Implementing Nationwide Sex Education in Italy:

Why Sex Education is Important for a Country that Already has a Low AIDS/HIV Rate and Teen Pregnancy Rate

Hanna Yoshida

April 19, 2019

SOCI 239: International Comparative Family Policy

Dr. Feldman

Spring 2019

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Foreword

The inspiration for this research paper came from a topic that crossed my mind multiple times throughout my stay in Italy. At the Regional Tuscan Family Policy Center in Florence, I was told that not only does Italy not have sex education, they also have a low teen pregnancy rate and thus there are not many if at all, family-caregiving programs targeted for teenagers (Italian Family Policies and Services). This came as a shock to me, mostly because in the United States, teen pregnancy and caregiving facilities targeting teenage parents have been gaining more attention and importance over the past few years. Moreover, the United States has formal sex education in many public schools, but there is still a very high rate of unplanned pregnancy, whereas, from the discussions I have heard in Italy, these young Italians are able to prevent pregnancy in some way even without formal knowledge. How are the Italians gaining this knowledge if they do not have formal sex education and how would it benefit their society as a whole if sex education was implemented in their schools (since sex education does not just cover pregnancy)?

The Absence of Sex Education in Italy

Background

Italy is one of the few countries in the EU where there is "no national requirement to teach sex education and few schools do so" (Keating 2004). Decisions on sex education are not regulated by the EU; instead, the decisions are left open to the regional governments, creating a diversity in the quality of sex education an individual may receive (Keating 2004). Interestingly, Italy also has one of the lowest birth rates in the world, even though Italians are known to

predominantly use “traditional” contraceptive methods such as withdrawal and natural methods, despite the availability of modern and technological contraception (Gribaldo 2009, p.551).

Through research and studies, it has become apparent that the absence of sex education and the resistance to use “safer” contraceptive methods lies in the fact that Italy has a religious background. Even to this day, the Catholic Church claims that they have the right and duty to intervene in any situation that may put “souls in danger,” since it is reflecting “a superior order willed by God himself” (Fisina 2015, p.95). This situation allows the Catholic Church to “have the last word on ethical and bioethical matters” (Frisina 2015, p.95), since these new advancements may pose a direct threat to humanity. Though those that especially believe that the Catholic Church has the duty to intervene in political situations seem to be coming from the older populations and those living in the South (Fisina 2015, p.103), it does not prevent contraception and sex from being a taboo subject (Gribaldo 2009, p.554). The Catholic culture itself “closely intertwines love, sexuality, and reproduction,” linking the feminine identity with the image of maternity (Gribaldo 2009, p.561 & p.564). Thus, if a woman does get pregnant through sex, they believe that it is all just part of the cycle of life and that things have just aligned perfectly for the couple to become parents. Since Italian couples take into consideration these cultural forces as well as “social models behind choices to have children, notions of ‘planning’ and ‘decision-making,’” births-out-of-wedlock are uncommon even today(Gribaldo 2009, p.551-552).

Italians are also well-known for wanting to be in-tune with factors that may potentially harm their bodies, such as being cautious about genetically-altered foods and social illnesses (Gribaldo 2009, p.560). Therefore, Italian women see pharmaceutical methods, such as condoms and the pill, also as unhealthy to their bodies, whereas the traditional methods – in theory – seem

to pose less direct risk to the body itself (Gribaldo 2009, p.560). Some researchers have also pointed out that historically, the Church may have been more accepting when it came to traditional contraceptive methods (Gribaldo 2009, p.557), so there may be less of a social stigma associated with it. The lack of knowledge between different contraceptives comes from the absence of sex education in Italy, since most, if not all, Italian women seem to view modern-forms of contraceptives as harmful both in the short-term and in the long run, even though these forms may decrease the risk of STDs and pregnancy.

Other than religious and personal reasons, there seem to be two main reasons why sex education is still not implemented in Italy yet. One has to do with the current low rate of HIV/AIDS among Italian teenagers compared to other countries (Donati 2000, p.307). Thus, there may not be a sense of urgency to implement a nationwide sex education program. The second reason has to do with the fact that different forms of birth control were not even available to Italians until very recently. In fact, birth control was prohibited in Italy until 1971, since it was believed that the "decisional space relative to fertility cannot be separated from larger socio-economic questions, gender inequality, and political policies which today characterize Italy and the Italian family" (Gribaldo 2009, p.552). Condoms only started appearing in Italian advertisements and media in the mid-1980s (Gribaldo 2009, p.555), so the concept of different forms of contraceptives other than withdrawal is still very much a new topic for Italians to process.

Movements to Implement Sex Education

In some European countries, like Ireland and France, sex-education programs were started in schools due to the "fear of the AIDS epidemic," and have directly resulted in lower

rates of HIV infection (Keating 2014). Statistics show that the mean age at the first intercourse has been declining over the past few years, reporting that 45% of Italian women between the ages of 20-49 have had intercourse at least once during the ages of 14-19 (Donati 2000, p.307). This means that more young people are at risk of contracting STDs and HIV/AIDS if they do not know how to actually sexually-protect themselves.

