POLICY BRIEF

Towards a digital transformation of comprehensive sexuality education in Kyrgyzstan?

by Elisabeth Militz and Nurzada Kupueva

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) addresses all dimensions of sexuality – physical, emotional, psychological and social – and enables young people to be aware of their health, well-being and dignity. CSE also plays a crucial role in the ways in which young people develop intimate relationships with others and how they understand and protect their personal rights.[1] Although UNESCO et al. suggest that CSE should be made available to all young people through schools or qualified out-of-school institutions, experts have observed a lack of CSE in Kyrgyzstan.[2] As discussion of sexuality is seen as socially taboo[3] by families, educational institutions, politics and the general public, and with the increasing social stigmatization of and violence against queer and non-heteronormative sexualities,[4] many young people in Kyrgyzstan do not have safe and sufficient access to sexuality education let alone *comprehensive* sexuality education (CSE). In recent years, therefore, more and more non-governmental projects, grassroots initiatives and communities offering CSE are emerging on Instagram – one of the most popular social media platforms in Kyrgyzstan. To guarantee every young person's safe access to CSE in Kyrgyzstan, state institutions have a responsibility to strengthen these digital initiatives and communities technically, financially, and discursively. In this policy brief, we first illustrate the challenges to CSE in Kyrgyzstan. We then show how Kyrgyzstan-based Instagram activists and users create digital spaces for CSE. Finally, we propose actions that need to be addressed at the political and societal levels to enable safe, inclusive, and non-violent access to CSE for all (young) people in Kyrgyzstan.

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[1]   United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization et al., International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An Evidence-Informed Approach (UNESCO, 2018), 16, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770.

[2]   Uluk Batyrgaliev, 'Psychosocial Barriers to Sexual Pleasure and Orgasm in Married Heterosexual Women in the Kyrgyz Republic' (Bishkek, American University of Central Asia, 2022); United Nations Population Fund, 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan', Situation Analysis Report (Bishkek: UNFPA, 2021); Mohira Suyarkulova, '"Nobody Is Going to Want Her like This:" Disability, Sexuality, and Un/Happiness in Kyrgyzstan', Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research 6, no. 2 (2020): 188–200.

[3]   Erkina Asanbaeva, 'Education or a Threat: How Sex Education Is Taught to Schoolchildren in Kyrgyzstan?', CABAR.Asia (blog), 14 February 2020, https://cabar.asia/en/education-or-a-threat-how-sex-education-is-taught-to-schoolchildren-in-kyrgyzstan; Leila Saralaeva, 'No Sex, Please, We're Kyrgyz', Institute for War and Peace Reporting (blog), 21 February 2005, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/no-sex-please-were-kyrgyz; Zarena Syrgak kyzy, 'Exploring the Discourses about Sexual Education in Kyrgyzstan: The Case of Government, Non-Government and Political Institutions' (Bachelor Thesis, Bishkek, American University of Central Asia, 2014).

[4]   Nina Bagdasarova, 'Securing an LGBT Identity in Kyrgyzstan. Case Studies from Bishkek and Osh', International Quaterly for Asian Studies, Everyday Security Practices in Asia, 49, no. 1–2 (2018): 17–40; Olga Plakhtonik et al., 'Education to Support LGBT+ Communities in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine' (Milton Keynes: The Open University, July 2021); Mohira Suyarkulova, 'Translating "Queer" Into (Kyrgyzstani) Russian', in Sexuality and Translation in World Politics, ed. Caroline Cottet and Manuela Lavinas Picq (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2019), 42–56.

Challenges to comprehensive sexuality education in Kyrgyzstan

The most recent situation analysis report by UNFPA[5] on comprehensive out-of-school sexuality education in Kyrgyzstan confirms that institutions responsible for CSE such as the family, schools or healthcare providers are unprepared, understaffed and/or unwilling to provide CSE.[6] As Syrgak kyzy[7] shows in her discourse analysis on sexuality education, some political actors such as political parties or governmental institutions, consider sexuality education as unfit for Kyrgyzstan, its people, culture, and history. If they do so at all, political actors in Kyrgyzstan refer to sexuality education as education focused on avoiding risks related to sexual activities. However, the lack of CSE and access to it for all, presents a high risk to young people's health and wellbeing. For example, the UNFPA[8] report declares that, in the current context of decreasing and/or absence of access to CSE, unwanted teen pregnancies, incidents of gender-based violence and the number of HIV infections are on the rise. Likewise, a lack of access to CSE sustains and strengthens homo- and transphobic sentiments in society and legitimates violence against queer people.

