

# Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Europe: Progress Made and Challenges Ahead

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## Abstract

Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) is related to multiple human rights. Such rights envisage the right to:

- Life
- Right to be Free from Torture
- Health
- Privacy
- Education
- Prohibition of Discrimination

Significant progress has been made in furthering SRHR of women in Europe over the years. However, much more needs to be done. This review paper (based on secondary data) aims to address progress made in the area women's SRHR in the European region, and challenges ahead.

**Keywords:** Women, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Barriers, Challenges, Europe, Strategies, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

## Introductory Note

The term "sexual and reproductive health" implies a person's right to a healthy body; the autonomy, education and healthcare to freely decide

- Who to have sex with; and
- The knowledge and healthcare products to avoid sexually transmitted infections, including unintended pregnancy.

It has been found that violations of women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) are caused due to deeply engrained beliefs and societal values pertaining to women's sexuality. In addition, early marriage and resulting pregnancy (including repeated pregnancies spaced too closely together) have a devastating impact on women's health. Within the framework of SRHR, this situation has fatal consequences [1]. It is because of these considerations that countries in the European region have formulated and implemented programs for the purpose of safeguarding women's SRHR. Progress has been made in this direction. However, several challenges lie ahead; barriers in program implementation need to be addressed by the involved stakeholders.

## Rationale, Objectives and Research Methodology

Despite the fact that several countries in Europe have institutionalised sexuality education programs, many of the initiatives have not been fully successful. The programs fall short of international human rights requirements. They do not meet the comprehensive sexuality education and the World Health Organization (WHO) Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe. Wide range of barriers have been found to continue; they undermine women's access to justice and effective remedies for violations of their SRHR. In some European countries, women are confronted with difficulties in accessing required sexual and reproductive health care and services. There are violations of their sexual and reproductive rights of women [2]. In view of this, there are several challenges ahead in adequately addressing issues connected with SRHR. Objective of this paper is to touch upon each of these concerns and challenges from a human rights perspective. Also, it aims to address progress made in the area women's SRHR in the European region.



Secondary data have been used. Data are largely qualitative in nature. Method of data analysis is 'descriptive'. Data have been analysed in a manner that aligns with laid down objectives. Systematic and scoping review of literature of relevant literature was undertaken by the author for the purpose of collecting needed data in this paper. A scoping review is conducted in order to examine the extent, range and nature of research activities in a particular area. Data sources are quoted, both in the text, as well as under reference section.

## Overview of SRHR Programs in Europe

Countries in Europe are committed to global commitment that SRHR are crucial for women's and girls' right to self-determination. Several initiatives have been undertaken, over the years, to ensure that each individual has the right to decide freely and responsibly on matters affecting their sexual and reproductive health. It is pertinent to note that the EU continues to strengthen measures needed for ensuring access to quality, affordable, and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information. Comprehensive sexuality education, and health-care services are integral part of women's SRHR. Also, the EU remains committed to implementation of:

- i. The Beijing Platform for Action
- ii. The Programme of Action (POA) of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) [3].

Further, the Global Parliamentary Alliance for Health, Rights and Development (GPA) is a flexible parliamentary initiative. The GPA is aimed at boosting parliamentarians' efforts to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically in the areas of:

- A. Health
- B. Human Rights

It offers a platform for parliamentarians, from around the world, for addressing relevant aspects that have implications for

- Better Health Care
- Expanding Human Rights
- Meeting The SDGs, Both in Their Home Countries and Abroad

The GPA aims to enable parliamentarians (from around the world) strengthen SRHR initiatives. Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) launched (in November 2019) a global initiative at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD [4]. The European Union (EU) remains strongly committed to sexual and reproductive health.

## Progress Made in Women's SRHR

Women's SRHR plays a significant role in for overall health and well-being, gender equality, and societal development. This aspect has been recognized within the conceptual framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). During past two decades, countries in Europe have made significant progress in improving SRHR services through several programs [5].

During the recent past decades, European countries have made considerable efforts to prevent several discriminatory sexual and reproductive health practices among women. Program interventions have eliminated restrictions, discrimination, coercion and violence that are experienced by women throughout their sexual and reproductive lives. It has been reported that laws and policies prohibiting contraception have been eradicated. Also, efforts have been made to liberalise restrictive abortion laws. Some of other achievements include:

- a. Enacting regulatory frameworks criminalising violence against women
- b. Eradicating regulations specifying differing ages of sexual consent for women

c. Repealing provisions criminalising sex between men and women outside of marriage, and between same-sex adults

d. Legalising divorce practices. In addition, employment protections for pregnancy and maternity have been put in place [2].

