WHAT ARE “SEXUAL RIGHTS”?  

Sexual rights are human rights related to sexuality. They include the right of every person to sexual and reproductive health and well-being, bodily integrity, as well as the right to have control over and to make free and informed decisions on all matters related to their own sexuality, reproduction and gender, free from coercion, violence and discrimination. Sexuality is a central aspect of being human, whether or not one chooses to reproduce. Sexual rights respect the entitlement to experience and enjoy sexuality independent of reproduction and must not be denied to anyone.

They are human rights - in order for each of us to attain the highest standard of health and to have the possibility of a life of meaning, respect and dignity, each of us needs to be empowered to exercise choice. They are based in the rights to freedom, equality, privacy, autonomy, integrity and dignity of all people.

The denial of these rights leads to disempowerment, discrimination, abuse, violence, disease, imprisonment and death. We use the term “sexual rights” to underscore that they are broader than simply family planning or reproductive health services. They are the elements that every human being is entitled to, and it is the duty of States to progressively realize these rights.

LINKS BETWEEN SEXUAL RIGHTS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS

Gender-based violence is a violation of women’s and girls’ human rights and a barrier to the realisation of other fundamental rights. Respecting, protecting and fulfilling girls’ and women’s sexual rights can minimize the violence that they face and give them the choices, voice and empowerment to change their lives.

Violence & HIV: Women and girls who experience violence have an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. A survey among 1,366 South African women showed that women who were abused by their partners were 48% more likely to be infected with HIV than those who were not.1 IPPF research has similarly shown that women with HIV face violence and stigmatisation as a result of their HIV status. Women in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Dominican Republic reported traumatic experiences of being thrown out of their homes, denied property or inheritance rights, or being treated as outcasts.2 This relationship is cyclical: women experiencing violence are more vulnerable to HIV, and women living with HIV become more vulnerable to violence. However, if women’s sexual rights are respected, they may be more empowered to negotiate the terms of their sexual relationships, better protect themselves and live positively with HIV.

Violence in conflict zones: Women and girls in conflict zones and emergencies are more vulnerable to sexual and physical violence and the lack of infrastructure due to the insecure situation exacerbates the levels of risk they are exposed to. Approximately 500,000 women suffered violence during the genocide in Rwanda and many more
were victimized during the aftermath of the 2010 flooding in Pakistan. If governments and emergency response organisations prioritized women’s sexual rights, including reducing their vulnerability to sexual violence and ensuring access to sexual health services, women would experience less violence and be better equipped to deal with the consequences of violence that does occur (such as physical and psychological trauma, unintended pregnancy, STIs and HIV).

Harmful traditional practices: Girls and young women are vulnerable to harmful traditional practices that violate fundamental human rights principles including non-discrimination on the basis of sex, the right to bodily integrity, the right to life, and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

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Female genital mutilation/cutting serves to reinforce male dominance and undermines the role of women. Complications of the procedure can range from bleeding, severe pain, shock, infection and death, and trauma during pregnancy and birth. Cut women may experience psychological harm, including depression, symptoms of impaired cognition and panic attacks. Early and forced marriage makes young women and girls’ vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, early pregnancy with high risk of maternal mortality and morbidity, and transmission of sexually transmitted infections and HIV. These harmful traditional practices have a radical effect on a girl’s ability to realize her rights; they reinforce her inequality within the gender structures of the community, and through on-going physical and psychological trauma, they severely limit her empowerment and agency. When women’s and girls’ sexual right are realized, and when they have autonomy and control over their bodies, these forms of violence may decrease.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We ask member states to:

• Promote the linkages between sexual rights and violence against women, and position it as a key tool to address tackle women’s inequality, promote life chances and achieve sustainable development.

• Ensure that their domestic laws addressing violence against women are in-line with international best practice and reinforce the protections found in human rights treaties.

• Develop and make accessible health care, protective and legal services for survivors of gender-based violence using a coordinated, comprehensive multi-sectoral approach that strengthens collaboration among law enforcement, legal aid, health care organisations, educational institutions, economic development organisations and women’s groups to prevent violence and ensure an integrated response to survivors.

• Ensure all victims of violence have access to comprehensive sexual health information and services, especially those in rural areas and most vulnerable women, including sex workers, migrants, women with disabilities and lesbians.

• Support the development and implementation of statistical tools to measure violence against women and girls, including sexual violence.

• Promote comprehensive sexuality education that equips young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality – physically and emotionally, individually and in relationships.

REFERENCES


2 International Planned Parenthood Federation, Piecing it together for women and girls: The gender dimensions of HIV-related stigma, March 2011

3 International Planned Parenthood Federation, SPRINTing towards change: sex and pregnancy in emergencies, 2011