Accordingly, non-profit organisations do the bulk of the work in providing various forms of CSE to different audiences.[9] For example, the Reproductive Health Alliance Kyrgyzstan (RHAK), with branches in each province of the country, provides information and services about personal hygiene, sexual health and wellbeing, contraception, the reproductive system, STIs, and abortions.[10] Through their peer-to-peer sexuality education program, young sexuality experts provide comprehensive sexuality trainings in schools. In addition, the queer-feminist organisation Novi Ritm in Osh sporadically hosts training sessions on gender, sexuality, or gender-based violence, and the organisation Mutakalim addresses sexual health in a religious context.

Although there are several organisations working with marginalized groups,[11] such as Raventstvo, which accompanies young people with disabilities, or Labrys,[12] which targets young people in the LGBT+ communities, transgender people, intersex people, sex workers, people living with HIV/AIDS, young people in humanitarian crises, incarcerated youth, and young people without parental care, as well as many young people in Kyrgyzstan, have little to no access to CSE. In particular, young people in rural areas, Kyrgyz-speaking youth, girls and young women with disabilities, and young people facing intersectional discrimination who, for example, are not only queer but also living with a disability and/or are poor, remain underserved regarding CSE.[13] Due to the social and political taboo and stigma surrounding issues of sexuality and gender,[14] as well as state neglect of CSE,[15] an increasing amount of CSE content is emerging through digital platforms (e.g., blogs, social media, mobile gaming applications, podcasts), some of which also aim to reach, in particular, those young people who have more difficulty accessing CSE (e.g., young people in rural areas, young women with disabilities, LGBT+ people). Indeed, social media and internet platforms "to different extents, can be considered not only as information flow, but also as controversial virtual communities greatly influencing the views, attitudes and practices of young people regarding their

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5 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan'.
6 see also Asanbaeva, 'Education or a Threat'; Saralaeva, 'No Sex, Please, We're Kyrgyz'.
7 Syrgak kyzy, 'Exploring the Discourses about Sexual Education in Kyrgyzstan'.
8 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan'.
9 United Nations Population Fund.
10 see also Syrgak kyzy, 'Exploring the Discourses about Sexual Education in Kyrgyzstan'.
11 see United Nations Population Fund, 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan'.
12 see also Suyarkulova, '"Nobody Is Going to Want Her like This:" Disability, Sexuality, and Un/Happiness in Kyrgyzstan' on the creation of a comprehensive and inclusive queer sex education curriculum.
13 see for example Suyarkulova.
14 Asanbaeva, 'Education or a Threat'; Bagdasarova, 'Securing an LGBT Identity in Kyrgyzstan. Case Studies from Bishkek and Osh'; Batyrgaliev, 'Psychosocial Barriers to Sexual Pleasure and Orgasm in Married Heterosexual Women in the Kyrgyz Republic'; Saralaeva, 'No Sex, Please, We're Kyrgyz'.
15 Syrgak kyzy, 'Exploring the Discourses about Sexual Education in Kyrgyzstan'.

[sexual and reproductive health]."[16] In the context of Kyrgyzstan, Instagram plays a central role here, as 64% of websites offering sexuality and sexual health content are Instagram accounts.[17]

In this policy brief, we centre digital initiatives and content producers on Instagram which are providing safe, inclusive, and non-violent CSE. To ensure (young) people in Kyrgyzstan's safe and inclusive access to CSE, we propose the support and fostering of these digital non-governmental and grassroot initiatives technically, financially, and discursively. Safe, de-stigmatized and inclusive access to CSE does not just strengthen (young) people's health and wellbeing (for example through a decrease in STIs and unwanted pregnancies, or greater acceptance of queer and non-heteronormative sexualities), as we will illustrate in the next section, supporting CSE experts on Instagram also strengthens marginalized knowledge and voices, the digital innovativeness of young Kyrgyzstanis, and community building in Kyrgyzstan.

