

A report on the integration of reproductive health components into school curricula in Morocco

Prepared by Dr Mohammad Zorwali
Curriculum Directorate

Presented to the Regional Conference

Comprehensive sexual education and the extent to which sexual and reproductive health concepts are integrated into curricula and textbooks

Amman from 4/23-22/2024

A Report on Reproductive Health Programs at the Ministry of National Education

1. Introduction:

The National Education sector has a longstanding commitment to improving and strengthening school curricula in reproductive health education. It has collaborated with national and international institutional partners and stakeholders to empower learners to acquire knowledge and adopt responsible attitudes towards issues related to personal health, especially those concerning adolescent transitions, infectious diseases, family planning, and early marriage. In this context, the ministry has entered into partnership agreements with all sectors aimed at raising awareness of the reproductive health risks facing students and their parents. The first partnership agreement in the field of reproductive health at the Ministry of National Education was signed in 1998 with P&G North West Africa Foundation. Over 15 years (1998-2014), the results of this collaboration led to the awareness of three million and 500 thousand students, as well as 300 thousand mothers of students, conducting 58 thousand educational sessions benefiting 900 educational institutions, in addition to training 650 doctors. The program was recognized by UNESCO as a model of successful partnership between the public and private sectors.

Program Development:

This program laid the foundation for reproductive health management in schools, followed by a series of awareness and sensitization programs addressing the risks to students' safety. By targeting mothers and female students, the preventive message was disseminated to the community as a whole while developing pedagogical supports tailored to specific groups.

2. Context:

Morocco has a young population, with over 42% under the age of 24 (25% under 14 and 17% between 15-24). This prioritizes youth and children's needs, especially in education and healthcare. Addressing threats to student safety and health is crucial. Risky behaviors like drug use, violence, and unsafe sexual practices endanger their physical and mental well-being.

Early sexual activity combined with limited information and services puts adolescents (10-19) at risk of unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS (over 1 million people contract STIs daily, according to WHO), and other reproductive health issues. Since treatment costs often burden the public budget, prevention is key. Addressing these issues before adolescence prepares young people better. The World Health Organization recommends integrating sexual and reproductive health education (SRHE) in primary schools, starting from age 12.¹

¹ Studies have shown that young children (under the age of 12) have many questions about reproduction, sex, and genitalia. These young children have a great curiosity that leads them to risk gathering inaccurate information from their daily lives, peers, the street, or through media (internet, television, non-specialized books).

Recognizing the need to protect future generations and safeguard young people from risky behaviors, Morocco has developed policies promoting youth health. These policies empower them to make informed and responsible choices regarding health and safety. International expertise from organizations like WHO, UNICEF, and UNFPA is utilized.

Since promoting students' reproductive and sexual health and fostering healthy behaviors is a school health objective, Morocco, through programs with specialized actors, aims to implement proactive policies through health education within schools. SRHE is a central component as it encourages preventing risky behaviors and aligns with educational goals.

While current reproductive health programs in Morocco mainly involve celebrating themed days (tobacco, STIs, HIV/AIDS), there has been progress in implementing school activities, particularly through health clubs. These measures, initially piloted through limited-time cooperation programs, have become more widespread. Furthermore, content from these programs is often integrated into existing curriculum, especially in life and earth sciences courses.

3. Pillars:

The 2011 Constitution elevated ratified international treaties, making them official directives for social sectors like National Education that promote health awareness.

The World Health Organization defines reproductive health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being concerning all aspects of reproduction, not merely the absence of disease or disability." It encompasses appropriate approaches, services, and methods throughout an individual's life.

Focusing on reproductive and sexual health aligns with Morocco's commitment to international treaties on the subject. Including school health and reproductive health components in education respects the right to family planning and reproductive health, as well as the right to life by preventing maternal deaths, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and miscarriages linked to STIs or inadequate prevention.

In implementing health-related international commitments, Morocco is considered a leader in Africa and the Arab world. The country was commended at the 2019 World Health Assembly in Geneva for its pioneering role in promoting reproductive health awareness and prevention. The Ministry of National Education has taken a proactive step by formalizing reproductive and sexual health education within the curriculum and implementing it through appropriate teaching methods.

4. Integrating Reproductive Health into Curricula

As mentioned earlier, reproductive health education in schools contributes to the development of responsible behavior, self-respect, and respect for others. The cognitive components of reproductive health education in curricula or parallel activities aim to:

- Provide students with knowledge about the physiology of reproductive organs (male and female) and mechanisms of reproduction.
- Address other dimensions of sexuality (emotional, cultural, ethical, social, legal).
- Promote responsible behavior by preventing risks (sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, unwanted or early pregnancy, etc.) and introducing available protection methods (contraception).
- Support thinking about mutual respect, relationships with others, living together, and respecting the law (issues related to sexual violence, pornography, or combating gender biases).
- Raise awareness among students (consider "students" instead of "children" for consistency) about information, assistance resources, and support both within and outside the school.

