

IFMSA Policy Statement

Women's Rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health

Adopted by the 65th March Meeting General Assembly in St. Paul's Bay, Malta, March 2016

Summary

As future medical professionals we acknowledge that the right to sexual and reproductive health is an essential component of the right to complete health and wellbeing. It includes measures to improve maternal and child health, sexual and reproductive health services, including universal access to safe family planning, antenatal and postnatal care, emergency obstetric services and access to information, as well as the possibility to be able to act upon that information.

Women's right to health requires the removal of all barriers interfering with this, including national laws penalizing and restricting women's right to decide at which age, how many and at how often to have children and preventing access to sexual and family planning education, contraception and the legal right to abortion and ending female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). We recognize that these health benefits and rights fit to every single individual self-identified as a woman according to her determined gender identity. One of the main barriers for women to fulfill their full potential in many countries is gender inequality and woman's limited right to decide when and how many children to have.

IFMSA recognizes that this is a religious and cultural sensitive issue, but as future health care providers the IFMSA believe our stand should be grounded in health gains and effects.

Introduction

Today far too many women, children and adolescents worldwide still have little or no access to essential, good-quality health services and education, clean air and water, adequate sanitation and good nutrition. They face violence and discrimination, are unable to participate fully in society and encounter other barriers to realizing their human rights. The Millennium Development Agenda has left us with unfinished business. As stated in the new Sustainable Development Goals and Global Strategy on Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health 2016-2030 the annual death toll remains unacceptably high: 289,000 maternal deaths, 2.6 million stillbirths, 5.9 million deaths in children under the age of five— including 2.7 million newborn deaths—and 1.3 million adolescent deaths. Most of these deaths could have been prevented through access to sexual and reproductive health services. Many also suffer illness and disability, failing to reach their full potential. This results in enormous economical costs and loss of human life for countries both today and for future generations. [1]

Inequality between women and men undermines all development goals. When women and girls lack access to education, information and services, their health and rights suffer. When women and girls do not have full access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, their ability to contribute economically, socially and politically to their communities is severely constrained. To achieve goals of gender equality, which underpin all other development objectives, it is critical to acknowledge sexual and reproductive health and rights as fundamental human rights and guarantee access to sexual and reproductive health services for all. These services must go



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beyond access to contraceptive methods to integrate other actions across sectors, such as sexual and reproductive health education. Sustainable, meaningful and rights-driven development will be possible only by addressing gender inequality, which denies women and girls the opportunity to make decisions about their bodies and live free from violence. [2]

Sustainable Development Agenda is calling for universal access to sexual and reproductive health. Goal 3 calls for achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health care, reducing global maternal death rates, and ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Reproductive health problems are a leading cause of ill health and death for women and girls of childbearing age in developing countries. Impoverished women suffer disproportionately from unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortion, maternal death and disability, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and related problems. Young people are also extremely vulnerable, facing disproportionately high HIV rates as well as barriers to reproductive health information and care.

Women are much more likely than men to be impoverished, deprived of education and opportunities, and victimized by sexual and domestic violence. Goal 5 calls for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, the end of all forms of gender-based discrimination, and the elimination of harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). It also calls for ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.[3][4]

Laws and policies on abortion should protect women's health and their human rights. Regulatory, policy and programmatic barriers that hinder access to and timely provision of safe abortion care should be removed. An enabling regulatory and policy environment is needed to ensure that every woman who is legally eligible has ready access to safe abortion care. Policies should be geared to respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights of women; to achieving positive health outcomes for women; to providing good-quality contraceptive information and services; and to meeting the particular needs of poor women, adolescents, rape survivors and women living with HIV [5]

Main text

As Medical Students of today and healthcare professionals of tomorrow, we are the ones who are going to carry the Sustainable Development Agenda to 2030.

IFMSA therefore calls:

1. Governments to provide comprehensive sexuality education in primary-, secondary- and high school, adapted to class level.
2. Governments to ensure women's right to decide when, at which age and how often to have sexual relations.
3. Governments to ensure women's right to plan whether to have children, when, at which age and how many by providing rights-based access to family planning and contraception services.
4. Governments to introduce national laws and implementation of existing legislation to abolish child marriage and end female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) at all forms everywhere

The IFMSA also commits on:

1. Raising awareness about sexual and reproductive health rights, gender equality, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) within the Federation. by promoting it through interventions



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such as campaigns, and by introducing it as a topic during General Assemblies among all the Standing Committees.

2. Advocating for women's sexual and reproductive health in the light of new Global Strategy on Women's, Children's and Adolescent's health 2016-2030 especially in terms of access to family planning, contraception and rights-based non-judgmental services especially to youth and adolescents in high-level meetings and within respective networks.

3. Promoting rights-based attitudes within IFMSA ensuring gender equality and non-discriminatory behaviours within IFMSA international networks and among NMOs.

References

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