The digital transformation of comprehensive sexuality education in Kyrgyzstan – examples and challenges from Instagram

As a social media platform with a visual focus, Instagram has become one of the most important digital platforms for communicative exchange, networking, and social activism in Kyrgyzstan in recent years.[18] Of the 3.6 million social media users in Kyrgyzstan over the age of 13, more than 62% use Instagram.[19] In the last five years more and more accounts have emerged that produce and share content related to CSE. Some accounts, often run by professional sexuality educators, psychologists

or expert teams, focus almost solely on the provision of high-quality knowledge and expertise around CSE.[20] There accounts which feature more than one person posting that might not only discuss CSE, but other issues such as human rights, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, feminism, or family/parenting as well.[21] Most accounts producing and sharing CSE in the context of Kyrgyzstan, however, are personal accounts by feminist, queer or disability rights activists which address a whole range of topics, with CSE is just one theme among many.[22] In what follows, we will showcase three selected Instagram accounts to highlight the ways in which CSE unfolds on Instagram in Kyrgyzstan in more detail.

"My friend once shared a video from @batyrgaliev_ on sexual health, and then I started following his account," remembers an Instagram user[23] in a qualitative research interview we conducted in April 2022. @batyrgaliev_ is the Instagram account of 22-year old peer sexual educator Uluk Batyrgaliev who has been trained through RHAK's peer sexual education program since the age of 12. Initially seed-funded for 3 months through a grant by the Open Society Foundations, he manages his Instagram account by himself, producing daily stories and creating humorous videos on topics such as contraception and sexual consent. He tries to actively engage his followers through interactive challenges, but primarily responds to private messages via the Instagram chat function, as many Instagram users prefer to ask intimate questions via private chat rather than by publicly commenting under a post. His 11,600 followers on Instagram are mainly based in large cities, such as Bishkek, Moscow, Osh, Almaty and Karakol, yet many of his videos are watched by more than 50,000 Instagram users. According to Batyrgaliev, this is likely due to the high societal stigma surrounding

16   United Nations Population Fund, 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan', 6; see also Plakhtonik et al., 'Education to Support LGBT+ Communities in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine', 21.
17   United Nations Population Fund, 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan', 25.
18   Jasmin Dall'Agnola and Colleen Wood, 'Introduction: The Mobilizing Potential of Communication Networks in Central Asia', *Central Asian Affairs* 9, no. 1 (12 April 2022): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.30965/22142290-12340013.
19   Simon Kemp, 'Digital 2022: Kyrgyzstan', DataReportal, 16 February 2022, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-kyrgyzstan.
20   See, for example, @batyrgaliev_, @oilobot, @arzclinic, @mezhdunot7, or @chpok4pok
21   For examples see @teens.kg, @thegracekg, @novi.ritm, and @bilesinbi.kg
22   See author 2022; for example, @vivat.pobeda, @begaiym.zamirbek, @madinahoooooon, @karakyz.osh or @murzashova.aziza.
23   Flora, Personal conversation on 8 April via MS Teams, 8 April 2022.

sex. His followers in rural areas might not have officially subscribed to his account, but they still access the content he produces.[24] While he aims to increase young people's awareness of sexual and reproductive health and covers themes ranging from personal hygiene and sexual pleasure to the prevention of early pregnancies and STIs, his content mostly focuses on questions and issues relevant for cisgender and heterosexual people and relationships.

Another recent project is the account @ oilobot, a sexual education project initiated by the Bishkek Feminist Initiatives (@ bishkekfeminists) which is funded by UNICEF and lead by feminist activists Guliaim Aiylchy and Nurzada Kupueva. @oilobot seeks to promote use of the anonymous teen-friendly chatbot 'Oilo' on Telegram. It currently has almost 3,000 followers on Instagram, but more than 50,000 inquiries on Telegram. Designed to be a reliable, trustworthy, and non-judgmental friend, sitting literally on the telephone, the Oilo bot provides qualified and comprehensive answers to hundreds of questions around bodily changes starting in puberty, the sexual and reproductive body, intimate relationships, and STIs in both Russian *and* Kyrgyz. Oilo bot collects teenagers' questions and the topics they wish to learn more about via Instagram's chat function. Assuming access to a personal smartphone, Oilo bot thus allows teenagers to safely learn about their intimate bodily experiences, sexual identities, desires, and practices, without anybody else taking note of their questions or concerns – key in social environments where sex is taboo. In providing CSE in Kyrgyz, the people behind Oilo bot are also transformative in suggesting and transforming sexuality-related language in Kyrgyz. For example, the common Kyrgyz word for "menstruation" literally translates to "skirt dirt," implying that menstrual blood coming out of the vagina is dirty. To de-stigmatize menstruation and neutralize the term, the creators of Oilo bot have started to use the