4.1. Reproductive Health Education in Curricula:

Reproductive health education in primary education includes contents and cognitive materials mainly distributed in science activity lessons, while in preparatory and secondary education, they are integrated into life and earth science lessons and in some cases into family education in preparatory education.

Cognitive contents included in reproductive health in the science activity subject:

The science activity curriculum in primary education, along with all its inputs of scientific, methodological, and value skills, aims to empower learners with the fundamental dimensions of scientific culture through knowledge, concepts, and the development of critical thinking, scientific curiosity, and research skills to adopt positive attitudes and develop human values such as scientific integrity, self-respect, and respect for others. Thus, we find that the materials prescribed in the science activity subject in primary education address topics related to reproductive health culture. In the science activity subject, emphasis is placed on specific lessons such as biology and reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and awareness concepts aimed at promoting responsible behavior and risk prevention. Additionally, components related to human body and growth, such as various changes related to puberty in physical, mental, sensory, social, and emotional aspects (anatomy and functions of internal and external reproductive organs and their functions, personal hygiene related to puberty, etc.), are included in the science activity curriculum.

The following table illustrates the contents of reproductive health in the primary school science curriculum:

Topic	Edition	Level - Age Group
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Human Reproduction: - Reproductive System - Fertilization - Pregnancy - Childbirth - What are Sexually Transmitted Diseases?	First Edition 1991 Third Edition 1994 -2000	Sixth Year of Primary School (11-12 years old)
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Materials in language or national education at the primary level also address the theme of "respect," especially between genders, and questions about sexual and gender-based violence. All of these are knowledge areas aimed at supporting mutual respect, relationships with others...

- Reproductive Health Education in Life Sciences and Earth Sciences Curriculum:

The Life Sciences and Earth Sciences program at the secondary level has included knowledge components related to human reproduction since 1971. Since 1996, sexually transmitted diseases have been included alongside human reproduction in both secondary and middle school levels. The following table presents the evolution of the content of the Life Sciences and Earth Sciences subject at both the preparatory and secondary levels from 1967 to 2005

Year	Content of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Curricula	Educational Level
1967	Absence of Reproduction Topic in Programs	-
1971	Reproductive Organs/Precautions during Birth (Streptococcal Disease); Male Organs and Reproductive Diseases; Reproductive Diseases and Genital Hygiene	9th Grade (15-16 years old)
1974	Reproductive Organs/Precautions during Birth (Streptococcal Disease); Male Organs and Reproductive Diseases; Reproductive Diseases and Genital Hygiene	9th Grade
1976	Reproductive Organs/Precautions during Birth (Streptococcal Disease); Male Organs and Reproductive Diseases; Reproductive Diseases and Genital Hygiene	9th Grade
1979	Reproductive Functions/Precautions during Birth (Streptococcal Disease); Male Organs and Reproductive Diseases; Reproductive Diseases and Genital Hygiene	9th Grade
1985	Reproductive Functions/Precautions during Birth (Tetanus and Gonorrhoea); Male Organs and Microorganisms/Reproductive Diseases and Genital Hygiene	9th Grade
1993	Human Reproduction/Insistence on Taking Necessary Preventive Measures during Birth; Immunology: AIDS as an Example of Immune System Disorders	9th Grade

1996	Human Reproduction/Sexually Transmitted Diseases (Gonorrhea, Syphilis, Hepatitis, AIDS); AIDS as an Example of Immune System Disorders	12th Grade
2005	Health Education; Body Health/Reproductive Health (Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Syphilis, Gonorrhea, Hepatitis); Immunology: AIDS as an Example of Immune System Disorders	9th Grade

Evolution of the Inclusion of Reproductive Health Education Components in Natural Sciences Curriculum

The table below illustrates the age groups targeted by reproductive health education components in science and life sciences courses.

Years	Topics	Age Group
Sixth Grade First Edition: 1991 Third Edition: 1993-1994	- Reproductive System - Fertilization - Pregnancy - Birth - What are Sexually Transmitted Diseases?	11-12 years old
Ninth Grade 1985	- Reproductive Functions: * Demographic Principles and Generalization * Sexually Transmitted Diseases * When and How Does a Person Become Able to Reproduce? * Infertility: Causes and Treatment of Some Cases * Family Planning	15-16 years old
1993	- Human Reproduction/Understanding Some Necessary Preventive Measures to be Taken during Birth - Immunology: AIDS as an Example of Immune System Disorders	
2005	- Health Education; Body Health/Reproductive Health (Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Syphilis, Gonorrhea, Hepatitis) - Immunology: AIDS as an Example of Immune System Disorders	
Twelfth Grade 1996	- Human Reproduction/Sexually Transmitted Diseases (Gonorrhea, Syphilis, Hepatitis, AIDS) - Immunology: AIDS as an Example of Immune System Disorders	17-18 years old

Also worth noting is that reproductive health education components have been and continue to be included in family education courses.