More and more Italian teenagers have been openly expressing their desire for formal sex education in their schools, seeing it as "an essential complement to the existing bottom-up initiatives" (GenPol 2018, p.42). Therefore, informal sex education has been gaining steam in Italy, where groups of parents and teachers work with NGOs and even small rape crisis centers to "carry out independent projects" (GenPol 2018, p.40). Some primary and secondary schools across the country have even started informally teaching sex education, educating the students about different forms of violence and discrimination regarding sexuality (GenPol 2018, p.40). In the public schools in Rome that have experienced workshops regarding sexual education, researchers found that "students had an average 50% gain in the percentage of correct answers" following the course a few months later (Donati 2000, p.303). Unfortunately, "widespread protests from religious and conservative groups" have prevented these provisions from actually becoming specific regulations, resulting in the current situation of individual schools deciding on their sex education content (GenPol 2018, p.40). Students of schools that are of better socioeconomic background (the humanistic and scientific high schools) tend to have "higher levels of initial knowledge" about sex education compared to their peers (Doanti 2000, p.307).

Effects of Implementing Sex Education in Italy

The Difference in Effects between the US and Italy

The United States, which has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world, does not make sex education a requirement in all the states. As of March 1, 2016, only "24 states and the District of Columbia require public schools [to] teach sex education" (Blackman 2019). Out of the 24 states, 21 states mandate public schools to teach both sex education and HIV education (Blackman 2019), which contrasts how Europe emphasizes HIV/AIDS in their sex education rather than the sex component itself. The quality of sex education also differs across the states because the medical accuracy of the sex and/or HIV education can vary, "from requiring that the department of health review [the] curriculum for accuracy" to basing the information off of "published authorities" (Blackman 2019). Sex education has constantly been a hot topic for policymakers in the United States because "teen childbearing costs taxpayers at least $9.4 billion annually" (Blackman 2019). These costs come from the fact that since teenage mothers are less likely to finish high school and are thus more likely to live in poverty, they would be in poor health and would need to depend on public assistance (Blackman 2019). Therefore, the theory is that by informing teenagers about the risks of unprotected sex, policymakers may be able to reduce the amount of tax other people would have to pay.

Unfortunately, as we have seen, the United States is not the best example for encouraging the implementation of sex education, since our teen pregnancy rate has not decreased. Yet, it may be the fact that the variance in the content and accuracy of information from school to school is having a great influence on these numbers. Moreover, many American schools still heavily advocate for abstinence-only sex education, limiting the amount of information that

children can learn regarding safe sex. This, in turn, may also be the cause for the high rates of teen pregnancy in the US.

Though the United States does not necessarily see a direct result from implementing sex education, this does not mean that Italy should not consider implementing at all, even if they already have low teen pregnancy rates and low HIV/AIDS rates. For one, the fact that the "natural" method is still the popular and majority choice for contraception is an issue of itself. Unprotected sex is known to not protect individuals from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (Gertler 2005, p.519). Thus, even if some research shows that Italian teenagers may not be as infected with HIV/AIDS compared to other EU countries, there has not been much recent research done that shows that these individuals may be suffering from other STIs without knowing about it. Moreover, with the large domestic sex trade industry in Italy (Chapin 2019), it is important to include sexual violence and information about the sex trade in the education. Girls that are at risk of being involved can use the knowledge they gain from sex education to protect themselves while boys can use the information to warn officials when they see suspicious behavior. Sex education does not have to merely be about having safe sex and being pregnant; the content and knowledge should be customized to meet the needs of the teenagers in each area.

Looking at Sex Education in the Other Welfare States

We often times rely on other welfare states such as Sweden when looking to reform/create new policies. However, while Sweden is one of the first countries in the world to make sex (and even gender) education mandatory in schools across the country (International experts 2018), they are also ranked as being one of the countries that has a very high percentage

of people that have unprotected sex (Fontes 2017). The cause for this may be similar to the problem the United States currently has with conducting sex education: there is no set standard regarding sex education lesson plans (International experts 2018). Some Swedish teachers may decide to put a heavy emphasis on gender equality and STDs, but not cover much regarding safe sex.

On the other hand, China is well known for the absence of sex education and the culture of shaming when it comes to topics concerning the body (Griffiths 2016). This has led to an unhealthy increase in the number of HIV infections and even abortion rates (Griffiths 2016). While many organizations and individuals in China are also trying to create spaces to "break the cycle of sex-ed silence," the limitation of information and conservative culture causes people to have incorrect thoughts about safe sex (Griffiths 2016). Shockingly, for many young Chinese women, abortion is the primary form of birth control for them, since they are basing their knowledge off of the limited advertisements they see (Griffiths 2016).

Conclusion

The variation in the content and quality of sex education seems to be the cause for high rates of unsafe sex and even STDs, across different countries around the world. The implementation of a national sex education in Italy, especially, may not suddenly decrease the number of unprotected sex and it may not even have an effect on the percentage of HIV/AID infected teenagers. Yet, as the examples of sex education (or the absence of) have shown, there is an urgent necessity for a standard for sex education to protect not just the young teenagers that may be sexually active, but also to help individuals that may be victims of sexual violence and the sex trade. As sociologists, our role is to raise awareness to these issues that harm the

individuals in our society. The more we study the effects that different policies can have on our communities in the long run, the faster they may be implemented in the larger scale. My hope is that children would use the knowledge that they would gain from these sex education curriculums to help others in need so that everybody would be able to make full use of the opportunities that they have access to.

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