



WHAT ARE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS?

Briefing note

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Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) are a relatively new concept. Reproductive rights were first officially recognised at the [International Conference on Population and Development \(ICPD\)](#) in Cairo in 1994. Agreed by 179 countries, it was the first and most comprehensive international document to embody concepts of **reproductive health and rights and sexual health**.

Prior to this, reproductive health programming had emerged from concern about population control and focused on family planning, fertility control and safe motherhood only. The definition of SRH agreed in Cairo moved beyond this to a more comprehensive definition anchored in the context of human rights and the right to health. It not only focused on problems and diseases but also on what should be positive experiences around pregnancy & parenthood, sexuality & relationships.

The [Beijing Platform of Action, 1995](#), was the first declaration to embody the concept of sexual rights. At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 189 governments also recognized that social and cultural discriminations, gender inequalities but also the lack of information and services contribute to sexual and reproductive ill health. Other main inputs of the Beijing Platform for action were to highlight violence against women as a public policy issue (and not only a private domestic concern) and to broaden the definition of “violence” so as to include acts previously justified in the name of culture and tradition. The Beijing conference also firmly stated that **women’s rights are human rights** and that **women’s sexual rights are part of their human rights**.

Last but not least, in October 2007, the target of universal access to reproductive health was eventually included in the Millennium Development Goals (n°5) while it had been excluded in 2000 when the MDGs were first discussed. Based on this global political reaffirmation of the ICPD agenda, **reproductive rights are now considered a human rights for all people, including universal access to reproductive health** throughout their life cycle. In addition, family planning is now understood within the broader framework of reproductive health and rights and not as a population control instrument.

IN BRIEF

Sexual and Reproductive Health is the ability to have a safe and satisfying sex life and the ability to reproduce. It is strongly linked with the freedom for all to decide if, when, how often and with whom one has sex and their freedom to decide if, when and how often to reproduce.

Sexual and Reproductive Rights are the right for everyone to make decision about their sexual and reproductive health, including the choice to marry and determine the number, timing and spacing of their children; to sexual and reproductive security free from coercion and violence; to be informed and have access to safe and legal family planning services and to have access to healthcare services enabling women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth.

Family planning allows individuals and couples to anticipate and attain their desired number of children and the spacing and timing of their births. It is achieved through use of contraceptive methods and the treatment of involuntary infertility.

Reproductive Healthcare includes family planning services, access to contraception, counselling and information, antenatal, postnatal and delivery care, health care for infants, treatment for reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS), safe abortion services where legal and management of abortion-related complications, prevention and appropriate treatment for infertility, information, education and counselling on human sexuality, reproductive health and responsible parenting and discouragement of harmful practices.

1. SEXUAL HEALTH – OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS

Sexual health “concerns the enhancement of life and personal relations, and not merely counseling and care related to reproduction and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).”

ICPD Cairo Programme of Action, par. 7.2

“A state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity.

Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.”

World Health Organisation, working definition 2006a

Sexual health includes healthy sexual development, equitable and responsible relationships and sexual fulfilment, freedom from discrimination, coercion, illness, disease, violence and other harmful practices related to sexuality.

2. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH – OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS

“A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes.

Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.

Implicit in this last condition are the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which are not against the law, and the right of access to appropriate health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant.”

ICPD Cairo Programme of action, 1995 Par 7.2

3. SEXUAL RIGHTS – OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS

“The rights of women to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences.”

Beijing UN Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, par. 96

“Sexual rights protect all people's rights to fulfil and express their sexuality and enjoy sexual health, with due regard for the rights of others and within a framework of protection against discrimination.

Rights critical to the realization of sexual health include the rights to: Equality and non-discrimination; Be free from torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment; Privacy; The highest attainable standard of health (including sexual health) and social security; Marry and found a family and enter into marriage with the free and full consent of the intending spouses, and to equality in and at the dissolution of marriage; Decide the number and spacing of one's children; Information, as well as education; Freedom of opinion and expression; An effective remedy for violations of fundamental rights.

The responsible exercise of human rights requires that all persons respect the rights of others.”

WHO, working definition 2006a, updated 2010

- ⇒ Sexual rights include the rights of everyone to decide freely and responsibly on all aspects of their sexuality, to be free from discrimination, coercion or violence in their sexual lives and in their sexual decisions, to expect equality, mutual respect and full consent in sexual relationships.
- ⇒ For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.
- ⇒ Sexual rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in international and regional human rights documents and other consensus documents and in national laws. The application of these existing human rights to sexuality and sexual health constitutes sexual rights.

4. REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS – OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS

The basic right of all couples and individuals to:

- Decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children;
- Have the information and means to do so ;
- Attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health ;
- Make decisions on reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence.

ICPD programme of Action Cairo, 5-13 September 1994, Para 7.2

5. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE – OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS

It is the constellation of methods, techniques and services that contribute to reproductive health and sexual health.

It includes family planning services, access to contraception, counselling and information, antenatal, postnatal and delivery care, health care for infants, treatment for reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases, safe abortion services where legal and management of abortion-related complications, prevention and appropriate treatment for infertility, information, education and counselling on human sexuality, reproductive health and responsible parenting and discouragement of harmful practices.

Other working definitions of the WHO

SEX

Sex refers to the biological characteristics that define humans as female or male. While these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, they tend to differentiate humans as males and females. In general use in many languages, the term sex is often used to mean “sexual activity”, but for technical purposes in the context of sexuality and sexual health discussions, the above definition is preferred.

SEXUALITY

Sexual health cannot be defined, understood or made operational without a broad consideration of sexuality, which underlies important behaviours and outcomes related to sexual health. The working definition of sexuality is:

“...a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.” (WHO, 2006a)