Author's response to reviews

Title: The political dimension of sexual rights. Commentary on the paper by Chandra-Mouli et al: A never-before opportunity to strengthen investment and action on adolescent contraception, and what we must do to make full use of it. Reproductive Health 2017; 14:85.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

22 September 2017

Subject: response to Editor comments on our submission to Reproductive Health-REPH-D-17-00271

The political dimension of sexual rights - Commentary on the paper by Chandra-Mouli et al: A never-before opportunity to strengthen investment and action on adolescent contraception, and what we must do to make full use of it. Reproductive Health 2017; 14:85.

Dear Dr Belizan,

Thank you very much for your positive comments on our manuscript and your invitation to submit a revised version. We are indeed submitting a new manuscript, one clean copy and one version with tracked changes, as requested. Below we provide a point-by-point response to your comments (indicated between [ ]).

0. General

[I read it carefully. I agree with your four overall assertions. On reading the paper you have commented on, I believe that some of the points you have raised have been addressed in the paper whereas some other have not. My reading of your commentary is that there are very few points on which you disagree with the paper’s contents. Your call is for more information and for a position on issues that you believe are important but are not addressed by the paper. Given this I do not understand why your tone is so critical. I will appreciate that the tone of your Commentary is to make positive and proactive comments and contributions.]

Thank you very much for clarifying your reading of our commentary. We indeed do not disagree with any of the points made in the paper by Chandra-Mouli et al, but rather wish to reinforce them and at the same time highlight the political dimension of adolescent sexuality and contraception. We have changed the tone to a more positive one.

1. Sexual rights are controversial:

[I agree with you that sexual rights are controversial. This is true all over the world. For example same sex marriage has been made legal in Germany only in June this year. Legal and policy restrictions, social and cultural resistance, and individual biases are a reality in many places – to sexuality education, to contraception, to abortion etc.. There is also opposition to child marriage prevention, female genital mutilation prevention, and even to gender-based violence prevention. But the tide is beginning to change and a shared understanding that adolescents are sexual beings and need contraceptive information and services is beginning to emerge. Your call for a clear statement on sexual rights is a reasonable one, but it could be made more positively than it is.]

We have taken out much of the first paragraph about the affiliations of the authors and the disclaimer. This section now brings up two reasons why sexual rights are controversial.

2. Political factors at the national level:

[I agree with you that it is critical to investigate the factors that contribute to restrictive laws and policies.

Your criticism is that the paper does not provide an analysis of the factors contributing to the restrictive laws and policies in Nigeria and Tanzania, that it does not explain why Ethiopia is doing better than Burkina Faso and Nigeria, and that it does not state that the Ethiopia
programme benefited some group and others. To my reading the need for such analysis has been stressed in the section on implementation research. Having said that I am pleased that the paper has stimulated you to consider these important ‘why’ questions. But this could be stated in a positive and constructive manner. And you could provide answers to them if you have them.]

Thank you for pointing this out, upon rereading this paragraph we agree it was too negative.

Instead of saying that the paper that we are commenting on provides “limited insight” as to why Ethiopia is doing so much better than Burkina Faso and Nigeria, we are now saying that “we endorse the call for implementation research that sheds light on context-specific programmatic challenges and employs methods to overcome identified obstacles.”

3. Ambivalence requires attention:

[I agree with you that we cannot assume that teachers and others will deliver evidence-based and positive messages about contraception once trained. To my reading the paper does not make this assumption. In fact in the Indian example, it points to training, retraining and ongoing support provided by an NGO to a state-level education programme in India. I also agree with you that new avenues need to be explore to allow for accurate and positive teaching of adolescents about contraception in contexts where there is reticence/reluctance to discuss these issues. Again if you have examples please share them.]

Thank you for pointing out that the paper doesn’t make the assumption as we alleged.

We now elaborate a bit more on the example from India and bring up the point that apart from training sexuality educators it is also necessary to ensure that school is a safe environment, both for students and teachers, to learn and teach about sexuality. We bring in the ‘whole school approach’ developed by Rutgers, as an example (and an additional reference).

4. Barriers at the global level should not be silenced:

All of us involved in sexual and reproductive health are upset by the opposition of the new USA government. Your criticism is that the paper is silent about this. You must admit however that the She Decides movement is a heartening symbol of a number of other countries standing up this opposition. You have not mentioned that. Further you criticise the silence in the paper about abstinence only approaches to sexuality education. From my reading of the paper, the authors
have called for age- and developmentally-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. Again, the points you make could be done so more positively than they are.]

We gratefully accept the suggestion to mention the ‘She Decides’ movement. We are now also mentioning ShareNet International, the knowledge platform on SRHR and HIV.

We have now included an additional reference, the one by Pugh et al in HRM, which refers to this movement. Interestingly, one of the headings in Pugh’s paper is ‘Holding ground in difficult times’, which contrasts with the somewhat euphoric claim in Chandra-Mouli’s paper that there is ‘a never before opportunity’.

Also on behalf of my co-authors, Billie de Haas and Anny Peters, I thank you once again for the constructive criticism. We hope the revised manuscript is now acceptable for publication and we look forward to receiving a confirmation.

Yours sincerely,

Leon Bijlmakers