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## **Taboos surrounding the sexuality of Polish youth – an attempt to diagnose the phenomenon**

### **Tabu wokół seksualności polskiej młodzieży – próba diagnozy zjawiska**

#### **Abstract**

**Introduction.** Youth sexuality remains a taboo in Poland. Leaving young people without sexual education, downplaying and distorting the essence of psychosexual development results in a lack of understanding of the processes occurring in their bodies, a lack of knowledge about health, norms, emotional aspects, and building relationships, and ultimately, a lack of understanding of their own sexuality. As a consequence, young people bear both the emotional and behavioural costs of these shortcomings.

**Aim.** This text aims to outline the most essential themes related to youth sexuality, which are still insufficiently addressed in the academic and educational discourse by referring to the most important papers within the discussed topic.

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**Materials and methods.** The study involves desktop research, including academic articles, monographs, and research reports.

**Results.** The authors signal research fields that should be deepened through reliable empirical studies, such as sexual education, access to pornography, sexual violence, risky behaviours of children and adolescents, the issue of LGBT+ youth, and lastly, the almost entirely overlooked subject of youth sexuality of people with disabilities.

**Keywords:** sexuality, youth, sexual education, social taboo, sexualization.

### **Abstrakt**

**Wprowadzenie.** Seksualność młodzieży to w Polsce temat tabu. Pozostawienie młodzieży bez edukacji seksualnej, bagatelizowanie i zniekształcanie istoty rozwoju psychoseksualnego sprawia, że młode osoby nie rozumieją procesów zachodzących w ich ciałach, nie dysponują wiedzą o zdrowiu, normach, emocjonalności oraz budowaniu relacji i – wreszcie – nie rozumieją własnej seksualności. W rezultacie młodzież ponosi tego koszty zarówno emocjonalne, jak i behawioralne.

**Cel.** Tekst, przywołując najważniejsze pozycje z zakresu omawianej tematyki, ma na celu zarysowanie – najistotniejszych zdaniem autorów – wątków związanych z seksualnością młodzieży, które wciąż niewystarczająco są poruszane w dyskursie naukowym i edukacyjnym.

**Materiały i Metody.** Analiza danych zastanych – artykułów naukowych, monografii oraz raportów z badań.

**Wyniki.** Autorzy sygnalizują pola badawcze, które należałoby pogłębić rzetelnymi badaniami empirycznymi, takie jak: edukacja seksualna, dostęp młodzieży do pornografii, przemoc na tle seksualnym, ryzykowne zachowania dzieci i młodzieży, zagadnienie młodzieży LGBT+, a wreszcie niemal całkowicie pomijany wątek seksualności młodzieży z niepełnosprawnościami.

**Słowa kluczowe:** seksualność, młodzież, edukacja seksualna, tabu społeczne, seksualizacja.

Youth sexuality is still a taboo in Poland. This taboo mainly concerns adults and institutions, such as schools, which relegate the topic of sexuality to the background, believing that young people should not be interested in sex, not to mention engage in sexual activity. As will be shown in this research paper, this does not mean that for young people issues related to sexuality are unimportant and that due to existing social and moral norms, they do not undertake such activity. As a result of the practical lack of sexual education in Polish schools, young people are often deprived of specialist knowledge on human sexual development and it happens that they engage in risky behaviour. There is even talk of the existence in our country of a restrictive model in the approach to youth sexuality, which:

[...] this treats sexuality as a threat, an area of sin, and pathology. The main aim of actions in this model is to prevent potential evil by isolating the child from

stimuli that might at least be associated with sexuality. The topic of sex and sexuality is not an area of information between adults and children. [...] Within the strict conception, the notion of psychosexual development does not exist: contact with sexuality is only possible after adulthood and sometimes only after marriage (Jur-czyk, Dąbkowska, 2022).

There is not much scientific research on adolescent sexuality and, it is important to note, that research on this sphere is subject to critical and lackadaisical assessment (Jaczewski, 2014; Grabowska, 2017). As Magdalena Grabowska emphasises:

The main problem of this type of research focuses on the social climate during the period when the research is carried out and the expected reactions to the results. In Poland, the sexual sphere tends to be a taboo subject, and the research projects carried out are particularly concerned with its public dimension (Grabowska, 2017).

