



Youth volunteers raise awareness of gender equality, reproductive health and rights and HIV/AIDS at a youth festival in Telavi, Georgia. © UNFPA

# Sexual and reproductive health and rights

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) refers not only to the absence of illness, but to empowerment and wellbeing in relation to sexual and reproductive health.

**Sexual health** is healthy sexual development. This includes equitable, fulfilling and responsible relationships as well as freedom from disease and disability and from violence and other harmful practices.

**Reproductive health** is complete physical, mental and social wellbeing in all matters related to reproduction. This includes a satisfying and safe sex life, capacity to have children and freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.

**Sexual rights** are the rights to decide freely and responsibly on all aspects of sexuality. This includes protection and promotion of sexual health and freedom from discrimination, coercion or violence in sexual life and decisions. It also includes equality, consent, mutual respect and shared responsibility in sexual relationships.

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**Reproductive rights** are the rights of couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so. This also includes the right to make decisions about reproduction free from discrimination, coercion and violence.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN SRHR?

### Girls would be free from harmful practices.

These include female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriage. 125 million women and girls alive today have been subjected to FGM and 3 million more are at risk every year.<sup>1</sup> One in three girls in developing countries is married by her 18th birthday. One in nine will be married by age 15.<sup>2</sup>

Eradicating these practices would prevent women and girls from experiencing the serious and sometimes life-threatening complications associated with FGM. It would prevent millions of childhoods being cut short by marriage or early pregnancy. It would allow girls continue in education and reach their potential as adults.

### Pregnancy would be safer.

Each day, more than 800 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. 99% of these deaths occur in developing countries.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 25% are caused by HIV infection and 13% are caused by unsafe abortions.

Meeting women's SRHR needs would lead to a 67% drop in maternal deaths. Newborn deaths would drop by 77% and HIV transmission from mothers to newborns would be almost entirely eliminated. The burden of pregnancy- and delivery-related disability among women and newborns would decrease by two-thirds.<sup>4</sup>

### Unplanned pregnancy would decrease.

At least 225 million women worldwide today are not using any form of modern contraception, although they would like to.<sup>5</sup> Family planning can prevent closely spaced and ill-timed pregnancies and births, which contribute to some of the world's highest infant mortality rates.<sup>6</sup>

Avoiding unplanned births allows families to invest in each child's education, nutrition and health; this reduces poverty and hunger for all members of a household. If the global unmet need for modern contraception was met, unintended pregnancies would drop by 70% per year.<sup>7</sup>

### Women would be better able to decide the course of their own lives.

When women's rights are respected and they have reproductive autonomy, they are more likely to delay marriage and pregnancy and to have fewer children.

As a direct consequence of delaying the age of marriage and pregnancy, girls are more likely to enter and stay in education.<sup>8</sup> They are then better able to make their voices heard in households, communities and parliaments and are more likely to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. They can shape and contribute to sustainable, inclusive development and economic growth.

### IRELAND'S COMMITMENT TO SRHR

Ireland has signed up to a number of binding international agreements on SRHR, including the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, also known as the 'Cairo Programme of Action').

This commitment is reinforced by One World, One Future: Ireland's 2013 Policy on International Development, which confirms the government's commitment to universal access to reproductive healthcare. The policy highlights that access to quality maternal and reproductive healthcare, supporting safe motherhood and allowing women to control their fertility is central to women's empowerment and the health of nations.<sup>9</sup>

### SRHR AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Ireland has signed up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, agreed in 2015. This Agenda will influence funding and policy priorities for sustainable development in all countries for the next 15 years.

The 2030 Agenda recognises that universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights is a prerequisite for

achieving sustainable development and for realising other rights. In recognition of this, targets for achieving SRHR are included under Goal 3 on Health, Goal 4 on Education and Goal 5 on Gender Equality.

### WHAT DOES THE FULFILMENT OF SRHR REQUIRE?

The fulfilment of sexual and reproductive health and rights requires access to quality, affordable services, supplies and information. It also requires the removal of legal, regulatory, social or other barriers to access.<sup>10</sup>

In practice, this means that women and couples must have effective access to modern contraceptive options and quality sexual health services.

Fulfilment of SRHR requires investment. Yet, despite its proven benefits, aid for family planning has declined as a proportion of overall aid for health in almost all recipient countries in the past decade.<sup>11</sup> Investing in SRHR has proven to be highly cost-effective.<sup>12</sup> Every €1 spent on rights-based family planning saves €4 in future spending on healthcare.<sup>13</sup> A 2015 analysis by leading economists rated investment in SRHR 13th in terms of cost-effectiveness out of the 2030 Agenda's 169 targets.<sup>14</sup>

### WHAT CAN THE IRISH GOVERNMENT DO?

Ireland has advocated within the UN Human Rights Council for the abandonment of harmful practices and has committed to advancing gender equality through its development programming. Ireland also provides core funding to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in support of the agency's work protecting and promoting SRHR globally. Ireland can:

- » Ensure that sexual and reproductive health and rights are implemented at national level and are central to Irish development policy.
- » Allocate resources to achieving the SRHR targets of the 2030 Agenda.
- » Use Ireland's influence within the EU and the UN to support actions and policies ensuring fulfilment of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls.

"We are committed to promoting universal access to reproductive healthcare, including ante-natal care and family planning services, consistent with the Cairo Programme of Action. By protecting and promoting sexual and reproductive rights, we not only enable women to access reproductive health services, but also provide a platform for women to negotiate their treatment in society throughout their life."<sup>15</sup>

– Minister for Foreign Affairs, Charles Flanagan, T.D.

1. WHO (2014). Female genital mutilation: Factsheet 241.

2. Girls Not Brides. Child Marriage around the World. Available at <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/>

3. WHO (2015). Maternal mortality: Factsheet 348.

4. The Guttmacher Institute & UNFPA. Adding It Up: The Costs and Benefits of Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health 2014.

5. The Guttmacher Institute & UNFPA, as above.

6. WHO (2015). Family planning/contraception: Factsheet 351.

7. Barot, S. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Are Key to Global Development: The Case for Ramping Up Investment. Guttmacher Policy Review, Winter 2015.

8. IPPF (2014). IPPF: Sexual and reproductive health and rights – a crucial agenda for the post-2015 framework.

9. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2013). One World One Future: Ireland's Policy for International Development.

10. Barot, S. (2015), as above.

11. Countdown 2015 Europe: Family planning saves lives and improves health. Factsheet 2012

12. Barot, S. (2015), as above.

13. Singh & Darroch (2012) Adding It Up: Costs and Benefits of Contraceptive Services – Estimates for 2012.

14. Barot, S. (2015), as above.

15. Launch of information factsheets by the Oireachtas All-Party Interest Group on Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Development, May 2015.

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The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) acts as the secretariat to the All Party Oireachtas Interest Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Development.

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