

# Sexual and reproductive health and rights: a global development, health, and human rights priority



In May, 2014, at the 67th Session of the World Health Assembly, member states reviewed the progress made in the implementation of resolution WHA57.12, the WHO Reproductive Health Strategy.<sup>1</sup> The progress report noted that although a range of regulations and strategies to strengthen sexual and reproductive health and related rights have been implemented, certain areas required further attention, which include unmet need for contraception, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents and young people, as well as prevention and management of the consequences of unsafe abortion, gender equality, violence against women and girls, and cancers related to reproduction.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, in the progress report WHO reaffirmed its commitment to making sexual and reproductive health a priority in the post-2015 development agenda.<sup>1</sup> This reaffirmation underscores the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights and WHO's commitment on these issues.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are fundamental to individuals, couples, and families, and to the social and economic development of communities and nations.<sup>2</sup> However, 20 years after the International Conference on Population and Development and the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, universal access to sexual and reproductive health remains an unfinished agenda.<sup>3</sup> Much remains to be done to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 5 (reducing maternal deaths MDG 5a and achieving universal access to reproductive health MDG 5b).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's report, inequalities between and within countries, and persistent disparities between women and men, and between social and ethnic groups, continue to inhibit progress.<sup>3</sup>

At the Rio+20 Summit governments reaffirmed the need to achieve sustainable development.<sup>5</sup> To achieve these objectives governments must create greater health equity, ensure gender equality, and promote and protect human rights. Promotion and protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights lies at the very core of this approach.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights encompass efforts to eliminate preventable maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity, to ensure quality sexual and reproductive health services, including contraceptive services, and to address sexually transmitted infections (STI) and cervical cancer, violence against women and girls, and sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents. Universal access to sexual and reproductive health is essential not only to achieve sustainable development but also to ensure that this new framework speaks to the needs and aspirations of people around the world and leads to realisation of their health and human rights.

Better control of women's fertility allows girls to remain in education longer, accumulate more skills, and eventually earn higher wages.<sup>6</sup> According to the World Bank, female participation in the labour force decreases with each additional child: by about 10–15 percentage points among women aged 25–39 years, and about 5–10 percentage points among women aged 40–49 years.<sup>6</sup> Universal access to sexual and reproductive health is therefore not only an essential human rights priority to ensure women's empowerment and gender equality, it is also a key international development priority.

Over the past 2 years, through the ICPD Beyond 2014 Global Review<sup>3</sup> and the post-2015 development agenda

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discussions, governments, UN agencies, development partners, parliamentarians, academics, and non-governmental organisations have argued through debates, online forums, expert group meetings, and other fora that sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical dimensions of the international development agenda and are a critical component of health and wellbeing of individuals.<sup>3,7</sup>

Based on evidence and knowledge and guidance from member states, WHO has underscored the need to achieve and exceed all health-related MDGs, which includes ending preventable maternal deaths and improving sexual and reproductive health, and to ensure that the new development framework highlights these priorities as part of finishing the unfinished work in health MDGs.<sup>8</sup> As underlined during a recent discussion with the Open Working Group (a member state body formed by UN General Assembly to develop proposals for Sustainable Development Goals), a universally relevant, transformative, high-impact, and cost-effective post-2015 framework must “respect, protect and fulfill the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all individuals throughout the life-cycle, including through universal access to quality, integrated sexual and reproductive health information, education and services”.<sup>9</sup>

It is imperative that the commitment from various stakeholders to sexual and reproductive health and rights must now be translated into clear and actionable targets in the new international development agenda. We must not allow history to repeat itself and wait for another 7 years for the international community to

reach consensus on MDG 5b. Sexual and reproductive health and rights is a global health, development, and human rights priority. We must act now and ensure that sexual and reproductive health and rights are given due recognition in the Sustainable Development Goals.

*Marleen Temmerman, \*Rajat Khosla, Lale Say*

Department of Reproductive Health and Research, World Health Organization, CH-1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland  
khoslar@who.int

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