Probing the politics of comprehensive sexuality education: ‘Universality’ versus ‘Cultural Sensitivity’: a Dutch–Bangladeshi collaboration on adolescent sexuality education

Rahil Roodsaz

Institute for Gender Studies, Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

As part of Western European development aid policy, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is increasingly promoted in resource-poor countries. This paper engages with CSE promotion in Bangladesh funded by the Dutch Government. It unpacks the ‘collaboration’ by looking at how a paradox is played out between the universal ideals underlying a broader transnational rights-approach and the intended cultural sensitivity by adapting CSE to the targeted context. Feminist scholarship on the ideological, moral and affective underpinnings of CSE is used to question this model’s implied universality and neutrality. The various negotiations, concerns and strategies of NGO representatives as co-producers of sexuality knowledge in Bangladesh are focused upon. Analysis focuses on how a ‘speakable’, middle-class-oriented ‘proper’ sexuality is invented and managed through affect; how cultural insensitivity and secular normativity with respect to CSE are challenged in discussions concerned a rights-versus-health approach; and how a confident and knowledgeable adolescent or young person is imagined through the emancipatory project attributed to sexuality education. Rather than via equal collaboration, it is argued, adolescent sexuality education in these development aid settings is shaped by powerful transnational and local processes of Othering.

Introduction

As part of the development aid policies in various Western European countries, including the Netherlands, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) has been promoted and implemented in many resource-poor countries. The impetus for this work is embedded in transnational commitments based on a Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) framework, as defined by organisations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). Within the transnational SRHR field, Western European nation-states invest heavily in sexuality education programmes in collaboration with local NGO partners in low-resource...
countries to improve the every-day lives of young people. While the SRHR-framework carries with it a universal promise, such programmes, often originally developed in donor countries, are supposed to be ‘adapted’ to the specific sociocultural-targeted context (Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2016). Despite the implicit universal ideal in SRHR discourse, cultural sensitivity appeals to diversity as another important virtue, suggesting a paradoxical relationship between the two. Building on critical feminist scholarship on dominant models of sexuality education, this paper focuses in on this paradox as played out by representatives of NGOs involved in setting up sexuality education programmes in Bangladesh. It probes the politics of knowledge and authority in the process of organising youth and adolescent sexuality education. The empirical data were collected as part of a transnational research project entitled Breaking the Shame: towards Improving Adolescent SRHR Education in Bangladesh funded by the Dutch Government.

The popularity and the effectiveness of CSE has been discussed by numerous scholars (Aggleton 2004; Farrelly, O’Brien, and Prain 2007; Goldman 2012; Haberland and Rogow 2015). Resolutions following the 2015 International Conference on Population and Development, repeatedly call on governments to provide CSE both in schools and at the community level (Haberland 2015). As defined by the IPPF, a leading advocate of SRHR, CSE ‘considers the various inter-related power dynamics that influence sexual choices and the resulting emotional, mental, physical and social impacts on each person’s development’ and emphasises ‘sexual expression, sexual fulfilment and pleasure’ as opposed to ‘methodologies that focus exclusively on reproductive aspects of adolescent sexuality’ (IPPF 2006). Within this definition, individual choice is seen as embedded within a societal field of power relations and the ability to express and fulfil sexual desires is celebrated. However, in some cases, rather than choice, the focus is on the ‘emotional’ well-being of the individual (e.g. UNESCO 2009). Nevertheless, the individual him/herself remains the main concern. This paper is divided into two sections. In the first of these, a theoretical discussion of CSE’s ideological, moral and affective underpinnings is discussed from a critical feminist perspective. This is followed by an empirical analysis of a stakeholders’ recent negotiations with and appropriations of a CSE-framework in Bangladesh.

The various interpretations of CSE within each country and the discrepancies between models and practice (Browes 2015; Vanwesenbeeck et al. 2016) notwithstanding, the Netherlands is generally labelled as exemplary in comparative research on the success and the extent of implementation of CSE (Lewis and Knijn 2003; Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005). This international depiction of the Netherlands as ‘progressive’ corresponds with its representation as liberal and tolerant in Dutch national public discourses on multiculturalism and sexuality, (Dudink 2017). Such scholarly and public sentiments are indicative of the post-colonial discursive space and power relations within which ‘collaborations’ in the field of sexuality education such as those between Dutch and Bangladeshi partners are set up. As gatekeepers of sexuality education in Bangladesh, the NGO-representatives referred to in this paper, receive funding, training and educational materials from, and work together with, Western donors to organise local sexuality education programmes. An analysis of their accounts, therefore, will help unpack the premises and implications of knowledge production in this transnational field of SRHR promotion. This analysis is a necessary step towards thinking about and creating the conditions for a more inclusive conversation about young people’s sexuality, especially when different cultures, histories and epistemes come together as in the case in Dutch–Bangladeshi collaborations on sexuality education.
The politics of CSE: ideological, moral and affective underpinnings

