



Young woman attending a comprehensive sexuality education workshop in Bangladesh. © IPPF/Peter Caton/Bangladesh

Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

The realisation of sexual and reproductive health and rights is indispensable to the empowerment of women, the achievement of gender equality and the realisation of all other human rights. When these rights are fulfilled, women can better participate in the workforce, in their communities and in public life.

Across the globe, gender inequality systematically prevents women and girls from achieving their full potential. Traditional gender norms mean that women and girls still have lower social status, fewer opportunities, lower income and less power than men and boys. Discrimination against women means that they have less control over and poorer access to resources, including land, credit, education and the information and services necessary to protect their health and wellbeing.¹ In the most extreme cases, gender norms can kill. Women die at the hands of violent partners. Women die because of preventable causes in childbirth and because of lack of access to appropriate healthcare services.²

If women are to live liberated and healthy lives, access to quality health supplies and services must include modern skilled maternity healthcare, contraceptive options, screening, counselling and information.

- » Global investment in sexual and reproductive health and rights has galvanised progress for women. This has resulted in maternal mortality rates dropping by 45% since 1990.³
- » More investment is needed to end the most severe violations of women's and girls' human rights. These include gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and unsafe abortion.⁴

GENDER EQUALITY IS GOOD FOR DEVELOPMENT

Respecting sexual and reproductive health and rights will have multiplier effects across many areas of development, including:

Poverty eradication

- » Women account for an estimated two-thirds of those currently living in extreme poverty and 60% of the world's working poor.⁵
- » Respecting women's sexual and reproductive rights contributes to economic empowerment and helps women break cycles of multiple disadvantage.

Political participation

- » Women make up only 22% of all parliamentarians worldwide.⁶
- » Providing women with the means to freely decide the number and spacing of their children enhances their opportunities to participate in public life and become leaders and agents of change.
- » When women's rights are respected and they have reproductive autonomy, they are better able to make their voices heard in households, communities and parliaments.

Health

- » Gendered barriers to accessing and making decisions about healthcare contribute to unequal outcomes for women worldwide. Currently, poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes represent one third of the total global burden of disease for women aged 15 to 44.⁷
- » Unsafe sex is the leading risk factor for death and disability among women and girls of reproductive age in low and middle income countries.⁸
- » Promoting gender equality and women's sexual and reproductive rights results in fewer maternal deaths and less reproductive illness.
- » Women who access skilled healthcare themselves are more likely to seek healthcare for their children, resulting in improved health of populations over time.⁹

Education

- » Education, including comprehensive evidence-based sexuality education, is a powerful protective factor throughout women's lives. It lessens the risk of maternal death and decreases the likelihood of experiencing rights violations such as early marriage.¹⁰
- » Educated women are better equipped to seek the health services they need for themselves and for their children.¹¹

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the world's governments have committed to achieving by 2030. The Goals indicate that sustainable development is possible only when sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have been realised.

- » **Goal 3 on Health** requires universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes (target 3.7).

- » **Goal 4 on Education** requires that all learners must be provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, including education relating to human rights and gender equality (target 4.7).
- » **Goal 5 on Gender Equality** requires the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls; the elimination of harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation; and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (targets 5.2, 5.3 and 5.6, respectively).

WHAT CAN THE IRISH GOVERNMENT DO?

"Gender equality is a cornerstone of Irish overseas development policy."¹² Ireland can support the implementation of the SRHR targets in the following ways:

- » Allocate new resources to programmes—both in Ireland and in developing countries—that ensure that women and girls can access rights-based services that are responsive to their reproductive health needs.
- » Advocate for the full implementation of the UN International Conference on Population & Development (ICPD) Programme of Action and other international agreements on women's human rights.
- » Develop a national action plan for implementing the SDGs. This plan should prioritise gender equality and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

"We now know that providing women with access to reproductive healthcare is not just an end in itself but can have a transformative effect on women's vulnerability to poverty, hunger and economic and social discrimination. Conversely, lack of access to reproductive healthcare remains one of the principal barriers to achieving real gender equality and ensuring that women are empowered to participate fully in the political, economic and social life of their communities and societies." – Ireland's statement to the Commission on Population and Development, 2011

1. Countdown 2015 Europe: The importance of linking sexual and reproductive health and rights to reducing inequalities in the post-2015 development framework. Factsheet 2013.
2. IPPF (2015). Sexual and reproductive health and rights – the key to gender equality and women's empowerment.
3. World Health Organisation (2014). Maternal mortality: Factsheet No. 348.
4. Countdown 2015 Europe, as above.
5. IPPF (2015), as above.
6. IPPF (2015), as above.
7. World Health Organisation (2014), as above.
8. IPPF (2015), as above.
9. Women Deliver factsheet series: Invest in women's health.
10. IPPF (2015), as above.
11. World Health Organisation (2013). Sexual and reproductive health: International Day of the Girl Child. Available at <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/adolescence/en/>
12. Irish Aid, One World One Future: Ireland's Policy for International Development 2013-2016.

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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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