

---

# SRHR AS A PREREQUISITE FOR DEMOCRATIC AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

---

Ensuring a strong voice and support from the EU and its member states on SRHR has never been more critical. Today, we see an articulated opposition to gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the rights of LGBTQI+ people, Europe is no exception. Trends of de-democratization have emerged along with threats to previous gender equality policy achievements, including in SRHR.<sup>1</sup> The hard-won gains for women's rights and LGBTQI+ people are currently under attack in fields as diverse as political participation, the labour market and care work.

These challenges can be overcome. Understanding how the rights and freedoms related to sexual and reproductive health can contribute to increased economic, political and societal participation and opportunities, is key to poverty reduction and democratic development. The EU and its member states should prioritise SRHR as key to economic development and democracy.

## VIOLATIONS OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS GLOBALLY

---

By investing in SRHR, people will not only be able to live healthier lives, but they will also be able to participate in and contribute to a democratic and economic development.<sup>2</sup> Yet, SRHR are far from being realised in the world. Due to a wide range of barriers, access to SRH services and information varies widely within and between countries, which has devastating effects on the lives and health of people. Currently:

- Approximately 300 000 women a year die from complications related to pregnancy, childbirth and unsafe abortion.<sup>3</sup>
- 164 million women who want to delay or avoid pregnancy and are not using any contraceptive method.<sup>4</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of women who have their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods continues to be among the lowest in the world at 56%. The largest gaps in meeting the need for family planning are among young women and adolescents.<sup>4</sup>
- Around 45% of all abortions are unsafe, of which 97% take place in developing countries.<sup>5</sup> Unsafe abortion is the leading cause of maternal deaths and morbidities.
- 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.<sup>6</sup>
- More than 3 million girls estimated to be at risk of FGM every year.<sup>7</sup>

## SRHR LEADS TO ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

---

SRHR are very closely linked to gender equality and women's empowerment which, in turn, is fundamental to poverty reduction and economic and democratic development. SRHR is central to the realisation of a range of rights, including the right to livelihood, security, education and participation.<sup>8</sup> As long as women and girls do not decide if or when to have children, are married off or suffer severe injuries due to childbirth, their participation in society will remain limited. When people have access to contraceptives, comprehensive sexuality education, safe abortion, and the power to decide over their own lives and bodies, only then will their economic, political and social opportunities improve.

Access to contraceptive information and services has countless socioeconomic benefits.<sup>9</sup> Contraceptives reduce rates of unintended pregnancies and allows women (and families) to delay childbearing, which benefits the education of girls and creates opportunities for women to participate more fully in society, including in higher education and paid employment.<sup>9-11</sup> This in turn improves the economic security and well-being of women as well their families. Women's access to contraception can also contribute to a substantial increase in the proportion of women in the work-force.<sup>9</sup>

There is a wealth of evidence concluding that transforming social norms are key to SRHR and gender equality.<sup>12</sup> For a sustainable shift in unequal gender power and inclusion of all in democratic development, positive social norms must be strengthened, and harmful social norms on sexuality, masculinity and femininity must be transformed. Such harmful norms overwhelmingly disadvantage women and girls and LGBTQI+ persons in their everyday social, economic and political life.

If young people, including young women, are to participate in a sustainable economy, all aspects of empowerment must be taken into account. Providing job opportunities to young people in low-income countries is not enough. They also need access to a comprehensive package of youth-friendly SRHR services, including but not limited to contraceptives and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), as these equip them to better understand their rights, to counter harmful gender norms and stereotypes and to engage in the economic, social and political life of their communities. When young people have access to health services that meet their specific needs, they can make choices, protect themselves from coercion and violence, exercise their right to health and live healthy lives. They can avoid potential economic hardship resulting from gender inequalities and from events such as unintended pregnancies, often leading girls and young women to drop out from schools and being trapped in poverty.