word "aiyz," Kyrgyz for "monthly," instead. By introducing new language around sexuality in Kyrgyz, Oilo bot contributes to greater cultural transformation, detaching certain bodily experiences and sexual practices from sexuality myths.

25-year old feminist and human rights activist Viktoria Biriukova started to share posts about her life and experiences as a young woman in Kyrgyzstan living with a disability on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram because one day she realized "if I don't produce and share this content on social media, nobody will."[25] Through her Instagram account @vivat. pobeda, which has more than 1000 followers, she covers a range of topics: everyday life with disabilities, questions around education and health care, and the sexual life of people with disabilities. She senses that, through her activism on social media, people with disabilities, their joys, pains, everyday lives, and diverse sexualities have gained more visibility. Her social media activism is a way to build community among young Kyrgyz people living with a disability in material environments that often fail to provide safe spaces for them or to cater to their needs. In particular, Biriukova wants to reach out to other young women who may be sitting at home discouraged and show them that they are not alone in their experiences of discrimination and exclusion as young women living with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan.

While Instagram's translocal reach enables non-traditional, mobile, visual-sensory knowledge production and interactive community building in the field of CSE,[26] the platform also presents multiple challenges for CSE. For example, Instagram is a highly "policed platform."[27] Designed as an application for use through a mobile phone, users need to create an account and agree to personal data sharing to see, produce and interact with most Instagram content. In an environment where sex talk and sexualities are taboo, the

24   Uluk Batyrgaliev, Personal conversation via MS Teams, 24 March 2022.
25   Viktoria Biriukova, Personal conversation via MS Teams, 7 April 2022.
26   Jasmin Dall'Agnola, '"Tell Me Sister" - Social Media, a Tool for Women Activists in Tajikistan', *Central Asian Affairs* 9 (2022): 119–47, https://doi.org/doi:10.30965/22142290-12340018; Diana T. Kudaibergenova, 'The Body Global and the Body Traditional: A Digital Ethnography of Instagram and Nationalism in Kazakhstan and Russia', *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 3 (3 July 2019): 363–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2019.1650718.
27   Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram. Visual Social Media Cultures*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge, Medford: Polity Press, 2020), 20.

visible following of an account that provides information on CSE might be shameful for some users, causing them to avoid following accounts sharing CSE content.[28] Furthermore, each user's experience of Instagram is controlled by opaque, gendered, sexist and racist algorithms and, in addition, any user can flag content they deem inappropriate. Due to heterosexist and gendered cultural norms, this flagging affects content related to the (female) intimate body, sexual practices and identities more than other content on average.[29] This could lead to increased self-censorship[30] and the avoidance of specific topics, terminology or visuals deemed to be "too provocative" by content producers.[31]

Moreover, creating and maintaining an Instagram-account for CSE is labour- and time-intensive.[32] Due to Instagram's popularity and filter-based aesthetics, demands for appealing visual content are constantly increasing, and content producers who want to increase their reach do not only need to develop their own visual aesthetics but also need to constantly produce high quality content.[33] Spending this time on Instagram producing content, sharing information and connecting with others, however, is mostly unpaid and emotionally strenuous labour.[34] In addition, content production in the field of CSE is not as commercially usable as other content produced on Instagram, and activists might not want to entertain cooperation with companies who would renumerate them for their digital content production. Unless CSE content on Instagram is produced as part of a funded grant (see for example @oilobot), content producers of CSE in Kyrgyzstan often must rely on other sources of income and/or wage labour.

