

**Forum:** Human Rights Commission 1

**Issue:** Strengthening reproductive rights for women

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## Introduction

The right to freely decide whether an individual can reproduce, have an abortion, use contraceptives or start a family is known as reproductive right. It is the right to have control over one's own body and therefore their destinies. In 2014, 25% of the world's population was living in countries that were strictly against abortions and had laws set in place to restrict abortions. 134 of 196 countries around the world allow abortions if the mother's physical health is at risk while nine countries will not allow abortions under any conditions. El Salvador, Malta, the Vatican, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua refuse abortions even if it is to save the mother's life. In El Salvador, women who have illegal abortions can face two to eight years of jail time with twelve years of jail time for the nurses who assisted them through the process.

In a study done by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) they stated "Sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical for empowering women and girls and advancing gender equality – both to realize their rights and their access to health services." Giving girls and women sexual and reproductive health and rights, is moving one step forward into achieving gender equality. Their ability to freely and independently make an informed decision of whether to and when to have a child, in many countries currently, result in discrimination and violence.

Research in 2008 by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy showed that letting one choose when to enter parenthood, gives greater stability and satisfaction, allows more work experience amongst women, thus increasing wages and average earnings. With reproductive rights for women, it would be one step towards the universal declaration of human rights. Article 1 of the universal declaration of human rights claims that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." With strengthening the reproductive rights for women, it not only makes them equal but also free in rights.

Equality is not the only reason there is a need to strengthen reproductive rights. As mentioned previously, the mother's physical health can be at risk and with reproductive rights, they have the ability to make decisions on their own and are not forced by the government. A woman should not be forced into delivering a child that may result in the harm of their own body. This is especially evident when very

young women are raped and/or forced in non consensual intercourse the results in them becoming pregnant. According to recent figures in a study done by Independent, for girls aged 15 to 19 pregnancy is still the 'number one killer', as every 20 minutes around the world 1 teenage girl dies due to complications during childbirth. A charity called Save the Children found that almost '30,000 teenagers girls die every year from complications arising through pregnancy or childbirth'. By allowing the government to negatively impact the reproductive rights of women, they run the risk of doing harm to both the mother and the child. The child may also grow up in an unstable household as a result of the fact that the pregnancy was carried out. Children may be physically, mentally, and emotionally harmed whilst growing up because the parents are unprepared of the responsibilities that come with raising a child.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Human Rights

Human rights are provided to all humans around the world. These are provided without discrimination to people of all genders, nationalities and religions. Human rights are the basic and fundamental freedoms and entitlements that are universally available to all humans from birth. These aim to provide equality and dignity to all and prevent discrimination against anyone for any reason. These human rights are stated within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

### Reproductive Rights

When individuals are given the right to decide what to do with their bodies in terms of reproducing and to have reproductive health. Having the right to make the decision to start a family or aborting a child. Reproductive rights also allow the individual to gain access to sex education and reproductive health rights.

### Abortion

When medical means are used to end a pregnancy. These means could include abortion pills and surgical abortion. Women usually turn to having an abortion when their pregnancy is unplanned or unwanted, however in many countries around the world, laws have been set in place stating abortion is an illegal act.

### Contraception

Broadly referring to all behaviours or devices/implements that may be used during time of sexual intercourse to prevent pregnancy (caused by insemination in the uterus). Most contraceptive devices also prevent against Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs).

## **Sexually Assault**

A form of harassment: when an individual is forced to provide non-consensual sexual services, often as severe as rape.

## **Background Information**

Women's reproductive rights have varied over time, and this has greatly influenced numerous facets of society. We are at a point of time in history where women's reproductive rights are stronger than ever, yet there are still certain inconsistencies in these rights that have not been fully addressed at this time. These include the familial preference of a male child, child marriage, and the taboos in society surrounding the idea of reproduction. In the context of this issue, the gap between developed countries and developing countries widens considerably, for most developing nations are plagued with these sub-issues as compared to developed nations that have nearly eradicated these sub-issues.

## **Contraception**

Contraception is still a controversial issue in a global scale. Albeit the attitudes towards contraception have been changing since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in most countries in the world it is a taboo to 'indulge' in contraceptive measures. For an ancient double standard made it clear that a man's sexual prowess was to be rewarded and a woman's reputation was to be damaged. Indeed, a colloquial saying elucidates: "men were encouraged to 'sow a few wild oats' while women were told 'good girls don't'". This double standard was one of the main reasons women chose to fight for their reproductive rights, and this trait can be most commonly seen with different developed countries in the world.