At the same time, within the framework of SRHR, improvements have been made in delivery, quality and accessibility of sexual and reproductive health care that women need most. Several of the European countries have reported lowest rates of maternal mortality, in comparison to other regions and nations of the globe. Analysis of data also indicate that

- I. Modern contraception is now more generally available, than in other regions
- II. Rate of unintended pregnancies is declining
- III. Incidents of unsafe abortion are negligible in some European countries, with many parts of the EU region experiencing continuous decline [2].

## Barriers in Program Implementation

Despite achievements in implementing SRHR programs in many European countries, women are confronted with obstacles in accessing the quality care and type of support they need. It has been found that women's sexual and reproductive health (including autonomy, integrity, and decision-making) remains threatened. Also, violations of women's sexual and reproductive rights are evident. For instance, laws and policies, in some countries of Europe, violate, restrict and undermine women's SRHR. Whole range of financial, practical and social barriers prevent women from attaining highest level of sexual and reproductive health. These contributory factors hinder their ability to receive good quality care in matters pertaining to sexual and reproductive health. Various types of violence against women continue to prevail in almost all European societies. Another area of concern is "coercive sexual and reproductive health care practices". It still remains a program implementation barrier in some countries in Europe [2].

In addition, social norms and stigma pertaining to women's roles in society, their sexuality and reproductive capacities make women painful and uncomfortable. These restrictions (including biases and abuses), at times, make women suffer. Again, these barriers give rise to multiple forms of discrimination. They have worsened impacts on sexual and reproductive health of particular groups of women. This trend results in violation of human rights [2].

## Challenges Ahead

During recent years, progress has been made in the area of women's SRHR in Europe. Several forms of discrimination in matters pertaining to sexual and reproductive health of women have been eliminated by the members of the Council of Europe. There is situation wherein member states (of the Council of Europe) have partially made success, over the years. As outlined in previous section of this paper, despite progress made over the years, women in European countries continue to be confronted with discriminatory practices; they face denials and infringements of their SRHR. Regulatory practices and policies (still) curtail women's full access to sexual and reproductive health care and services. This situation undermines their sexual and reproductive health, with denial to

- Dignity
- Integrity
- Autonomy
- Decision-Making [2].

As a result of discriminatory practices, women in Europe face a wide range of specific challenges. These challenges relate to enjoyment of women's SRHR. For instance, although many women (including adolescent girls) are sexually active, many of them do not use internal



or female condoms (that are put inside vagina). Inadequate access to (effective) methods of contraception puts them to the risks of

- i. Early Pregnancy
- ii. Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV [2].

## Way Forward

There is need for reaffirming commitments to human rights and gender equality among women in the European countries. Also, involved stakeholders are mandated to further strengthen measures that undermine women's SRHR. In terms of way forward, author of this paper suggests these policy level interventions:

1. Preventing erosion of existing protections
2. Preventing initiatives that seek to roll back established entitlements
3. Repealing retrogressive measures that have already been enacted in the area of SRHR
4. Refraining from discourse that is contrary to human rights principles
5. Refraining from discourse that pose challenges in gender equality (and undermines commitments to women's SRHR)
6. Reforming regulatory policies that act as barrier in working towards advance women's SRHR
7. Refraining from prohibiting the provision of evidence-based information on sexual and reproductive health and rights [2].

## Conclusive Comments

Initiatives aimed at promoting SRHR are crucial for preserving overall health and well-being of women in Europe, and elsewhere. It is of paramount significance for government-level policy makers to streamline gender equality, and societal development (as recognized by the principles of SDGs). Despite progress made over the years in improving sexual and reproductive health status of women in European countries, inequalities persist in outcomes relating to SRHR matters [5]. Universal access to quality sexual and reproductive health care should form part of guiding principles. It is pertinent to note that gender inequalities have significant consequences on SRHR outcomes. Gender inequalities are shaped and in accordance

with gender norms and unequal power relations in society; they strip women (including men) of their ability to control their SRHR [6]. This paper concludes that collective action is needed in order to address systemic barriers hindering access to safe, high-quality and affordable sexual and reproductive health services. SRHR is a reality for women and adolescent girls; they are more likely to be left behind for a number of reasons [7].

## Declarations

The author declares that the present research work has not been sent elsewhere for publication.

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