The current popularity of CSE in Western European countries and among international agencies and its generally positive evaluation in global scholarship on sexuality education notwithstanding, a body of literature has emerged that looks critically on its implicitly normative underpinnings. Focusing mainly on the work of three feminist scholars, Lamb (2010), Rasmussen (2010, 2012) and Lesko (2010), CSE’s underlying ideological, moral and affective positions as taken by their advocates will be discussed through the analytical lenses of subjectivity and agency. Probing, what might be called ‘the politics of CSE’ allows us to see the cultural and historical specificity of this framework, despite its implied neutrality and universality.

A liberal mode of agency and subjectivity

One of the major characteristics of CSE is its understanding of sexuality as a source of pleasure, going beyond a mere focus on health issues. Fine’s (1988) influential call to include pleasure and desire in the Western approach to adolescent sexuality, was according to Lamb (2010) perceived as an antidote to women’s objectification and victimisation, and stereotypes of female passivity by feminist scholars, such as herself. For Fine, this focus on pleasure would offer a more comprehensive model that envisions girls experiencing ‘entitlement rather than victimisation, autonomy rather than terror’ (1988, 50) and becoming negotiating ‘sexual subjects’ (1988, 46). Receiving education on sexual desire, others have argued, would enable girls to know what they really want, to love themselves and to gain self-esteem (Tolman 2002; Bay-Cheng 2003; Horne and Zimmer-Gembeck 2006; Impett and Tolman 2006). This individual-oriented sex-positive approach, Lamb argues (2010, 94) was in opposition to ‘past traditions that have taught that sex for women is dirty and shameful and overemphasised women’s partnering in such sex as objects of pleasure rather than explorers of such’.

Like Lamb, Rasmussen (2010, 2012) has drawn attention to an overemphasis on individual autonomy in CSE in the work of several ‘progressive’ scholars (Fine 1988; Elliott 2003; Connell 2005; Addison 2006). These scholars argue for a model which sees young people as sexually active autonomous subjects who have the right to be educated by experts on issues of sexuality in order to make informed decisions. Rasmussen (2010, 703) highlights the importance of the ‘inner world’ of young people in this understanding of adolescent sexuality and the task ascribed to sexuality education to enable youth to become agentic sexual subjects through examining and mastering their internal feelings.

Lesko (2010), correspondingly, points to the promise of CSE to produce confident and empowered individuals by overcoming feelings of shame and repression. This pleasure discourse, moreover, links empowerment to broader socio-political and economic domains of life (Fine and McClelland 2006). According to Fine (1988, 42), ‘If we resituate the adolescent woman in a rich and empowering educational context, she develops a sense of self which is sexual as well as intellectual, social and economic’. The position from which the adolescent woman is resituated is one that trains her ‘through and into a position of passivity and victimisation’ (Fine 1988, 43). Pleasure and desire-based CSE would, instead, turn her into an active, individual agent liberated from different kinds of oppression.

Despite CSE’s empowering potential, Lamb (2010), Rasmussen (2010, 2012) and Lesko (2010) invite us to consider a number of its problematic aspects, which potentially undermine
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feminists’ own principles. Lamb (2010, 299) for example, characterises ‘the sexually healthy adolescent girl’ imagined by CSE as someone who:

… ought to learn about, understand and identify desires, feel sexual feelings in her genitals, use full reasoning ability in making choices, being uninfluenced by romantic narratives and beauty ideals from TV, books, or movies, pursue her own pleasure as much or even more than her partner’s, and exist always as a subject and never as an object. She cannot be passive, and must be an agent; she ought to know how to consent and how to refuse sex, and perhaps more importantly, unambivalently know if she wants to consent or refuse. […] Behind her personal sexuality, her desire also ought to be connected to political issues she needs to be aware of.

As the above quotation reveals, Lamb considers this ideal unrealistic and exclusive. This is partly because what she identifies as CSE’s understanding of sexuality as a personal and a political project depicts young people as potentially capable of changing patriarchal cultures. This places too much responsibility on young people’s shoulders, being an impossibility for most adults to achieve. Moreover, as Lesko (2010) observes, the ideal knowledgeable young persons promoted by CSE, excludes the queer adolescent, who resists closure in terms of gender identity and sexual desire (Spargo 1999). Feeling insecure, uncertain, ashamed and unhappy are thereby pathologised and left out of discussion.

