

Youxme – a website developed for and with ethnic minority youth

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Ethnic minority youth are among those most difficult to reach in terms of sexuality education and relationship issues in the Netherlands. One of the possible factors which contribute to this is that many of the current programmes are developed without the needs and experiences of these young people in mind. This article is an account of Rutgers Nisso Groep's experiences with developing a website about partnership choice and sexuality, specifically for ethnic minority youth in the Netherlands.

Gossip and honour

The largest groups of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands are those of Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese origins. For these young people, partnership choice and sexuality significantly differ from the white Dutch majority. The family is often heavily involved in the decision of whom to marry. Forced marriages do occur, although not as frequently as arranged marriages, and here children as well parents have a say in partner choice. Furthermore, sex outside of marriage is forbidden. Primarily, it is girls who suffer from criticism when they have lost their virginity, or even when they are suspected of dating and (perhaps) having sex. Gossip plays an important role in these close-knit communities. When a girl becomes 'the talk of the town', the honour and respectability of the family – especially the father – is at stake. Although official doctrine is as strict for the boys, their sexual experiences are not regarded as negatively. Sometimes, boys are even encouraged to have sex, either to improve their skills, or as an outlet for 'tension'.

However, the majority appear to cope with this environment. They either fit in with their parents' ideals as well as they can, or they find ways out of the tight grip of their families. Nevertheless, for some young people, the stress associated with partnership choice and sexuality leads to severe problems. A considerable number of girls are affected with depression, resulting from disagreements with their parents on relationship issues. In addition, suicide attempts are relatively common among girls with Surinamese and Turkish ethnicity. However, recent research has shown that these attempts do not result in a high suicide incidence. In fact, men of Surinamese origin are most likely to commit suicide, as well as young Turkish men¹.

Youxme.nl

Even if it is acknowledged that materials need to be applicable in multicultural contexts, the result is often merely cosmetic. Essential themes for ethnic minority youth may be lacking, such as the need to preserve one's virginity until marriage, religious and cultural conventions regarding sexuality, the role of the family in choosing a partner for marriage, and many more. These issues led Rutgers Nisso Groep to develop a website on partnership choice and sexuality for ethnic minority youth in the Netherlands. Most importantly, a large proportion of the target audience uses the internet on a daily basis. Ethnic community websites are among the most frequently visited in the Netherlands, with very active discussions on their forums, and young people of Moroccan ethnicity in particular use the internet regularly. Forum discussions about love and sexuality are invariably the liveliest topics. Furthermore, a website is easily accessible and very convenient for providing both information and support.

A lack of information

One of the main problems in devising the site was that there was a limited amount of recent information about sexuality, relationships and needs of ethnic minority youth. The most comprehensive study about sexual behaviour and attitudes among Turkish and Moroccan ethnic youths was over ten years old, and there was no information about ethnic young Surinamese at all. Therefore, a study was conducted, which was completely internet-based². Young people were asked to participate on internet forums and message boards of ethnic community websites. If they clicked on a link, they entered a digital questionnaire, which took about 20 to 30 minutes to complete. About 800 young people participated, the majority of whom were from the target groups. Their responses were compared to those by young people of Dutch origin.

¹ Garssen, M.J., Hoogenboezem, J., & Kerkhof, A.J.F.M. (2006). Zelfdoding onder migrantengroepen in Nederland [Suicide among migrant groups in the Netherlands]. *Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, 150, 2143-49.



Results indicated that ethnic minority youths appeared to know less about sexual risks and contraception, compared to young people of Dutch origin. In addition, they were much more likely to condemn premarital sex and homosexuality. Even though all ethnic groups questioned believed that girls should be treated the same as boys, young ethnic Moroccans thought that it was more important for girls to stay virgins until marriage than boys. Girls with Moroccan and Turkish ethnicity were much less likely to have had vaginal sex before the age of 18 than boys. For the Dutch youth, it was in fact the reverse – many more girls had compared to the boys. About a quarter of the ethnic minority youth said they had had arguments with their parents about partnership choice. Approximately 10% thought that contact between them and their parents would be broken if the parents did not absolutely approve of their partner of choice. The majority of those questioned did not want to marry someone from their country of origin, though research revealed that many of them in fact do this³.

Youth participation

Rutgers Nisso Groep was convinced, even before starting the development of the website, that they could not do this alone. The organization consists of predominantly white, highly educated women, and they knew that if the website was to become a success, they would need extensive input from the target groups. The online study was a first attempt at incorporating the perspective of the young people concerned. The participants in the study explained what their problems were, but they also shared their thoughts on the website which was to be developed. For example, many of them preferred a multicultural website over specific websites for each ethnic group. Furthermore, they preferred an approach which was not too problem-focused, but rather entertainment-focused, providing information and support ‘along the way’. A stepped-care approach was developed for the website, including:

- ‘Infotainment’ – several games and information were combined;
- Self-help section through the website forum;
- Low-level support from trained coaches, young people from the target groups;
- Professional support

The next phase in involving young people was via e-mail. Young people were asked for their feedback and ideas on specific issues through e-mail. However, it was soon found that this was not the best procedure – only a small proportion of the participants responded to the requests. In fact, what appeared to work was to find a catchy, memorable name for the website. YouXme.nl was proposed and selected with the help of the target groups.

Since specific and in-depth feedback and ideas were required from the target groups to include on the website, Rutgers Nisso Groep started organizing focus groups. Approximately fifty young people participated in these groups, providing new insights into their experiences, and giving feedback and input on every stage of the development of the website. Finally, a number of young people who were particularly motivated in the focus groups were trained to become coaches. The coaches are co-owners of the website – they keep the website up-to-date, moderate the forum, give support to people with problems when possible and alert the experts when professional help is required.

Community building?

With about 3000 visitors per month, the website more than fulfils its original goals. The ‘infotainment’ approach resulted in a very user-friendly and popular website, which incorporates a wealth of information on sexuality, reproduction, diversity, love and relationships, and religion. A second important element is the level of involvement of young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Thirdly, the stepped-care approach is innovative, especially the use of trained people from the target groups to provide support.

Much of the concept of the website is based on the idea of developing a new online community, founded on the general themes of partnership choice and sexuality. In addition, the stepped-care approach requires a community in which young people feel comfortable enough to discuss their personal feelings. The website is still in its early stages, with the level of discussion still limited, but this will hopefully be resolved by creating a much closer working relation with the existing (and popular) ethnic online communities. Rutgers Nisso Groep is also developing a digital game, together with several community websites. It is still an open-ended question whether the organization should continue to aim at creating their own new community, or alternatively focus on reaching the target groups on their own community websites.

Even though the website has now been developed, it does not end there. The website and its contents will be developed further and additional funding will be sought for innovations. One of these innovations is to use the material developed for the website for school-based sexuality education.

For more information, visit the website <http://youxme.nl> (in Dutch) or contact Charles Picavet on c.picavet@rng.nl

² Kraemer, T. & Picavet, Ch. (2005). *Wat vind jij daar nou van?* [What do you think about that?]. Utrecht: Rutgers Nisso Groep.

³ Hooghiemstra, E. (2003). *Trouwen over de grens: Achtergronden van partnerkeuze van Turken en Marokkanen in Nederland* [Marriage across the border: Partnership choice of Turks and Moroccans in The Netherlands]. Den Haag: SCP.