

## **PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL NORMS– INTERVIEW WITH TEACHER**

Interview of reporter of local newspaper with teacher.

**Hello, can you tell me something about yourself?**

I am Maria, a grade 7 teacher and really enjoy my job! I love working with young people and teach them right from wrong. I am religious and my faith in God supports me throughout life and in my profession as a teacher as well.

**What is the situation at your school regarding sexuality?**

Well, I'm very worried about what I see at my school. A lot of girls don't finish school because they fall pregnant. I hear about sexual harassment. And there are so many young people dying of complications during teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion or HIV. Just now a boy who was in my class last year. Something has to be done.

**I heard a new program was introduced at your school, about comprehensive sexuality education. What was your response?**

If I'm honest, I was sceptical at first. I worried that what I had to teach would be in conflict with my religious beliefs and norms about sex. I thought that talking with young people about sex would encourage them to have sex. And I don't think that is good behaviour for young people at all. They should keep their virginity until marriage.

**But then you received a workshop about comprehensive sexuality education. What did you learn?**

Well, I was quite amazed, as I learned several things:

Firstly that young people are sexual beings that have the right to correct and complete information on this topic. This is a universal right, I didn't know that.

I also learned that evidence shows that once young people have the full range of information, they are more inclined to postpone their first sexual experience! So the opposite of what I was afraid of.

And, with their acquired knowledge, skills and confidence, young people can make a more informed decision on when they are ready for sex. Instead of just having unplanned sex, like they have now. And when they do they tend to do this more safely than without education. This decreases teenage pregnancy rates and HIV infections!

This all has a positive effect on the academic performance of learners. It also improves their relationships with friends, family, teachers and potential romantic partners. And that also reduces (sexual) abuse cases and violence.

**And how do you feel about your personal norms and teaching sex education?**

Well I see there is a difference between what I think is right and wrong behaviour, according to my personal beliefs, AND the right of young people to receive full information.

**So what you're saying is: your personal views are still valid for you, but you don't impose them on the students?**

Yes, that's true. But that wasn't so easy at first. I had to make a distinction between my role as a teacher and my personal beliefs.

I now see it as my professional task to provide young people with factual and comprehensive information on their sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights without telling what I believe is right or wrong.

### How are you able to do so?

Well, I learned for starters that there is a distinction between opinions and facts. Culture and religion may feel very true to me, but they are not scientific evidence. It is my personal belief. It is very important to me, it guides my life and that's okay. But as a teacher I should give facts to my students, not my opinion.

### And how do you give comprehensive information?

I share factual information about a specific behaviour or issue, but I use different perspectives, answering the following questions.

- Is the behaviour healthy?
- Is it legal in our country?
- Is it in line with Human Rights?
- Is the behaviour socially acceptable?

For instance about sex before marriage,

- I will tell students that there are no health complications as long as you do it safely and in full agreement by both partners.
- In the law however it states that sex between a minor (below the age of consent) and a person that has passed puberty is illegal as it is seen as statutory rape.
- Some religious norms in Malawi see it as socially unacceptable to have sex before marriage.
- But ultimately, it is however your human right as a young person to make your own decisions regarding your sexuality based on complete and factual information and the availability of contraceptives.

With this insight and gained confidence in some important skills (decision making, assertive communication, negotiation, reflection) I trust that they can make *their own sexual health choices*.

### Thank you for your time.

My pleasure.

### Reflective questions:

- How did this teacher solve the issue of having her own personal beliefs on sexuality education for young people and her view on her professional task as a teacher?
- What is your personal opinion about giving information on sexuality to young people?
- And how do you see your role as a teacher? What are your professional values?
- What can you learn from Maria's experiences that could support you in your professional role as a teacher while staying true to your personal beliefs?