Lamb (2010), furthermore, highlights the assumed dichotomies in the CSE-framework between active and passive sexuality and between subject and object, both of which obscure the various ‘in-between’ positions that probably better reflect young people’s every-day experiences. Lamb (2010, 86) argues that becoming an active sexual agent might not be a concern shared by all adolescent women, as for instance, black and Latino girls in the USA are often confronted with stereotypes of being oversexed. What might usefully be added is an ‘intersectional perspective’ (Wekker 2016) that takes into account race, class and ethnicity – as equally important axes of difference alongside sexuality and gender – and which is sensitive to the complex interplay between different simultaneous marginal positionalities of young people.

Discussing another questionable aspect of CSE, Lamb (2010) refers to an underlying notion of agency that overinvests in a model of free will and choice. The model tends to situate the answer to political problems in individual, personal transformation (Illouz 2012). Empowerment necessitates change in a much broader field of power relations, while CSE locates change primarily within the individual, promising implicitly that once the individual has changed the social world more generally will follow.

Following this critical line of thought, Rasmussen (2010, 2012) questions CSE’s disregard of collective concerns and, thereby, the complex role of kinship networks, culture, religion and spirituality in young people’s decision-making. Rather than assuming universality and neutrality with respect to the appraisal of the individual as was often done by CSE’s advocates in the past, including Rasmussen’s own earlier work, she argues for critical reflection of CSE’s exclusive mechanisms which tend to neglect collective sensibilities.

What each of these accounts reveals is an understanding of subjectivity and agency as two inter-linked concepts underlying the CSE-framework. According to Foucault (1990), subjectivity is a process of becoming a subject in accord with a certain discursive tradition and, as Butler (1990) has argued building on Foucault’s work, agency is the capacity to perform subjectivity. Based on these notions of subjectivity and agency, young people’s subjectivity as promoted by CSE seems to be ‘in accord with’ a discourse marked by autonomy, progressive politics and transgression of tradition. Mahmood (2001) has identified this mode
of subjectivity and agency as ‘liberal’, one that emerges through resistance against and freedom from domination and which prevails in feminist scholarship as an analytical and political positioning that claims to be universal. She questions this stance, arguing that

… the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspiration and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject. (2001, 223)

By locating the moral and political autonomy of the subject in the face of power, Mahmood (2001, 203) suggests that our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of people whose desire, affect and will have been shaped by ‘non-liberal’ traditions, becomes sharply limited. Engaged with the same discussion, Bracke (2008) suggests a broadening of the concept of agency and subjectivity to include

different (non-liberal, non-secular) understandings of the capacity to act and shape the world, and notably understandings of autonomy, of subjectivities shaped within a tradition and by the dynamics of that tradition, including their capacities to transform a tradition. (Bracke 2008, 43–44)

Both Mahmood and Bracke argue for an understanding of agency and subjectivity that focuses on processes of subjectification as a form of transformation, regardless of what this process leads to, including resistance and compliance. Having discussed the specific forms of youthful subjectivity and agency promoted by CSE, the question is then raised as to what modes of subjectivity and agency are excluded from the CSE-framework. This question becomes especially urgent, with regard to the adoption of adaptation of Dutch-based CSE-models in Bangladesh. In these two contexts, one can expect different politics of sexuality and related affects, thoughts, fears and desires. Moreover, although sexuality education models are supposed to be adapted into ‘culturally sensitive’ versions, their deepest assumptions and therefore remains whether such fundamental epistemological differences are sufficiently accounted for by attempts to make sexuality education programs ‘culturally sensitive’.

A secular mode of agency and subjectivity

As another characteristic of CSE’s politics of pleasure and desire, Rasmussen points to the reinforcement of a ‘secular logic’ through the promotion of autonomy, sexual freedom, reason and modernity (2010, 2012). This secular logic according to on Joan Scott’s work on ‘sexularism’ (2009). According to Scott, secularism ‘encourages the free expression of sexuality’, promises to ‘end the oppression of women [by removing] transcendence as the foundation for social norms’ and ‘treats people as autonomous individuals, agents capable of crafting their own destiny’ (2009, 1). Scott coins the term sexularism to illustrate that rather than achieving gender equality the separation of church and state led to the emergence of reason as the defining attribute of the citizen assigned as masculine, while familial and religious matters were privatised and came to represent the feminine (2009, 4). Religion was thereby allocated to the private and excluded from the public sphere in which reason was situated (Asad 2003).