5. International Commitments in the Field of Reproductive Health:

In order to improve the policy of promoting reproductive and sexual health, and with the aim of respecting internationally committed obligations, the Ministry of National Education has taken the initiative to formalize this education in the field of reproductive and sexual health within an official framework by integrating it into the curriculum. Reproductive health in the educational system in Morocco has garnered increasing attention from partners and stakeholders in public health. Initiatives and partnership programs continue to emerge, working on issues related to the concept of reproductive health and its components. In this regard, there are programs funded by specialized international organizations affiliated with the United Nations system:

5.1 United Nations Population Fund and Reproductive Health Program:

The United Nations Population Fund is the main sponsor of activities related to reproductive health alongside other partners. This cooperation during the period 2017-2021 included the implementation of a project to promote awareness to encourage access to information about reproductive education and integrate components of reproductive and sexual health education into the curriculum for primary and secondary levels. It supported the performance of the Ministry of National Education in developing national and regional plans for reproductive health awareness, promoting the use of long-term contraceptive methods, enhancing family planning services, and combating sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS. The United Nations Population Fund program operates through a health education approach. Education in the field of reproductive and sexual health aims to prevent risky behaviors by adopting practices that promote reproductive and sexual health for students, developing their skills so they can adopt behaviors suitable for their health.

Education in the Field of Reproductive and Sexual Health for Youth in Educational Institutions:

Education in this field takes various forms:

- Communication initiatives related to celebrating thematic days (tobacco, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS);
- Measures taken at school as part of school life, in health clubs, or as part of a development project;
- Supervision of activities by life and earth science teachers in partnership with the school health service or associations.

The United Nations Population Fund proposed to the Ministry of National Education, as a result of cooperation in the field of reproductive health, a roadmap within a clear strategy and measures aimed at integrating education in the field of reproductive and sexual health into the curriculum. This includes training and capacity-building for stakeholders in the field of reproductive health, such as teachers and inspectors. Additionally, an attempt is being made to design a system for assessing and monitoring the integration of reproductive health into the primary and secondary school curricula.

Education on "sex" and reproductive health is not only about learning factual content about reproduction but also includes learning to recognize feelings and self-expression by developing a positive self-image and awareness of individual rights and the rights of others through interactive building and dialogue skills. These skills and attitudes are also necessary for conflict management, making sensitive decisions, resisting negative peer influences, temptations of alcohol and drugs, and so forth. Developing these skills requires the use of adapted teaching methods that focus on the learner and prefer interaction, which falls within the realm of constructive social trends.

Key Implementation Measures:

Teachers play an important role in the educational transmission of content related to social and economic development. One of their roles is to prepare learning situations in their classrooms aimed at prevention. Teachers should not only provide knowledge and information but also allow young people to express themselves regarding "sexuality" and reproductive health without imposing a specific discourse. Efforts should be made to promote interaction, build a multidisciplinary approach, and work on youth self-respect, creating an atmosphere of trust. Therefore, teacher training is necessary for the success of reproductive health measures in schools, aiming to achieve the following outcomes:

- Development of a training unit on corporate social responsibility (reference guide, trainer's guide, educational resources),
- Facilitation of training workshops on reproductive health for trainers of high school inspectors,
- Facilitation of training workshops for teachers responsible for teaching English at the secondary level,
- Development and distribution of educational resources in the field of reproductive health for use by high school teachers.

5.2 UNICEF and Menstrual Hygiene Education Component

The menstrual hygiene education component is one of the components of the "Accompanying Adolescents in Transition from Shopping Centers to Adulthood" project. The health education component on menstruation is under the leadership of the directorate responsible for school life.

The "Menstrual Hygiene" component is considered part of the directives of the Ministry of National Education to address some challenges within preemptive programs such as:

- Combatting school dropout, especially among girls in rural areas.
- Combating early marriage for girls in rural areas.
- Menstrual hygiene program implemented by the department responsible for school life.

