

# SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

*Excerpt from the*  
UNDG Guidance Note on Human  
Rights for Resident Coordinators  
and UN Country Teams

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# Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

## Key points and messages that the Resident Coordinator should know about the issue

- Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) refers to a collection of human rights which are guaranteed in international human rights treaties, other inter-governmental agreements and consensus documents, and national laws. These human rights include civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights, all of which are essential for ensuring the equal right of women and men to enjoy the maximum attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health and make decisions concerning their sexuality and reproduction, including the number, timing of birth and spacing of their children, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. For instance, the lack of respect of the right to privacy can deter adolescents and young people from seeking sexual and reproductive health services if adolescent sexuality is stigmatized.
- Violations of SRHR take many forms, such as denying access to services that only women require, providing poor quality services, subjecting access to third-party authorization or performing procedures without a woman's consent, including forced sterilization or forced virginity examination.
- UN treaty bodies such as CEDAW have established that criminalization of services that only women require is a form of discrimination against women, and States should decriminalize sexual and reproductive health services, including abortion, as a matter of priority.
- Violations of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are often deeply ingrained in societal values and gender stereotypes pertaining to women's sexuality. In particular, patriarchal concepts of women's roles within the family mean that women are often valued according to their ability to reproduce. Addressing violations of SRHR will often require addressing these harmful stereotypes as well as traditional practices such as FGM and child, early and forced marriage.
- The CRPD asserts that people with disabilities have the right to the same standard and services in the area of sexual and reproductive health services as is provided to other persons.

## Relevant international standards

The relevant international standards are summarized in the following documents:

- UNFPA and Center for Reproductive Rights, '[ICPD and Human Rights: 20 Years of Advancing Reproductive Rights through UN Treaty Bodies and Legal Reform](#)';
- UNFPA, OHCHR, Danish Institute of Human Rights, [Reproductive Rights are Human Rights](#);
- OHCHR, Information Sheet series on SRHR (forthcoming);
- OHCHR, [Women's rights are human rights](#), chapter on SRHR, p. 50; [General Comments of CRPD](#), [General Comments of CEDAW](#) and SR reports.

## Role that the Resident Coordinator and UN Country Team can play in promoting the issue

- The UN Country Team can speak publicly for the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights. For instance, in El Salvador (a country in which abortion is criminalized in all circumstances), the UN Country Team issued a public statement encouraging the implementation of treaty bodies' and UPR recommendations in the area of sexual and reproductive rights.(20) This was done further to the Supreme Court ruling in the case of a young woman who had sought urgent medical intervention in the course of a pregnancy that was placing her life at risk. The UN system in El Salvador reiterated its willingness to facilitate a national dialogue to advance the promotion and protection of women's rights. This was followed up with multi-stakeholder dialogues and public appearances, such as at the event to

launch Amnesty International's report on women's rights in El Salvador, where the RC reiterated the need for the Salvadoran Government to commit to a debate on the decriminalization of abortion.

- The UN Country Team can also lead operational work on SRHR issues within the country. For instance, in Malawi, a Delivering as One country, the UN Country Team is coordinating an initiative to support a multi-stakeholder dialogue and a national inquiry by the Human Rights Commission into sexual, reproductive, maternal and child health, supported by UNFPA.
- In certain contexts, focusing on less controversial aspects of sexual and reproductive health rights (e.g. maternal health) can be a good entry point for beginning a discussion about more difficult issues. For instance, in many cases, the largest group at risk of dying in pregnancy and childbirth is adolescents. Data of this nature can help trigger discussion about the need for adolescents to have information and access to services, including contraception and safe abortion services. [General Comment No. 4 of the CRC](#) asserts that State parties should provide adolescents with access to sexual and reproductive information, including on family planning and contraceptives.

### **Support and tools available from the United Nations system**

- OHCHR and UNFPA offer, when resources are available, capacity-building workshops that provide basic information on the main human rights standards related to SRHR;
- Preventing and Responding to HIV-related Human Rights Crisis: Guidance for UN Agencies and Programmes (forthcoming).