This secularist logic dominates the ‘health-based approach’ present in much Western European sexuality education, excluding religion from discussion about adolescent sexuality education (Rasmussen 2012). Religion’s role is seen as belonging to the private sphere and, as such, located outside of public matters such as the sexual education of young people.
This explains several oppositions assumed in the field of sexuality education – health versus morality; human rights versus religious rights; and reason/science versus faith – where in each case, the former is idealised and linked to freedom, progress, empowerment and autonomy (Rasmussen 2012). Religious subjectivity, by contrast, is assumed to involve oppression and false consciousness (Avishai 2008). This points at an Othering mechanism at work within the CSE-model, excluding agencies and subjectivities shaped within a religious framework.

This Othering is further criticised by Lesko (2010), focusing on the presumed oppositional pairing of religion-based Abstinence-Only (AO) sexuality education programmes and science-oriented CSE-models in the USA. While the former are generally associated with tradition and backwardness because of their disapproval of pre-marital sex, the latter are framed as modern, objective and progressive. However, analysing a number of programmes representing both frameworks in the USA, using the concept of ‘affect’, Lesko (2010) illustrates commonalities between the assumedly opposite AO and CSE-frameworks, concluding that an ideal of feeling secure, free and happy and a longing for simplicity, effectiveness and stability of knowledge is shared by both models. By investigating towards which emotions young people are directed in CSE and AO-programs, Lesko deconstructs the idea that the former exceed ideology while the latter are located within it.

Probing the liberal and secular ideological, moral and affective underpinnings of the CSE-framework and thereby, illustrating its cultural and historical specificity have the potential to open up space for a more inclusive and equal conversation about how sexuality education could be organised in collaborative projects in development aid settings. Rather than suggesting neutrality, the idea is to explicitly present the ideological positioning underlying the promoted model of sexuality. To further this issue further, I will turn to the accounts provided by a number of NGO-representatives in Bangladesh who, working with Dutch donors, focused on what they perceives to be their task, as well as the dilemmas, strategies and negotiations required that were in their every-day work.

Stakeholder accounts of sexuality education programmes in Bangladesh

Methodological notes

The project focused on in this article is a three-year-collaboration between the Dutch Institute of Gender Studies of Radboud University Nijmegen, The James P Grant (JPG) School of Public Health of the BRAC University in Bangladesh, Unite for Body Rights Alliance Bangladesh (NGO) and BRAC Adolescent Development Program (NGO). As part of the project, representatives of seven NGOs working on youth SRHR issues in Bangladesh were interviewed by JPG researchers in 2015 and 2016. These NGO-representatives, referred to here as ‘stakeholders’ in the field, were selected following a kick-off meeting at the start of project, during which various influential organisations active in the SRHR landscape of Bangladesh were invited to discuss their experiences of past and present adolescent sexuality programmes. The interviews were between 1 and 1.5 hours and were conducted by several JPG researchers in one sitting.

The seven interlocutors, six of whom were women, held different positions within their organisations, varying from coordinator and programme manager to technical advisor and programme officer. Between them, they had worked several SRHR projects in Bangladesh
over the past 6–16 years. As became clear during the conversations, almost all of the represented organisations relied on Dutch Government funding and worked to implement CSE-models developed in the Netherlands. In only one case, was there a collaborative project with a different country – Sweden.

As part of their work, the interlocutors were either directly engaged in providing sexuality education or training others to this end. All of the NGOs had access to a wide-range access to young people, covering rural and urban districts and religious and non-religious schools across the country. The target group usually encompassed girls and boys aged between 9 and 19 years old.

Inventing and managing ‘speakable’ and ‘proper’ sexuality

All of the organisations represented by the stakeholders avoided using the terms sex or sexuality in their official names, but rather referred to reproductive and population health services, adolescent development, gender justice, diversity and body rights. The avoidance of sex or sexuality could be interpreted as a sign of cultural sensitivity. Nevertheless, as it appeared from the interviews, the stakeholders work hard to turn sexuality into a topic of discussion, which they perceive as an inevitable part of their job. The classroom is one such context in which sexuality is supposed to be openly discussed.