The "Menstrual Hygiene" component responds to Morocco's commitments to sustainable development goals, particularly:

- Goal 3 of the Sustainable Development Goals: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education.
- Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals: Achieve gender equality.
- Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

The implementation of the first phase of the "Accompanying Adolescents in Transition from Shopping Centers to Adulthood" program took place in two regional academies for education and training: Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima (Directorate of Larache) and Marrakech-Safi (Regional Directorates: Directorates of Al Haouz and Chichaoua).

In the second phase of the program, which will extend from 2024 to 2025, the implementation of the program will extend to the Eastern region and the Beni Mellal-Khenifra region.

The target audience for the Menstrual Hygiene Management component includes:

- Girls from 3 pilot institutions.
- Girls from rural areas identified by their mothers.
- Non-formal education institutions: experimental Second Chance schools for the new generation.
- Leading "Girls' House" institutions.
- Experimental boarding schools.

The objectives of the Menstrual Hygiene Management component are:

Providing girls with appropriate knowledge and skills to ensure a positive transition to practical life by:

- Providing students and mothers with knowledge about menstrual hygiene.
- Maximizing some life skills among students that enhance good management of resources (self-management/critical thinking/self-esteem/communication/...).
- Providing educational health clubs with an organized program for good menstrual hygiene education.
- Providing educational health clubs with an educational kit (easy guide for health clubs/girls' guide) to provide menstrual hygiene education.
- Enhancing the capacities of field workers to promote better menstrual hygiene.
- Producing informative and advocacy materials for menstrual hygiene education (roll-ups/publications/capsules/etc.).
- Encouraging schools to annually celebrate World Menstrual Hygiene Day on May 28.

Results of the Menstrual Hygiene Management Program:

Similar to the initial acknowledgment, the Menstrual Hygiene Management program seeks to develop:

- A menstrual hygiene guide for health club leaders.
- A girls' guide for menstrual hygiene.
- Support for awareness and advocacy for menstrual hygiene education.

5.3 Partnership Program with Procter & Gamble for Reproductive Health Education

This program aims to promote reproductive health education in the school environment, under the partnership agreement between the ministry and Procter & Gamble in the field of reproductive health education dated February 27, 1998, renewed on May 23, 2023.

The program aims to:

- Develop life skills for first-year secondary school students and empower them to adopt healthy habits towards problematic situations, especially reproductive and sexual health.
- Change misconceptions and combat risky behaviors.
- Raise awareness among parents, guardians, administrative and educational staff to engage them in awareness-raising activities.

The program has seen significant development in terms of both the number of beneficiaries and the pedagogical resources provided and support provided to educational institutions. It has been activated through awareness sessions in educational institutions, agreed upon during the annual work program and conducted by trained doctors. These sessions cover various topics related to the specificities of age groups, such as physical and psychological changes during adolescence, menstrual cycle side effects, how to calculate menstruation, appropriate personal protective measures, and personal hygiene care.

Mothers are involved in these awareness sessions to unify the discourse between mothers and students, and consequently to the community as a whole. After the awareness session, time is allocated to answer some questions from the students on the topic. Annually:

- More than 130,000 female students in the first year of secondary education are sensitized.
 - Approximately 5,000 educational sessions are provided annually by trained female doctors.
 - Approximately 800 middle schools are targeted annually.
 - Since the start of the program, more than 476,000 participating mothers have been sensitized in awareness sessions.
 - During the COVID-19 pandemic, an awareness session was recorded in the school environment and broadcasted through accredited television channels for remote learning.
- The programs implemented by the Ministry of National Education in the field of reproductive health seek to establish a peer education methodology to target a large audience of beneficiaries. This mechanism allows for the involvement of female peers in transferring the knowledge and skills acquired and developed to their peers. Adopting a collaborative and experiential learning approach helps in the production and development of documents within the framework of collective work among various educational stakeholders (executive administrative and educational directors), allowing them to saturate the approach and model.

6. Conclusions

Some recommendations resulting from field studies within the framework of cooperation programs between the Ministry of National Education and the United Nations Population Fund:

- The most effective reproductive health education programs are those that go beyond merely providing learners with information about reproductive health. Reproductive health education is not sufficient and must also include educational measures within institutions. This is because values, environmental climate, and educational practices affect identity-building, learning, and skill acquisition.
- Classroom practice provides a means to enhance learners' communication and negotiation skills, set priorities, and, if necessary, adjust their behavior when there is a risk. However, it remains inadequate and does not have the desired impact without coordination in the school system with different social environments that significantly influence children.
- Educational institutions cannot bear social and health problems alone in the absence of other forms of public health measures as well. Therefore, involving parents and local communities improves program effectiveness.
- School curricula often provide accurate information on reproductive health and are also an opportunity for learners to develop basic competencies that enable them to focus on exhibiting positive behavior that allows them to maintain good reproductive health, provided that the appropriate pedagogical approach is activated.