## ANTI-SRHR AND ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS: ELEMENTS OF THE LARGER ANTI-DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

Anti-liberal movements at all levels want to restrict the rights of women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, not least their SRHR. Restrictions on SRHR often go hand in hand with restrictions on other freedoms such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the right to organise.<sup>1</sup> Poland, Hungary, Iran, Russia and Afghanistan are just a few examples of where authoritarian, anti-democratic developments are linked to restrictions of women's rights, their sexual and reproductive rights in particular. Limiting the right to safe abortion, banning sexuality education and restricting LGBTQI+ rights have been central components of the anti-democratic movements.<sup>15</sup>

The organised global opposition to gender equality and equity, SRHR, and LGBTQI+ rights is a dynamic and adaptive movement, and the tactics of this movement have evolved in response to changes in the political and social landscape. It includes the attempts to codify and enforce the concept that biological sex represents the “natural” order while gender is an invention and an “ideology”.<sup>16</sup>

As such, the specific opposition to SRHR we are seeing in different parts of the world today is part of a larger transnational political movement, stemming from the rise of populism and anti-democratic mobilisation.<sup>1,17,18</sup> Enormous financial resources are funding these anti-rights movements and the institutions that support them, which are leveraged into acceleration across global regions, yielding both the attrition of human rights infrastructures and the increasing rise of authoritarianism. Concerningly, it was found that between 2013-2017, LGBTQI+ movements worldwide received \$1.2 billion, while the anti-gender movement received \$3.7 billion<sup>19</sup> – more than triple the LGBTQI+ funding.

### **Pushback against SRHR in the Latin American context**

In Latin America, the Catholic Church has played a central role in the long-standing anti-gender offensive against “gender ideology”. In the region, transnational anti-gender networks promote the idea that the family is at risk if the “gender ideology” is not stopped, bringing together religious and secular actors.<sup>20</sup> In Brazil,<sup>21</sup> anti-gender movements played a key role in the election of Jair Bolsonaro of the Social Christian Party – of evangelical inspiration – as president of Brazil, who during his campaign resorted to strategies of disinformation and moral panic. Brazil's diplomacy was oriented to oppose any SRHR and gender equality language as exemplified by an anti-abortion declaration signed by Brazil, among others.<sup>22</sup> The anti-gender rhetoric in Latin America always coexisted with the hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church and most recently boosted by the evangelicals with strong and close connections to the American New Christian Right.

### Iran: “Women, Life, Freedom”

Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman, died in September 2022 whilst in the custody of the morality police after she was arrested for not wearing the hijab properly. Thousands of people have been rallying in daily demonstrations throughout the country after her death demanding “Woman, Life, Freedom” and calling for an end to the ongoing repression of women and girls’ fundamental rights.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, protesters have been calling for accountability in the face of increasing oppression and violence, including rape, killing, arrests, torture and attacks on detainees.<sup>23,24</sup>

During the Islamic regime’s first decade (1979-1989), women were stripped of significant rights. The government reduced the legal marriage age to nine years old, and women were forced to leave several government positions, and in 1983, the hijab became compulsory for all women<sup>25</sup> Over the past decade, authorities attempt to force women and girls to marry earlier and have more children to increase the national population. Iran has shifted its population planning from providing family planning and access to contraception, once seen as a success story by international organizations, to undermining women’s access to sexual and reproductive health care.<sup>26</sup> *The Bill to Increase Fertility Rates and Prevent Population Decline* was passed on November 2021 which outlaws voluntary sterilisation and blocks access to information about contraception.<sup>26</sup>

### SRHR and LGBTQI+ organisations suffer when civic spaces shrink

In recent years, a marker of the anti-democratic mobilisation has been the diminishing of civic space in many countries.<sup>1</sup> Civil society organisations, particularly those defending human rights, are facing increasing political restraints all over the world. This closure of civic space is a gendered phenomenon that particularly affects women’s rights and LGBTQI+ rights organisations. The people and organizations most at risk from shrinking civic space and repression include SRHR and the rights of LGBTQI+ people. Women’s rights activists are targeted because of the focus of their work, including SRHR, which is often viewed as endangering ‘traditional values’.<sup>18,27</sup> In 2021-2022, LGBTQI+ organisations were forced to close down in several countries, including Russia, Ghana, China and Uganda.

