

Sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: an urgent need to change the narrative



The world has made remarkable progress since the 1974 World Population Conference in Bucharest and the 1984 International Conference on Population in Mexico. The link between population and development was affirmed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo with the adoption of the Programme of Action, which brought a sharper focus on women and introduced new concepts such as sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. ICPD also gave prominence to reproductive health and women's empowerment. The Cairo Conference achieved consensus on key issues such as universal access to education, reduction of infant, child, and maternal mortality, and access to reproductive and sexual health services, including family planning.¹

Nevertheless, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have been neglected globally due to an absence of uniform understanding and opposing belief systems. However, UN member countries are beginning to find a common ground.² In the past, UN member countries have pursued individual agendas on SRHR policy, programmes, and implementation. This approach has had dire consequences, resulting, for example, in the conspicuous absence of SRHR in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000.³

Now, the report of the Guttmacher–Lancet Commission on SRHR represents the boldest attempt by the global community to inject life into a vital concept.⁴ The Commission highlights a problematic contradiction: there are overwhelming benefits of SRHR, but there are also many countries that ignore SRHR programmes and services. Thus, all stakeholders must begin to change their narratives to win more converts who will, in turn, push for greater global acceptance of all components of SRHR, encompassing sexual health, sexual rights, reproductive health, and reproductive rights, as elucidated in the Commission's report.⁴

There is compelling evidence that countries or governments that do not prioritise SRHR have disproportionately poor health indicators. For example, those countries with restrictive abortion laws contributed most to the global burden of 25 million unsafe abortions.⁵ By contrast, less restrictive abortion

laws helped some countries to cope better with the challenges of the recent Zika virus epidemic.⁶ Similarly, in countries with restrictive laws, there are also high burdens of other related SRHR problems, such as unmet need for family planning, provision of adolescent health services, sexually transmitted infections, and reproductive cancers, among others. The findings of the Guttmacher–Lancet Commission show that high-income countries have largely instituted policies that favour holistic implementation of SRHR programmes and services, whereas most low-income and middle-income countries are battling with the reality of prioritisation in SRHR or simply offering lip service to it. Sadly, most of these countries are in Africa and southeast Asia.⁴

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly mentions sexual and reproductive health, with Sustainable Development Goal target 3.7 stating “By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes”.⁷ This target has provided an unequivocal objective for all UN member states.⁷ Universal access to SRHR services is expected to provide leverage for ensuring that no one is left behind. It behoves SRHR policy makers and implementers to keep in mind the inequalities that have slowed countries down in

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progress on SRHR. We must, as a necessity, accept all shades of opinion that protect everyone's rights in all aspects of SRHR.

It is imperative for SRHR champions to fully integrate involvement of men in advancing the agenda on SRHR as their role must not be ignored. Gender equality is pivotal to successful implementation of SRHR services. Gender inequality exists in all countries and must be challenged, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁸ We need innovative ideas that will systematically desensitise men from their domineering role and accept that women have rights.⁹ Although some countries are instituting plans and ideas to bridge the gap in gender equality, sexual orientation, gender identities, and rights are yet to be fully accepted, as clearly set out in the Commission's report. The global community would need to adopt context-specific strategies to push for this component.

We welcome the recommendations of the Guttmacher–Lancet Commission, but it is expedient that we change our strategy and focus on appropriate messaging that will increase global acceptance and commensurate investment to implement comprehensive SRHR programming. Every country should be able to expend US\$9 per capita annually to achieve the costs of meeting all women's needs for contraceptive, maternal, and newborn care. We recommend that our messaging should include active engagement of all those involved in implementation of SRHR programming—policy makers, community influencers, professional organisations, and politicians. We need to demand real action and not only their commitment. Political leadership might need to be called out to include SRHR as part of their political agendas and deliverables to their citizens.

Lastly, it is important to continue to gather more evidence for better understanding of barriers as well as catalysts for agenda setting.¹⁰ There is hope that with continuous pressure on member countries to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, SRHR will take its pride of place. We firmly believe that knowledge is a powerful driver of social change. We also believe that belief change is fundamental.

"No great improvements in the lot of [hu]mankind are possible until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitutions of their modes of thought", wrote John Stuart Mill in his autobiography more than a century ago. These words are still relevant. We need to take advantage of information technology, and ever-expanding social media, to push our message of acceptability and priority setting for SRHR all over the world.¹¹

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