Particularly troubling is the lack of studies and publications on the digitalisation of young people's social lives and those examining the impact of new technologies – including the multimedia character of smartphones and the constant presence of young people online – on their knowledge of sexuality and intercourse and already concretised sexual behaviours. The scarcity of knowledge on this subject is also related to the tabooisation of this sphere of life in Polish social and pedagogical discourse. As some researchers emphasise:

Sexual taboo is understood as the prohibition of topics related to the sexual sphere of life. The assimilation of sexual taboos by children is related to the observation of adult behaviour when addressing sexuality. The young person associates the content communicated with the emotions expressed by adults, with the result that they may treat this area as shameful, and distasteful (Gorajska et al., 2018).

The presence of sex education in Polish schools is also causing controversy. Political opponents of the introduction of such education justify their beliefs by the alleged sexualisation of children and adolescents by instructors, the promotion of bad and inappropriate attitudes, and the encouragement of children by educators to engage in sexual activity (Jąderek, 2022). This topic appears quite often in the public debate, often forming part of some campaigning political disputes. However, the impression is created that the discussion is instrumental, off-topic, serving immediate political gains or “covering up” other pressing social problems. The topic of the sexualisation of children by NGOs, in particular equality and LGBT+ organisations,

has often been featured in the public media (Szot, 2020). Currently, sex education is provided through the optional subject of education for family life (in Polish: *Wychowanie do życia w rodzinie – WdŻ*). These classes are often implemented irregularly, during substitutions or on Saturdays, which may discourage students from participating. Their negative evaluation by students is mainly related to teachers conveying their personal views instead of reliable knowledge (Grabowska, 2017), although some studies indicate that positive results of regular participation could be observed, mainly among boys (Komorowska-Pudło, 2015). Also, textbooks for *WdŻ* are facing criticism from researchers:

Although textbooks address many important topics concerning human development in the family and society, the content presented there on sexuality is not based on the latest medical and sexological knowledge. Some appear too late to protect children from exploitation by adults and reproduction, reinforcing stereotypes about the sexuality of women and men (Gorajska et al., 2018).

Young people perceive the need for such lessons, but not in the form in which the classes are conducted. They complain about the poorly prepared staff, the embarrassment presented by the teachers during the classes, and the lack of interesting topics (Czarniak, Wasilewski, 2015). As Alicja Jeznach points out: “These classes are sometimes anachronistic and do not correspond to the knowledge young people already have, do not take into account their experiences and interests, do not respond to their needs and are therefore perceived as boring” (Jeznach, 2020). Discussions on sex education often confuse two concepts: “upbringing” and “sexual awareness”.

Upbringing is a continuous, often unconscious process that starts at birth and is carried out by the family, and secondarily by the school and the mass media. At school, teachers and the peer environment have the most significant role in this regard (Jaczewski, 2014). Catholic environments opposing school-based sex education postulate that the family should be responsible for sex education. However, most parents do not feel competent in this area. As Izabela Jąderek stresses:

Research conducted by CBOS [Centre for Public Opinion Research] in 2019, revealed that the majority of respondents (74%) disagree with the view that sex education has a demoralising effect on children. In addition, 70% of adult Polish women and men do not see a connection between sex education and the early initiation of sexual life and the awakening of interest in sex in children (Jąderek, 2022).

What should be emphasised is that as many as 88% of parents agree with the presence of sex education in Polish schools (Jaczewski, 2014). It seems that this may be a consequence of a change in the way families function and less involvement in spending time together, as well as the transfer of a significant amount of young people's social relationships to the virtual world. This process is conducive to transferring responsibility for various elements of upbringing to institutions educating children and young people.