### ***Birth control pill***

The invention of the birth control pill in 1960 in the United States was a major landmark in the history of reproductive rights for women. For the first time in recorded history, women were able to control if and when they got pregnant, and this was a major achievement for women at the global scale. Despite all of the positives, the pill was met with widespread backlash in the global sense. Reasons that the opposition used to reject the birth control pill included but were not limited to - religious motives, selfish desires, political losses, economic instability, and population decline. Today however, the birth control pill is the most commonly used form of contraception globally. However, a majority of these users reside in developed countries, with most developing countries either having difficulty accessing this basic form of contraception, or shunning it as a taboo towards society.

## **Abortion**

Abortion ranks in some of the top most controversial issues that are faced in this world. While some may argue that it is a basic human right to choose when to have a child and when not to, others argue that a life - even if unborn - is a life and taking that away from someone is also against basic human rights. The Feminist Campus has reported that, “44,000 deaths out of 303,000 maternal deaths worldwide result from ‘unsafe and often illegal abortion’”, and developing countries are the worst hit by this, with Africa having the greatest number of deaths. In most developing countries, the social stigma and the taboo of having an abortion is too great to bear for most women, so they refrain from undertaking any such measure even when presented with the opportunity to do so. Nearly “3 million unsafe abortions are performed on girls of the ages 15 - 19 every year”. Since these abortions are unsafe, these girls now have a greater risk of “maternal death and obstetric fistula because of physical immaturity”. This in turn makes any complications in pregnancy and childbirth as a leading cause of death in these girls.

## **Sexual assault**

Sexual assault is a clear violation of a woman’s reproductive rights. It is non consensual intercourse which breaches the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, alongside a woman’s right to refusal. Albeit sexual assault cases gradually decreasing over the last two decades, sexual assault is still a breathing issue in modern society. Sexual assault is everywhere, but is most commonly seen in impoverished countries, where judicial systems are too slow or the governing system too corrupt to take full action. Despite the individual actions of many countries (launching campaigns, changing legislation, etc.) to curb sexual assault, the issue still thrives due to conflicting consent ages and no global definition of consent for minors. Sexual assault can also occur to women past consent ages, however many women are hushed by family members or society fearing the social stigma attached to the whole ordeal. Consequently, the cries of many women go unnoticed for the fear of living with the constant pain of the memory through the eyes of society.

## **Maternity**

Maternity is an experience most women cherish in their lifetime. However, nearly all maternal deaths (99%) happen in the developing world. Of these, more than half are from Sub-Saharan Africa, and nearly a third in South Asia. The different facets of the issue range from inadequate access to daily health care supplies and the transparency on reproductive rights and sexual education. Indeed, if the modern contraceptive needs were met in the world, nearly 70,000 maternal deaths could potentially be avoided. Education would permit for better decision making abilities, thus empowering women and ensuring that they keep their health as the first and foremost priority before branching into other aspects of their lives.

### ***Child marriage***

Child marriage is an all too common issue faced in the world today. Not only is child marriage in violation of numerous agreements (including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), it is also a blatant disregard for the effort that nations have put into developing their countries into sustainable models of society. Estimates from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) say that one third of girls in the developing world are married off before the age of 18, alongside the fact that 1 in 9 girls will be married off before the age of 15. Even though countries with the highest trends of child marriage are located in Western and Sub-Saharan Africa, the largest numbers of child brides reside in South Asia due to the concentration of the population. UN Women has clearly established that child marriage often results in “social isolation, interrupts the girl’s schooling, limits the girl’s opportunities, and increases the risk of experiencing domestic violence”.

### ***Family planning***

In most developed countries, women are expected engage in family planning sessions with their spouses and certified physicians in order to ensure that everyone’s needs and desires are satisfied. However, the same cannot be said for developing countries or countries where religion plays an active role in politics. Here, it is more commonly believed that the male is the ultimate “decision-maker” when it comes to all household affairs - even birth - even though the wife is the one who is to give birth. Recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the right to choose if someone wants to marry, or when to marry. The importance of this is paramount, as this allows for consent from both sides of the relationship. Access to safe and voluntary family planning is a basic human right, as not only does this promote women empowerment, it also saves lives and allows for a transparent relationship between partners.