Transparency and participation are widely agreed to be the cornerstones of effective governance and democracy.<sup>28</sup> As such, to strengthen democracy, we need a stronger commitment to a robust and vibrant civil society, to movements that work for gender equality and greater participation of women and gender-diverse people in all fields.<sup>2</sup>

### Shrinking civic space for SRHR in Asia

The civil society context in Asia and space for SRHR actors has continued to be severely constrained. In 2021, civic space violations were documented across the region with the use of laws restricting the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, occurring in at least 21 countries.<sup>29</sup> Human rights defenders were detained under such laws in at least 19 countries and in 11 countries they were prosecuted.<sup>29</sup> In Cambodia civil society organisations have to become experts in the careful balancing act of advocating for SRHR, while at the same time avoiding their work being (too) politicised, including conflict sensitivity and risk mitigation in their work. Nonetheless, analysis has found that the shrinking space in Cambodia has already had negative impacts on development outcomes and will continue to have negative outcomes for gender equality and inequality.<sup>30</sup>

## THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES SHOULD PRIORITISE SRHR AS KEY TO ECONOMIC AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN ITS EXTERNAL RELATIONS

---

The EU is a strong voice for democracy, economic development and rule of law - and could be an equally strong voice for gender equality and SRHR. The EU could play a key role when it comes to showing the interlinkages between SRHR and development and prioritising SRHR as key to economic and democratic development for all. This can be done by the EU and its member states:

- **Addressing the root causes of economic inequality and the lack of participation in economic and democratic development, by investing in SRHR.** Investments in access to contraceptives, maternal health services, and young people's access to SRH services and information, in particular is vital.
- **Being a strong global voice for and funder of the most contested SRHR issues,** including safe abortion, comprehensive sexuality education and LGBTQI+ rights. Working against these rights is a central component of many anti-democratic movements.
- **Making a special investment in support of organisations and movements working for SRHR, LGBTQI+ and gender equality in anti-democratic countries and contexts.** These actors play a key role in the fight against forces that want to restrict people's rights and freedoms, including their SRHR.

# REFERENCES

---

1. UN Women. *Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash Against Women's Rights: Understanding the Current Challenges for Feminist Politics*. United Nations; 2020. doi:10.18356/c181abf2-en
2. Action Canada. Sexual and Reproductive Rights & Democracy: A Call to Action. Published November 2, 2022. Sexual and Reproductive Rights & Democracy: A Call to Action
3. WHO. Maternal mortality. Published 2019. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/maternal-mortality>
4. UN DESA. *World Family Planning 2022. Meeting the Changing Needs for Family Planning: Contraceptive Use by Age and Method*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division; 2022. Accessed March 27, 2023. [https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org/development/desa/pd/files/files/documents/2023/Feb/undesa\\_pd\\_2022\\_world-family-planning.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org/development/desa/pd/files/files/documents/2023/Feb/undesa_pd_2022_world-family-planning.pdf)
5. WHO. Abortion. Published 2021. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>
6. WHO. Violence against women. Published 2021. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>
7. WHO. Female genital mutilation. Published January 31, 2023. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>
8. Runeborg A. *Sexuality: A Missing Dimension in Development*. Sida; 2008.
9. Bernstein A, Jones K, Jones AB and K. *The Economic Effects of Contraceptive Access: A Review of the Evidence*. Institute for Women's Policy Research; 2019. Accessed March 28, 2023. <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/reproductive-health/the-economic-effects-of-contraceptive-access-a-review-of-the-evidence/>
10. Singh S, Darroch JE, Ashford LS. Adding It Up: The Costs and Benefits of Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health 2014. Published online December 4, 2014. Accessed March 8, 2023. <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/adding-it-costs-and-benefits-investing-sexual-and-reproductive-health-2014>
11. WHO. Contraception. World Health Organization. Published July 17, 2020. Accessed March 28, 2023. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/contraception>
12. UNDP. Tackling social norms a game changer for gender inequalities. UNDP. Published March 4, 2020. Accessed February 28, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/tackling-social-norms-game-changer-gender-inequalities>
13. Cooper D, Morroni C, Orner P, et al. Ten Years of Democracy in South Africa: Documenting Transformation in Reproductive Health Policy and Status. *Reprod Health Matters*. 2004;12(24):70-85. doi:10.1016/S0968-8080(04)24143-X
14. Cooper D, Harries J, Moodley J, et al. Coming of age? Women's sexual and reproductive health after twentyone years of democracy in South Africa. *Reprod Health Matters*. 2016;24(48):79-89. doi:10.1016/j.rhm.2016.11.010
15. Graff A, Korolczuk E. *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. Routledge; 2022.
16. Global Philanthropy Project. *Understanding the Resourcing of the Global "Anti-Gender Ideology" Movement, Executive Summary*; 2020. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/MTM-Summary-pdf>
17. Vida B. New waves of anti-sexual and reproductive health and rights strategies in the European Union: the anti-gender discourse in Hungary. *Sex Reprod Health Matters*. 2019;27(2):13-16. doi:10.1080/26410397.2019.1610281
18. Krizsán A, Roggeband C. *The Gender Politics of Domestic Violence: Feminists Engaging the State in Central and Eastern Europe*. 1st ed. Routledge; 2017. doi:10.4324/9781315618951
19. Global Philanthropy Project. *Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement*; 2021. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Meet-the-Moment-2020-English.pdf>
20. Biroli F. The Backlash against Gender Equality in Latin America: Temporality, Religious Patterns, and the Erosion of Democracy. *Lasa Fórum*. Published online January 1, 2020. Accessed February 27, 2023. [https://www.academia.edu/43010319/The\\_Backlash\\_against\\_Gender\\_Equality\\_in\\_Latin\\_America\\_Temporality\\_Religious\\_Patterns\\_and\\_the\\_Erosion\\_of\\_Democracy](https://www.academia.edu/43010319/The_Backlash_against_Gender_Equality_in_Latin_America_Temporality_Religious_Patterns_and_the_Erosion_of_Democracy)
21. Radio S. Kulturnytt: Protester mot Judith Butler i Brasilien och ny Dramatenpjäs om skjutningar i landet - Kulturnytt i P1. Published November 8, 2017. Accessed March 8, 2023. <https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/973096>
22. Borger J. US signs anti-abortion declaration with group of largely authoritarian governments. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/22/us-trump-administration-signs-anti-abortion-declaration>. Published October 22, 2020. Accessed March 8, 2023.