One of the interlocutors, for example, emphasised the importance of first ‘creating an environment that was friendly for discussion’ in order to get young people to talk openly about sexuality: ‘We never start the discussion right away […] and do our best to make them feel comfortable first’. These efforts point to both the need felt for sexual issues to be openly spoken about among youth, and the assumption that sexuality already exists in a hidden place and will become accessible through talking. Moreover, ‘comfort’ is a feeling towards which adolescents are directed as an affective condition to make sexuality ‘speakable’. This quest to turn sexuality into a discussable topic resonates with what Wekker (2009, 11) has described as a Dutch ‘speakability’ discourse on homo-emancipation policy and politics embedded in a Western history in which sexuality was invented through articulation and speaking about it (Foucault 1990). As universal as this quest might seem, such an imperative of speakability excludes other understandings of sexuality, for instance, those that involve modes of ‘doing’ rather than modes of ‘talking about’.

Naturally, the trainers are also expected to feel at ease when discussing issues of sexuality with young people. Visiting one of the centres where the curriculum developed by one of the stakeholder’s organisation was supposed to be taught, another interlocutor and her colleagues witnessed ‘cherry-picking’ among the trainers.

When we visited the training session we noticed some problems; they [trainers] had learned a lot of things, but still they were not comfortable talking about it with children. They would skip issues related to the body and sexuality. However, they did discuss other topics, such as health and hygiene.

Skipping the more sensitive topics regarding ‘the body and sexuality’, is considered problematic as it undermines the ideal of CSE to go beyond the reproductive aspects of young people’s sexuality. The trainers are in fact supposed to have embraced this ideal and feel comfortable discussing the body and sexuality with youth. Being directed towards the affective position of comfort, both young people and the trainers are mobilised to organise ‘speakable’ sexuality.
Furthermore, the trainers are called upon to convince others in the young person’s immediate environment of the necessity of the sexuality education promoted by the stakeholder’s organisation. Reflecting on a past girls-only sexuality education project, one of the interlocutors spoke about the role of parents in influencing the high dropout rate among pupils:

Every week, our trainers would go to those girls’ houses who were absent. [...] Their parents complained: ‘You discuss sensitive issues during the class and my daughter feels shy to participate’. Our trainers would then explain to the parents why their daughters needed to know all this. [...] We try to make the mothers understand this.

The relationship assumed here, between the trainer and the parent is a relationship between the knowledgeable expert and the naïve yet malleable parent. The only thing that is expected from the parents is to ‘understand’ the importance of sexuality education, given the assumed unquestionable universal need for openly discussing sensitive issues of sexuality. The trainer is expected to be persuasive enough to bring about this understanding parental attitude. Inevitably, young people’s shyness and their parents’ reservations should be overcome. Persuasion by the trainers and the removal of shyness among the youth, thereby become tools in the process of managing ‘speakable’ sexuality.

In fact, all of the interlocutors agreed on the importance of engaging ‘the whole community’ in their programmes. Orientation sessions seems to take place regularly informing parents, community elderly, school authorities and teachers about the goals and the relevance of the programmes. As one of the stakeholders emphasised, ‘We believe that child development is only possible when the community around children is also developing’. Sexuality education in Bangladesh is here seen as a matter of ‘development’ that requires an all-embracing approach. While this could be celebrated as a community-oriented perspective, what is expected from community is not so much active participation in discussion about how to organise sexuality education programmes, but rather the development of an encouraging and understanding environment to enable the delivery of a particular sexuality education project. The community’s role here is seen as one of facilitation, not critical engagement.

Some of the interlocutors described their own reservations to discussing certain issues of sexuality in their education programmes. Talking about sex-segregated classrooms, one of the interlocutors said, ‘actually the adolescents don’t have any problem with talking about sexuality in front of each other, the problem is from our side’. Another interlocutor, who had just complained about trainers’ reluctance to discuss issues of sexuality with youth, mentioned, ‘but even we [the programme developers] do not openly discuss these issues after so much experience’. Another one admitted, ‘I sometimes worry about how talking about sexuality could affect my own children’. Pointing at these cultural sensitivities in a confessional way illustrates the disciplinary role of sexuality education discourse among the stakeholders themselves, which led them to dismiss their own worries as an unfortunate affective response to sexuality educations’ universal progressiveness that needs to be internalised.