The contemporary generation of adolescents has clearly dissociated sexuality from the reproductive aspect, which can be seen, among other things, in rates of contraceptive use. There has also been a dissociation of sexual activity from the institution of marriage in the functioning of young adults (Grabowska, 2017). There is a shift away from traditional patterns of behaviour based on religious norms, instrumentalization and objectification of the sexual relationship partner, liberalisation, and weakening of social control, including parental control. There is a convergence of masculine and feminine roles, which is visible in the sphere of dress and behaviour – especially among young people – and a “sexualisation of girlhood”, which manifests among other things in girls taking the initiative in establishing intimate relations (Izdebski, 2020). Leaving adolescents without sex education, belittling the essence of psychosexual development results in young people not understanding the processes occurring in their bodies, lacking knowledge about their health, norms, emotionality, and building erotic relations. As a result, adolescents incur emotional costs: confusion, shame and fear, and other psychological costs in the form of unconsciously reinforcing negative stereotypes and beliefs about their own and different sex or gender roles. Additional peer pressure leads some adolescents to believe that their peers are more sexually active than they actually are, and thus engage in various forms of sexual activity without being psychologically prepared for doing so (Jąderek, 2022). The phenomenon of “splitting puberty” is also observed, i.e., reaching biological maturity earlier and achieving emotional, moral, social maturity and economic independence much later (Izdebski, 2020). Joanna Pacewicz-Biegańska (2013) describes the phenomenon of delayed mental maturation and late achievement of social and economic maturity as “acceleration”. It can be assumed that contemporary adolescents reach biological maturity at approximately the age of fourteen (Jaczewski, 2014). The differences between boys and girls in terms of sexual activity are narrowing. Girls are becoming active just as often as boys, and there is a growing group of adolescent girls initiating sexual life at an increasingly young age (Komorowska-Pudło, 2015). It is noteworthy, however, that when asked about the feelings that accompany their initiation and first sexual intercourse, young women report that the ability to feel sexual satisfaction is spoiled by their fear of pregnancy and the feeling that they are doing something wrong (Jaczewski, 2014).

Young people's sexuality is influenced by religious norms, which includes a system of values, views and rules, determined by faith, and passed down from generation to generation inside a family (Żyłkowska, 2021). In the area of declared sexual behaviour, no gender differences were found in the measurement of the frequency of sexual intercourse or use of contraception. On average, young people declare having between ten and fourteen sexual acts per month. While 68.9 % of respondents use contraception.

Most of the young respondents demonstrate a moderate level of knowledge about sexuality (a high score was achieved by 26.7% of the respondents and a low score by 15%). Respondents show the highest level of knowledge on contraception, while the lowest level of knowledge is on the anatomy of the reproductive system and the course of sexual reactions (Grabowska, 2017). Sources of knowledge about sexuality for adolescents are online forums and blogs (81%), friends (69%), non-educational publications such as youth magazines, series (64%), and pornography (45%). Such a high proportion of non-educational, and often even harmful, unrealistic sexual channels (such as pornography) has lasting consequences for the way young people view sex and their views on boundaries in intimate relationships. In particular, 8% used the services of professionals, while education from family (28%) and school (32%) could barely be expected by a third of those questioned (Jeznach, 2020). The general level of knowledge of adolescents on the subject of sexuality is not high, although they are quite well-informed about contraceptives available on the market (Czarniak, Wasilewski, 2020). It should also be noted that the family environment is the first source of information on gender-typical behaviour. From the very beginning, parents perceive and treat their newborn children differently depending on their gender. However, young people rarely approach their parents to learn about sexuality. As Maria Woźniak (2017) points out: "By consciously avoiding the topic of sexuality, a scenario is given to children associating carnality and sex with something that is not talked about, something that is socially taboo". Conversations with parents about sexuality are often characterised by a lack of freedom and feelings of embarrassment. As A. Jeznach (2020) points out: "Such a fundamental topic as one's sexuality is explored most often among peers or via the Internet".