23. OHCHR. Iran: Crackdown on peaceful protests since death of Jina Mahsa Amini needs independent international investigation, say UN experts. OHCHR. Published October 26, 2022. Accessed March 30, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/iran-crackdown-peaceful-protests-death-jina-mahsa-amini-needs-independent>
24. Reuters. Iranians protest in southeast flashpoint, mark “Bloody Friday.” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranians-protest-flashpoint-province-nationwide-unrest-persists-2022-11-11/>. Published November 12, 2022. Accessed March 29, 2023.
25. Boroumand L. Why Women Are Leading the Fight in Iran. *Journal of Democracy*. Published September 2022. Accessed March 30, 2023. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/why-women-are-leading-the-fight-in-iran/>
26. Human Rights Watch. Iran: Population Law Violates Women’s Rights. Human Rights Watch. Published November 10, 2021. Accessed March 29, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/10/iran-population-law-violates-womens-rights>
27. Krizsan A, Roggeband C. Towards a Conceptual Framework for Struggles over Democracy in Backsliding States: Gender Equality Policy in Central Eastern Europe. *Polit Gov*. 2018;6(3):90-100. doi:10.17645/pag.v6i3.1414
28. Gostin LO, Monahan JT, Kaldor J, et al. The legal determinants of health: harnessing the power of law for global health and sustainable development. *The Lancet*. 2019;393(10183):1857-1910. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30233-8
29. Civicus Monitor. Asia-Pacific: Restrictive Legislation. Published 2021. Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://viewer.mapme.com/7fb255ef-175e-478f-b7c3-7d6c6529f78a>
30. Schröder P, Young S. The Implications of Closing Civic Space for Sustainable Development in Cambodia. Published online April 30, 2019. Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/14510>

**RFSU was founded in 1933 and is a pioneering Swedish organisation working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).**

**RFSU is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation without party-political, trade union or religious affiliation. Our aim is to spread a knowledge-based and open view of sexuality and relationships issues to overcome prejudices, bridge knowledge gaps and improve sexual health and wellbeing. We run projects and programmes to promote access to sexual and reproductive health and rights – both in Sweden and internationally. Much of this work is done with partners and other organisations. RFSU has a rights perspective of sexuality based on everyone’s freedom to be what they want to be, to choose to live as they want and enjoy what they want. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) was founded by RFSU and other actors, and RFSU remains IPPF’s Swedish member association**

**You can read more about RFSU’s activities at [www.rfsu.se](http://www.rfsu.se)**



**This publication is implemented with the financial support of the EU and Sida. Its contents are the sole responsibility of RFSU and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU or Sida.**