Explaining sexuality’s status as a cultural taboo in Bangladesh more generally, one of the stakeholders referred to the lack of a middle-class language in which to address issues of sexuality. According to this interlocutor, ‘sexuality is perceived as a vulgar issue [because of which], contrary to urban residents, rural people have less difficulty talking about it’. Because they are not part of a cultural setting in which social capital can be gained through disciplinary regimes of sexuality, rural people are less concerned with the appropriation of a ‘proper’ language of sexuality. As suggested in the quotation, vulgarism as a negative moral framing
of the existing sexuality discourse, should allegedly be replaced by a more appropriate form of urban middle-class language in order to avoid negative associations with sexuality. At the same time, it is by fashioning this ‘proper sexuality’ that societal intervention in the form of sexuality education as the core business of the stakeholders, becomes feasible. The middle class and ‘proper’ sexuality become constitutive of one another: the middle class is mobilised to construct ‘proper’ sexuality, and through the progressive ‘cultural practice’ of sexual properness the middle class emerges (Spronk 2014). In the context of Bangladesh where the middle class in terms of both economic and cultural position is expanding rapidly (Karim 2012), the appropriation of ‘proper’ sexuality through language may become an important marker of social stratification.

The aforementioned stakeholders’ accounts and analyses attest to attempts to invent sexuality as an acceptable, discussable topic and to internalise its importance among young people, trainers, parents, the wider community and the stakeholders themselves. Sexuality is perceived as currently either hidden or accessible only in a vulgar configuration, against which a middle-class-based ‘speakable’ and ‘proper’ sexuality is promoted. As affective tools towards this goal, comfort and persuasion are proposed, while shyness and vulgarity are dismissed as inappropriate forms of sensibility.

Rights-versus-health negotiations

In discussion about how the stakeholders would frame their work, the concept of ‘rights’, as opposed to ‘health’, appears to be highly loaded. While health issues were seen as a more culturally acceptable way of presenting their work, the idea of ‘sexual rights’ was often seen as culturally insensitive. As argued by Rasmussen (2012), rights is one of the main ideological underpinnings of Western sexuality education models. At the same time, according to Rasmussen (2012), health is considered a popular concept in contemporary Western conceptualisations of sexuality education. In this latter context, ‘health’ is associated with the general well-being of youth and adolescents, including both their physical and their mental health. As an overarching concept, health here, entails respecting and ensuring the human rights of young people. However, as the following quotation illustrates, in their discussion stakeholders employed a different notion of ‘health’. Rather annoyed by the concept, one of the interlocutors said,

Sometimes I get irritated by people who do research about whatever they want. What is SRHR? In Bangladesh ‘rights’ is an implausible concept. You and I are highly educated, but do we actually practice our rights? […] None of us do that. That’s the reality. […] For example, if I ask for my rights from my husband, if I tell him that I don’t want to do it [have sex], what would be the result? That’s just not possible […] We [the organisation] prefer talking about ‘reproductive health’.

The annoyance expressed here conveys frustration in dealing with the apparently dominant ‘rights’-based framework. Refusing to have sex with her husband is presented as culturally unimaginable, which suggests a gender transgressive connotation attributed to the concept of rights. This understanding of rights is related to a particular liberal notion of agency which assumes the possibility of disobedience. Through annoyance and by questioning the feasibility of marital disobedience, the liberal normativity of this rights-approach becomes more apparent. Annoyance serves as an act of resistance against the incorporation of gender transgressive marital behaviour within the sexual ethics in Bangladesh.
Another interlocutor saw rights and health as less readily incompatible and presented their organisation’s approach to sexuality education as one that incorporated both concepts. Explaining this, she said, ‘When we conducted our sessions we would let them [young people] know that it is their right to get all the services needed to keep their body healthy’. Rather than being viewed in terms of transgressive autonomy, rights are here presented as implying collective access to health. Similarly, describing one of their specific projects, another interlocutor said,

We see it basically from the maternity and adolescent health perspective as well as from the rights perspective. From the rights perspective, what we ensure is that we have counsellors. The counsellor gives counselling services to the adolescents who come to the clinic.

Reflecting on one of their previous sexual health programmes, another interlocutor explained, ‘We used to cover both health and right issues. It was fifty-fifty. We would inform the girl that it is their right to get treatment in the hospital’.

In the previous stakeholders’ accounts on adolescent health and rights, ‘health’ is about preventing and curing diseases, while ‘rights’ refers to the accessibility of services that enable good health. The emphasis on having access to health services is an important practical concern due to the limited facilities available in Bangladesh, a problem expressed by all of the interlocutors. Framing rights as connected to ‘health’ loosens the former from its association with transgression and disobedience. Via health, rights can become a matter of collective well-being and thus culturally acceptable rather than the contestation of cultural norms.