Researchers draw attention to both positive and negative effects of the influence of mass media on young people (Łukaszek, 2013; Dobosz, 2021). Particularly important – due to its accessibility, low cost and, above all, anonymity – in this context is the Internet. As a general rule, young people can use the media in their own room, behind closed doors, without control – which is especially important in the case of the sexual sphere (Lew-Starowicz, 2002; Łukaszek, 2013). Most advertisements, music videos, photos, and recordings on mobile apps or social

media channels – particularly those aimed at young people – refer to carnality and eroticism, and thus encourage young people to demonstrate and emphasise their sexuality (Nowak, 2022). An analysis of media representations of love reveals that it is reduced to purely biological aspects, rarely touches on feelings and focuses on the theme of avoiding pregnancy at a young age (Dobosz, 2021). It is also worth paying attention to Internet forums concerning the sexual sphere (Szpunar, 2011). Tabooisation of the problem of conscious and healthy use of Internet resources by young people may be exacerbated by the legal changes being prepared. According to legislative plans, access to pornography shall be regulated, and the law which is to introduce these restrictions is pushed as a proposal of a general grassroots movement to protect children from demoralisation. Work on legal changes is taking place without the participation of young people themselves. Finally, they are impossible to realistically enforce, as pornography is not only present on typically erotic websites but also on popular social media platforms such as *Twitter*, *Discord*, or *vimeo*. The politicisation of adolescents' sex lives is therefore not having a positive impact on solving their real problems in this sphere of life. And the problems are increasing.

Intergender or gender-based violence is common among young people. According to the declarations of male and female students, more than half of young people experience this type of peer violence every day or almost every day. According to research:

The most common form of violence is verbal, but they also experience physical, psychological, relational, material and sexual violence. About one in three respondents experience violation of intimate space through various forms of unwanted touching. One-third of respondents are frequently exposed to unwanted sexual or pornographic content (Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019).

Surprisingly, relatively little is said about the sexual violence that so frequently occurs in schools. Natalia Jurkiewicz (2023) believes that: “Adults, both teachers and parents, often refer to alarming behaviour as a natural part of the formation of relationships between boys and girls or within a particular gender”. The eroticisation of violent images is also mentioned as one of the reasons for such behaviour (Dobosz, 2021). This happens in the context of pornography, films, games, and music videos containing images of male violence against women. There is an association of violence with something sexy, whereas women's suffering is in this case marginalised (Małyszko, 2013). Young people experience a moderately strong tendency to use gender stereotypes. However, it is worth noting here that the tendency to use stereotypes of femininity prevails (Grabowska, 2017). On the other

hand, attention is also drawn to the media's promotion of sex-positivity (sex-positive movement), i.e., pointing out that deriving pleasure from a satisfying intimate life and relationship with another person is an extremely important part of our lives (Dobosz, 2021).

An important theme to be discussed in the context of digital media is minors' contact with pornography. A 2015 study revealed that in Poland, almost  $\frac{1}{3}$  of children aged 7–18 (32%) using the Internet via computer had contact with erotica and pornography (PBI, 2015). The results of a 2017 study show that among children and adolescents aged 11–18 years, 43% have been in contact with pornographic and sexualising material (Makaruk, Włodarczyk, & Michalski, 2017). However, 18% of children and adolescents aged 11–18 are in contact with pornography at least once a week (Makaruk, Włodarczyk, & Michalski, 2017). According to Karolina Nowak (2022) on pornographic websites, as she emphasises:

[...] a completely new, unrealised erotic reality is created. In such conditions, being torpedoed by distorted images of the world of male-female relationships, it is extremely easy to get lost and extremely difficult to find oneself later in the real world of human relationships, relations, and intimacy.

Access to pornography is only one of the problems associated with young people's sexuality. The tabooisation of young people's sexual behaviour also often results in overlooking the production of pornographic materials by young people themselves, both in the partner dimension (e.g., through sexting) and the commercial dimension (video chat rooms, e.g., *Onlyfans*). Practically nothing is known about the scale of the phenomenon, as in the Polish reality undertaking research concerning this subject is covered by a very strong taboo. Another serious problem is engaging in risky sexual behaviour.

