education textbooks often use a fear-based tone when discussing topics like sexual harassment, abuse, teenage pregnancies, and STDs, emphasizing negative outcomes such as unplanned childbirth, STDs, mental trauma, and social stigma.

*“Refraining from wrongful sexual conduct and avoiding unwanted pregnancies will help avoid venereal diseases (Grade 7, pp 162).”*

The study unveils evidence of the negative consequences of sexual behavior to cultivate fear, shame, and guilt.

*If a pregnancy occurs during the teenage years the fetus will not receive adequate nutrition ... Teenage mothers can develop problems during childbirth... social stigma may also result in stress...the girl's education too will be disrupted. (Grade 8, p 110).*

Studies show abstinence-only programs are ineffective and may harm young people's sexual and reproductive health. (Santelli et al. 2017).

**Culturally sensitive language:** Sri Lanka's sexual education curricula inadequately reflect its cultural diversity, neglecting socio-cultural sanctions and norms. However, studies consistently show that CSE must be culturally relevant and sensitive (Coultas et al, 2020).

### c) Culturally sensitivity of the curriculum

The study's third objective focuses on four themes: respect for cultural diversity, sensitivity to religious beliefs and practices, inclusive representation of ethnic and cultural groups, and avoidance of cultural stereotypes or biases. Since the current curriculum fails to foster a comprehensive and culturally sensitive education, it hinders learners from thriving in inclusive pedagogical spaces where a sense of belonging is built (Coultas et al., 2020).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, although Sri Lankan curricula have made strides by incorporating additional SRH topics, they are still inadequate in meeting comprehensive CSE standards. The primary curriculum lacks essential sexual education content and does not adequately address gender, relationships, or reflect the country's cultural and religious diversity. The prevalent fear-based approach further undermines a supportive learning environment. To enhance effectiveness, the curriculum needs to be expanded to include a broader range of topics, employ inclusive and empowering language, and integrate culturally sensitive approaches to provide a more comprehensive and supportive education for all learners.

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