Finally, most information shared on Instagram

in the field of CSE is remains primarily available in English or Russian. Despite projects with a focus on content production in Kyrgyz, such as @oilobot, or personal accounts posting about sexuality and gender issues in Kyrgyz, for example @nuramel or @karakyz.osh, experts continue to observe a lack of sexuality-related language in Kyrgyz as "high-quality content on [sexual and reproductive health] issues in Kyrgyz language segment [has] just start[ed] to gain momentum."[35]

Policy recommendations

While many different Instagram accounts are already addressing the challenges related to control and self-censorship, labour-intensity and lack of funds, and language barriers for CSE in Kyrgyzstan on Instagram, political and institutional support would help digital initiatives and content producers to safely continue their important work in the field of CSE and incite the creation of continuous high-quality content for different populations. In order to ensure the availability of this support, we present three key policy recommendations

- *Provide educational resources to improve young people's digital literacy:* Even though most young people today have access to a smartphone or computer, they might not have the skills necessary to navigate the web safely and, for example, distinguish high-quality information around CSE from low-quality information. To ensure that a wide range of different groups have access to digital CSE resources, digital literacy training needs to be established in all schools in at least Kyrgyz and Russian. In addition, people who do not go to

28   Batyrgaliev, Personal conversation on 24.03. via MS Teams.
29   Carolina Are, 'How Instagram's Algorithm Is Censoring Women and Vulnerable Users but Helping Online Abusers', *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 5 (3 July 2020): 741–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1783805; Stefanie Duguay, Jean Burgess, and Nicolas Suzor, 'Queer Women's Experiences of Patchwork Platform Governance on Tinder, Instagram, and Vine', *Convergence* 26, no. 2 (1 April 2020): 237–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856518781530; Sherri Williams, 'Watch out for the Big Girls: Black plus-Sized Content Creators Creating Space and Amplifying Visibility in Digital Spaces', *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 8 (17 November 2021): 1360–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2004195.
30   Begaiym Zamirbek, Personal conversation via MS Teams, 19 February 2022.
31   Aida, Personal conversation via MS Teams, 16 April 2022.
32   Aikanysh Eralieva, Personal conversation via Skype, 12 March 2022.
33   Stefanie Duguay, *Personal but Not Private: Queer Women, Sexuality, and Identity Modulation on Digital Platforms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
34   @murzashova.aziza, 'Недавно смотрела старое интервью @irina_gorbacheva, где она говорила о том, что популярные блогеры становятся заложниками...', Post, *Instagram* (blog), 7 April 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CcDvmufr0yi/.
35   United Nations Population Fund, 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan', 24.

school should also have access to digital literacy training (e.g., school dropouts and parents). Such digital literacy training must be adapted to the needs of the respective target groups. Young people affected by discrimination, for example, should not only learn how to identify qualified resources with trustworthy information on social media and the internet more broadly, but also how to protect and defend themselves against digital violence.

• *Provide financial resources to activists and grassroots organisations*: As our analysis has shown, there are numerous experts in Kyrgyzstan who have accumulated a broad range of expertise in CSE through their own embodied experiences, training in sexual and reproductive health and rights, and/ or queer feminist activism. These experts, however, are often limited in their abilities to share this knowledge due to a lack of financial resources. International organisations and governmental and non-governmental donors in Kyrgyzstan should create more long-term funding opportunities to promote the already existing and diverse educational structures and expertise in the country. Above all, it is important not

to fund few organisations and initiatives repeatedly, but to offer several smaller funding opportunities that are attractive to many, and thus to allow individual activists and experts, especially those in smaller towns and villages, to promote CSE among multiply marginalized in intersectional groups.

• *Change the public discourse on sexuality-related issues in Kyrgyzstan*: To increase public knowledge about different sexual identities and diverse sexual desires, practices, and experiences, and to contribute to greater social acceptance of queer and non-heteronormative sexualities in particular, state and non-state institutions in Kyrgyzstan should strengthen CSE not only financially and materially, but also discursively. This includes, for example, the consistent public rejection, prosecution, and condemnation of gender-based violence, and violence against feminists and members of LGBTQ communities by political actors, the media, cultural institutions, etc. Authorities need to develop "strategies [for] gender-sensitive sexuality education based on [a] positive perception of [the] sexual and reproductive development of people."[36]

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[36] United Nations Population Fund, 'On Introduction of Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education Among Adolescents and Youth in Kyrgyzstan', Situation Analysis Report (Bishkek: UNFPA, 2021), 33–34.

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