According to NGO reports, the most important and common risky sexual behaviours of young people are: “undertaking early sexual activity and engaging in this activity without adequate protection (...), as well as sexting (sending erotic content over the phone or internet) and grooming meaning (seduction via the internet)” (Stammer, 2022) or “upskirting”, i.e., taking pictures of underwear and intimate body parts of girls wearing dresses or skirts (Jurkiewicz, 2023). Sexting among young people is a way of communicating that one is sexually active, it is also a form of flirting and safe sex that substitutes for physical contact (Adamczyk et al., 2022). A phenomenon that has emerged among young people in recent years is “slut-shaming”, i.e., various forms of humiliation, stigmatisation and shaming of girls about their actual or alleged sexual activity. It mainly targets girls who go beyond traditional stereotypes regarding sexual behaviour (Chmura-Rutkowska,



2019). The widespread problem of sexualisation and vulgarisation of youth language is also noticeable.

The initiation of sexual contact often involves drinking alcohol or using other psychoactive substances, without using contraceptives. Sexual intercourse after alcohol use concerns 23% of adolescents and after drug use 3.5%. Risky sexual behaviour expressed through sex with a random person is relatively rare – 5.5%, as is the situation with group sex games (3.2%), which contradicts media messages exaggerating the phenomenon. In recent years, it has been noted that the risky sexual behaviour of having sex with a person infected with HIV or another venereal disease is becoming more frequent. Adolescent unwanted pregnancies and an increased number of recorded sexually transmitted diseases are also becoming increasingly common problems (Czarniak, Wasilewski, 2015). Having sex with multiple partners, often at the same time, at parties, with the influence of drugs limiting perception and conscious decision-making, including consenting to a specific activity, is also emerging as a problem among adolescents.

Discussing the tabooisation of youth sexuality in Poland, it is also important to mention the issue of LGBT+ youth. As Mikołaj Winiewski and Katarzyna Malinowska note:

In the curriculum, the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation are rarely discussed – approximately 15% and 34% of LGBT+ young people, respectively, had classes at school or university that addressed these issues. However, when such content did appear in the curriculum, it was mostly presented positively or neutrally, with only around 23% of LGBT+ young people who had such classes stating that non-heteronormative orientation or non-sexual identity was presented negatively (Winiewski, Malinowska, 2021, p. 299).

Nonetheless, LGBT+ youth in Poland are a group particularly vulnerable to violence. It is extremely worrying to see homophobic statements by representatives of state institutions (Winiewski, Malinowska, 2021). The authors of the report note that:

This is of great importance because, as the research reveals, school climate – institutional support or lack thereof – has a huge impact on the functioning of LGBT+ youth. Institutional support has a positive effect on the self-esteem and school achievement of non-heteronormative young people significantly provides a safer environment and, most importantly, offsets the effect of prejudice on the functioning of LGBT+ youth (Winiewski, Malinowska, 2021, p. 282).

The survey results leave no illusions: 74.29% of LGBT+ teenagers feel lonely. More than a quarter of school adolescents have severe symptoms of depression. 56.41% of LGBT+ teenagers studying in schools can be categorised as meeting the criteria for depression. Three-quarters of school adolescents admit to having suicidal thoughts (Winiewski, Malinowska, 2021). More than a quarter of LGBT+ adolescents have run away from home at least once (26.07%). An estimated one in ten LGBT+ young people has been persuaded against their will to leave (9.72%) (Winiewski, Malinowska, 2021). Homophobic and transphobic violence against young people is significantly higher than against adults (by 10%). Verbal violence is experienced by 64.53% of students, threats by 48.34%, vandalism and denial by 35.65%, physical violence by 18.23%, and sexual violence by 26.13% (Winiewski, Malinowska, 2021). Alienated peer violence is also considered to be one form of transphobic and homophobic peer violence. It can also occur due to the teaching staff's activities (Winiewski, Malinowska, 2021). Students consider gender-based violence and harassment to be an issue that affects them greatly, but which they are learning to accept as part of school life (Chmura-Rutkowska 2019).