That said, several organisations specifically use the term rights when framing their work towards Western donors. As one of the interlocutors mentioned, ‘We [SRHR organisations] are all running after the rights issue, because donors are saying so. […] We claim “rights” only to make the donors happy, especially when they are from the Netherlands’. While convinced of the shortcomings of a rights-approach in the context of Bangladesh, the interlocutor observes that different organisations in the SRHR field ‘claim’ this concept in order to receive funding from donors who have ‘rights’ high up in their policy agenda. Using the word for practical rather than ideological reasons becomes a way of mocking the norm and faking compliance. Within development aid settings, a pragmatic attitude in negotiations with the dominant ‘rights’-framework is not surprising.

Another way of resisting the rights-based approach is by questioning its assumed universality. One of the interlocutors stated,

Nowhere in the world are sexual rights truly practised. Women are still not allowed to say ‘I will do this because this is my right’. […] Roman Catholics also don’t want this. Pre-marital sex is never okay. All religions restrict this.

Instead of presenting ‘rights’ as culturally incompatible, the interlocutor points to the secular bias in the rights-based approach as internationally problematic. Religion and religiosity are presented as part of all cultures, beyond Bangladesh, which are excluded from the ‘rights’-approach to adolescent sexuality. This exclusionary mechanism was discussed previously as indicative of CSE’s ‘secular logic’ (Rasmussen 2012). Taking religion and religiosity into account, the rights-based approach becomes a contested topic and forms a ground for resistance against and negotiation with CSE’s underlying secular norm.

Rights-versus-health discussions therefore, function as a space in which the stakeholders explicitly articulate a tension between universality and cultural sensitivity and specificity in the transnational field of SRHR development aid. Although the rights-based approach seems
to be a dominant framework for stakeholders when working with Western donors, they manage to bargain with this framework by expressing annoyance as a form of resistance towards its cultural insensitivity; using the term ‘rights’ for pragmatic reasons; questioning the universality and secular normativity underlying this dominant framework; and incorporating the rights-based approach into the existing acceptable framework of health.

**Sexual education as an emancipatory project**

Various topics are covered in the programmes managed by the stakeholders’ organisations, including personal hygiene, physical and mental changes during puberty, wet dreams, pre- and post-natal care, sexually transmitted infections, the negative consequences of (unwanted) early marriage and violence against women.

One of the recurrently articulated concerns by the interlocutors was the need to provide young people with ‘correct information’ on these topics. ‘People have a lot of misconceptions about these issues that need to be fixed,’ said one of the interlocutors with reference to wet dreams and hygiene care during menstruation. In the absence of correct knowledge or because they have incorrect information, young people feel ‘ashamed’ and ‘insecure’ about bodily changes and neglect the required personal hygienic care. Provided with the correct knowledge through sexuality education, emotions such as shame and insecurity are avoided. Ideally, it is suggested, the sexually educated adolescent is both knowledgeable and confident. Another interlocutor said she was regularly confronted with young pregnant women who are considering abortion, but have no idea about the stage of their pregnancy, because they have forgotten how many months ago their menstruation stopped: ‘their knowledge about these issues is very limited.’ Moreover, several stakeholders use help lines as a tool to provide young people with correct information as provided by invited ‘experts’. Sexuality education is thereby assumed to fill a knowledge gap, to unveil the ‘real truth’ and to oppose and replace misconceptions, revealing an understanding of sexuality as objective and progressive that resonates with what Lesko (2010) described as CSE’s appeal to modernity and science. Sexuality education, as implied in these quotes, carries with it an emancipatory promise, through which progress can be achieved.

Despite being one of the donor’s explicit concerns, issues related to sexual diversity are generally avoided. The question whether ‘LGBT issues’ are dealt with in their projects, in fact, was met with amazement and incomprehension by stakeholders. Explaining the lack of attention for this topic, one of the interlocutors said, ‘I don’t think it is culturally accepted to talk about this issue openly. We can’t even think about encouraging people towards that. I admit that we do not cover LGBT issues, but it is also a question of how much we should cover.’ Being too big of a cultural taboo, and the risk of (being accused of) unleashing inappropriate behaviour by discussing it, places LGBT topics outside the scope of feasible sexuality education in Bangladesh. Moreover, LGBT issues are seen as relevant only to a small group in society and not to a broader audience: ‘Not everybody needs this information. […] We do not discuss LGBT issues,’ said one interlocutor. Dismissing sexual diversity in this way, however, allows those who do embrace its importance as a necessary component of progressive sexuality education to claim true pioneership. One of the interlocutors explained that in their programme they tried to discuss ‘in steps’ with young people how ‘some boys might like boys and some girls might like girls’. However, she further explained that the majority of her colleagues disagreed with this part of the module and worried about its
consequences: ‘I always [have to] fight with them.’ With this phrase, she emphasises how discussing sexual diversity is an act of transgression even among stakeholders and educators. While sexuality education is seen as progressive and emancipatory in itself, sexual diversity is located at the edge of the tolerable.

