

It's Time to Talk About Sex: Sexual Rights are Essential to Achieving the MDGs

There are five years left for governments to bring poverty to an end by realising the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Around the same time, in 2014, governments will take stock of the Programme of Action of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and hopefully set a new strong agenda to realise sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. The linkages between reproductive health and rights and the MDGs have been made explicit with the addition of target 5B: reproductive health for all by 2015. However, the linkages between sexual rights and achieving the MDGs are not yet fully recognised.

In 1994, the United Nations ICPD Programme of Action defined 'reproductive rights' as follows:

Reproductive rights [...] rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health.

Since the ICPD, the concept 'sexual and reproductive health and rights' (SRHR) has been widely used. However, while there is a working definition, sexual rights remain undefined at the international level.

Working Definition of Sexual Rights

"Sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus statements. They include the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to:

- the highest attainable standard of health in relation to sexuality, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services;
- seek, receive and impart information in relation to sexuality;
- sexuality education;
- respect for bodily integrity;
- choice of partner;
- decide to be sexually active or not;
- consensual sexual relations;
- consensual marriage; and
- pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life."¹

Sexual rights must be defined and recognized so that violations can be addressed. Reproductive rights and sexual rights cannot be exercised independently – they complement one another and are intertwined. Both sets of rights are closely related to other domains of human life, from birth until death. However, the international community has thus far not recognized the intrinsic role sexual rights play in securing the health and well-being of all people.

We need to talk about sex if we are committed to achieving the MDGs!

Recommendations for civil society, policymakers and programme officers at all levels:

- Ensure access to comprehensive sexuality education, beginning at the primary school level.
- Schools, workplaces, and governments should write and implement policies on the sexual rights of students, employees, and citizens.
- Recognize the sexual rights of people living with HIV.
- Discuss sexuality and sexual health in a positive way, for instance by using sexual pleasure as an entrance to promote condom use.
- Ensure access to sexual health services and contraceptives.
- Invest in programs and services that include the promotion of sexual rights.
- Use dialogue with both women and men to enhance sexual rights and promote mutual respect.
- Recognize the importance of social, cultural, and religious practices relating to sexuality, and work together with relevant stakeholders as much as possible to promote sexual rights.

¹ WHO, 2006, "Defining sexual health: report of a technical consultation on sexual health, 28–31 January 2002, Geneva," page 5.

Promoting Sexual Rights → Promoting the MDGs



- Realizing the right to sexual health improves overall health, which allows individuals to be better able to seek full employment and decent work. This, in turn, means they are less likely to suffer from poverty and hunger.
- A lower birth-rate, due to sexuality education and contraceptives, reduces poverty and hunger.
- More people can join the workforce when they are not discriminated and marginalized due to gender, sexual orientation, or lifestyle choices, such as not marrying.
- The acceptance and fulfilment of rights of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, prevents social and economic exclusion.



- Comprehensive sexuality education is and should be part of primary education everywhere.
- Sexuality education, access to contraceptives, and sexual health care prevent health problems and unwanted teen pregnancies, and thus (forced) school drop-out.
- The right to choose when and who to marry prevents girls from dropping out of school due to arranged marriages.
- When the right to bodily integrity is affirmed, girls and boys will no longer fear being sexually harassed by teachers, peers, or others on the way to school or in school.



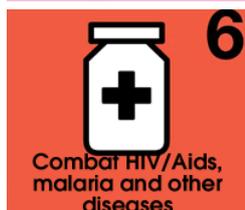
- Sexual rights are essential to achieving gender equality.
- Starting dialogues with men and women about sexual rights can enhance understanding of existing gender roles, and stimulate processes that lead toward gender equality.
- The right to choose a sexual partner assures consensual domestic situations where gender relations are more equal and respectful.
- The right to sexual pleasure empowers women and men to know and pursue their desires in a mutually respectful manner.



- Affirming the sexual rights of girls and women reduces the number of unwanted children who are not cared for (properly), thus reducing child mortality.
- The right of young girls to not be coerced into sex leads to less unwanted pregnancies, and less infant mortality since the risks are highest for the youngest mothers.
- Affirming young children's sexual rights not to be abused reduces child mortality.
- Realizing the right to bodily integrity can protect young girls from the life threatening consequences of female genital cutting.



- Access to sexual health care reduces (fatal) complications around pregnancy and birth, which are leading causes of death among women in developing countries.
- Education about sexuality, access to sexual health care, and the right to sexual pleasure for girls and women will reduce female genital cutting, unwanted pregnancies, and unsafe abortions, which all contribute to maternal mortality.
- Educating boys and men about sexuality, pregnancy, birth, and possible complications can increase their responsibility in the reduction of maternal mortality.



- The right to sexuality education increases knowledge and negotiation skills for safer sex.
- The right to safe sex guarantees access to condoms, which prevent HIV and other STIs.
- The right to safe and pleasurable sex promotes the use of female condoms, which empowers women to protect themselves against HIV and other STIs.
- The right to sexual health care reduces the risk of HIV transmission and the onset of AIDS.
- The right to choose a partner irrespective of sex/gender eliminates legal discrimination in the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS.



- The realization of sexual rights can reduce rapid population growth, which is one of the factors that puts enormous stress on environmental sustainability.
- The acknowledgement of sexual rights can stimulate the availability of water and sanitation. When women and men are both involved in this process, it is more likely that the facilities will meet the needs and affirm the rights of everyone, for instance by creating separated facilities for men and women.



- Sexually healthy and empowered people are more likely to be involved and active citizens who are able to contribute to local and global development.
- The right to sexual health stimulates cooperation with the private sector, especially in regards to developing and distributing new technological developments.
- The economic benefits of the programs under MDG 8 will not reach all people if groups are excluded / discriminated against due to sexual practices or expression.