Extremely complicated is the situation of young transgender people living in Poland. The only possibility allowed by Polish law for legal gender correction is “an action for determination based on Article 189 of the *Kodeks postępowania cywilnego* by the person concerned” (Rozbicka, 2020; *Ustawa z dnia 17 listopada 1964 r. Kodeks postępowania cywilnego* [Act of 17 November 1964 Code of Civil Procedure]). The action needs to be initiated against the parents of the transsexual person or, in their absence, against a guardian appointed by the court (Rozbicka, 2020; *Uchwała Sądu Najwyższego z dnia 22 września 1995 r., sygn. akt: III CZP 118/95, LEX nr 9240* [Resolution of the Supreme Court of 22 September 1995, ref. no. III CZP 118/95, LEX no. 9240]). A final judgment in a case can result in an amendment to the birth certificate. In the case of minors, this leads to a paradoxical situation in which the child's parent (acting on behalf of the child) acts against themselves. It should also be noted, following Wiktor Dynarski, that:

Transgender youth are also not discussed in the context of other aspects – safety both at school and in wider peer groups, protection from psychological, physical or sexual violence (these aspects also include protection from relatives, including legal guardians and extended family). Furthermore, the situation of transgender young people in foster care, correctional institutions or children's homes is not known (Dynarski, 2016).

A final important issue that should also be highlighted is the sexuality of young people with disabilities (Jurczyk, Dąbkowska, 2022). The taboo related to the sexu-

ality of persons with disabilities leaves a void caused by the lack of data to discuss this topic reliably. Indeed, desexualisation is the norm concerning people with disabilities, which is also associated with the exclusion of this group from the social sexual sphere (Wos, Baczała, 2020). An issue worth highlighting is sexual violence against young people with disabilities. However, there is a lack of qualitative and quantitative research data on the scale of the phenomenon. There are no systemic programmes to prevent this targeting of people with disabilities (Jurczyk, 2019). Statistics on the incidence of sexual abuse of children and young people with disabilities according to age, gender, type and degree of disability are also not collected (Żardecka, 2022). Anna Żardecka analyses the few available data on this issue and notes:

A report summarising the activities of the State Commission on Paedophilia stated that, of at least 361 children under the age of 15 whose sexual offence cases were handled by the Commission, 22% revealed features of intellectual disability (Żardecka, 2022; PKDP, 2021).

This information signals only the scale of the problem, leaving a huge deficiency. Foreign studies on the sexual abuse of children with disabilities indicate that it is related to risk factors such as a situation of poverty, substance abuse, and parental separation (Żardecka, 2022). In Poland, research should also be conducted that considers these themes. Otherwise, we will not explore the causes and develop an effective system to counter the phenomena.

## **Conclusion**

The sexual life of adolescents has been for a long time breaking away from conservative patterns prescribing the connection of this sphere of life with marriage and parenthood, and thus exposing adolescents to several problems resulting from such a transformation. The tabooisation of adolescents' sexual behaviour and the rigour prevailing in the public discourse on human sexual life, as well as the ousting of reliable sources of knowledge on sexuality from youth education programmes, are not conducive to solving problems in this area. Meanwhile, the knowledge accumulated about adolescents' sexual behaviour – including actual or potentially dangerous behaviour – dictates that taboos should be overcome and points to the necessity of launching new and transforming existing channels of knowledge about sexuality as an area that serves, above all, the psychosexual health of maturing people. Without de-tabulating the discourse on the sexual behaviour of children and adolescents, we

will not be able to deal with the problems arising at the interface of gender relations, the increasing identification of young people with sexual minorities, or the issue of the psychosexual development of people with disabilities. We need such an opening up and a move away from the strict, prohibitionist view of child and adolescent sex to begin and continue reliable research into this phenomenon because learning about contemporary problems leads to solutions that are timely and appropriate for providing a high level of psychosexual care as a matter of public health. Tabooisation does not make children's and adolescents' problems disappear, it does not stop sexual activity but causes the educational accent to be taken over not by experts, doctors, or support institutions, but by peers, the Internet and social media, which often leads to a multiplication of problems and a higher incidence of risky or pathological behaviour.

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