In the stakeholders’ accounts presented in this section, sexuality education is considered a necessity in order to tackle misconceptions and produce knowledgeable and confident forms of young people’s subjectivity. Progress is here imagined through sex education, a tendency ascribed to campaigns for sexual health more generally (e.g. van Raemdonck 2016). While CSE is appropriated by including within it a wide range of topics, sexual diversity enjoys a culturally hyper sensitive status and is, therefore, often avoided. As such, sexual diversity marks one of the boundaries of the emancipatory trajectory attributed to CSE, allowing its proponents to claim a ‘truly’ transgressive position in the field.

**Concluding remarks**

This paper has sought to engage with the paradox between the universal ideal and the appeal to cultural sensitivity in the promotion of CSE by Western donors in ‘resource-poor’ countries. Through the conceptual lenses provided by subjectivity and agency, the analysis has pointed to this model’s secular and liberal ideological, moral and affective underpinnings and questioning its implied universality and neutrality. More empirically, I have offered an analysis of the articulations of NGO-representatives engaged in setting up sexuality education programmes in Bangladesh in collaboration with mainly Dutch partners. I have tried to show how the universal implied in SRHR discourse is embraced through inventing and managing a ‘speakable’ and middle-class ‘proper’ sexuality, challenged by questioning its rights-based approach as culturally insensitive in the context of Bangladesh, criticised for its secular normativity, mocked by the use of ‘rights’ terminology to reassure the Western donor, reinterpreted in a way to fit locally acceptable discourses of health, and celebrated for its emancipatory potential.

Within a complex field of power relations, these findings attest to the disadvantaged position of the particular in relation to the universal, as effort is put into explaining deviation from the universal, while the universal itself is presented as a matter of fact. As argued by Ahmed (2017, 134), ‘To be particular can be to inherit a requirement to tell your particular story.’ When positioned as particular, explanation is required. What is assumed as characteristic for sexuality in Bangladesh (the particular) from the interlocutors’ perspective is presented as either hidden, vulgar or ignorant. When the particular is embraced (e.g. through the health approach), justification is needed in relation to the dominant norm (the rights-based approach). At the same time, however, this requirement to justify the particular makes the contours of the universal visible. Ahmed (2017, 134) continues, ‘those lodged as particular can dislodge the general. […] To be in question, is to question being.’ The very act of having to defend a position in relation to the dominant norm opens up a space in which to articulate the mechanisms through which the norm works to retain control over power.

This paper illustrates something of the processes of Othering at work within the organisation of youth sexuality education within a transnational development aid context. Previous research has pointed to the exclusionary consequences of not recognising local sexuality politics (e.g. Najmabadi 2008; Hossain 2017) in transnational sexual health and rights policies and discourses. If we are committed to organising a true conversation about sexuality
education, then collective concerns and local modes of sexuality knowledge and politics need to be included rather than implicitly downplayed and othered in relation to the universal. This inclusion will make it possible to consider, for instance, a religion-based/non-liberal notion of rights and genealogical investments in locally embedded approaches to sexuality as part of the universal. Such an approach requires an initial in-depth understanding and probing of the existing local discourses on issues of sexuality and gender and the identification of power relations between the main stakeholders. This might involve reflecting on and rethinking one’s epistemological positioning, with the possibility of a reassessment of what is qualified as a ‘problem’ in need of solving in the first place. Questions regarding what to do with topics that are perceived as sensitive and which might include sexual diversity, gender norms and child marriage, both at the level of content and methodology, need not be answered beforehand. In this regard, what could be considered is a primary facilitative role by Western donors and organisations in the service of a conversation between important local stakeholders, and most importantly young people themselves.

Note
1. See, for instance, a CSE-based programme developed by the Dutch leading Rutgers Institute, which is also very popular in Bangladesh: https://www.rutgers.international/what-we-do/comprehensive-sexuality-education/depth-world-starts-me (accessed September 5, 2017).

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ORCID
Rahil Roodsaz http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7416-6888

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