### ***Reproductive health services***

Reproductive health services are a necessity in modern day society. In developed countries, people are expected to use these services to ensure that their health and wellness is in order. This is especially true for pregnant women, who are expected at the minimum to attend “four antenatal visits” to ensure their pregnancy is going smoothly, alongside proper postnatal care for themselves. This type of adequate healthcare is not available in most developing countries, and statistics tell the same story. “125 million women may give birth every year, but nearly 54 million women are unable to meet the minimum requirement of four antenatal visits and nearly 43 million women do not give birth in an adequate health facility”. This is the state of the reproductive health services in most developing countries. In addition, because most women do not receive decent postnatal care, they become victims of potentially fatal yet preventable health complications.

### ***Sexual education***

Although not an issue in most developed nations, sexual education is fairly limited and rather sparse in developing nations. At most, the quality of the education is inconsistent and incoherent, therefore rendering its purpose useless in the long run. Sexual education being limited in developing countries can be attributed to two main causes, religious beliefs (taboo in society) or lack of infrastructure to be able to train individuals. The repercussions of this can be seen in most developing countries, as child marriage is fairly common in Western and Sub-Saharan Africa. Girls and women who have been given exposure to sexual education are less likely to consent to child marriage or any other form of relationship that endangers their reproductive rights.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### International Women's Health Coalition

The International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) was initiated in 1984. This organisation believes in equality for women and in the improvement of human rights to women all around the world. They work in over 40 countries to ensure women have access to all that essential to them so that their human rights are met and not violated. They do this through informing women of their human rights and the issues relating to their reproductive rights and health along with child marriages and other matters relating to this issue. IWHC also help women with other problems such as violence and discrimination and help empower women and providing them equal opportunities including positions of leadership.

### Pathfinder International

Pathfinder International is an organisation that aims to provide all women with reproductive rights. They believe that people should have the ability to make an informed decision on reproduction. They want contraception to be available to all and for there to be no new HIV's (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). The former Secretary-General of the United Nations stated that "Despite all the barriers, Pathfinder finds ways to serve marginalized populations, including the poorest."

They do this through using information, such as "25% of people live in countries that would not allow abortions to save a woman's life". They bring together government officials and experts so that they can take the appropriate actions to change these situations and improve reproductive rights. Pathfinder protests for measures and regulations to be taken place so that more time and resources are spent on advancing reproductive health and ensuring it is available to all. Additionally, they raise funds for those who lack in reproductive health the most to provide services and contraceptives. Pathfinder International also provides maternal health care and health care to newborns as there is a high amount of pregnancy related deaths in LEDC's most of which are preventable.

### The Republic of El Salvador

The Republic of El Salvador is one of the most states relating to reproductive rights. Abortions are illegal. Those who take abortions are sentenced up to eight years in prison, however if it was determined as a homicide, women may be sentenced up to thirty years in prison. Due to lack of safe abortions women rely on illegal abortions instead which are unsafe and often cause the death of the mother. The World Health Organisation has estimated that 68,000 women die yearly due to unsafe abortions.

Prior to 1998 certain exceptions were provided for the ban on abortion. Under certain circumstances which were if pregnant woman's life was in danger, if the pregnancy was caused by rape or if the child had a birth defect. These conditions were set during 1973, however, in the year of 1998 a new Penal Code was introduced that removed these exceptions. This also meant that anyone that carries out an abortion can be sentence between 4 to 10 years and if this person is a doctor or nurse they can be imprisoned between 6 and 10 years.

A case where these extreme regulations are demonstrated is that of Evelyn Beatriz. This 19-year-old girl was raped and impregnated. She was sentenced to 30 years in prison for aggravated assault without any decisive evidence. She stated that she passed out and had a stillbirth, the autopsy was inconclusive on the stillbirth. She was mainly sentenced due to her not seeking prenatal care as she was too afraid of telling anyone of her sexual assault and did not know she had become pregnant.

### **International Pregnancy Advisory Service**

The International Pregnancy Advisory service was founded in 1973 to avoid deaths from lack of reproductive health care. They aim to prevent women risking their life due to lack of health care or safe abortion and want all women to have the ability to make choices on whether and when they have children. They do this through working with countries and providers of health care to ensure that women have access to contraceptives and safe abortions are available to all. They also educate people on reproductive rights and the importance of maternal and new-born health care.

### **Canada**

Canada has been one of the leading countries in terms of improving reproductive rights. The state has expressed strong views and outrage on the lack of suitable reproductive rights and health care to women around the world. Canada had submitted a resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Council which was unanimously adopted. The aim of this resolution is to prevent the abuse and discrimination of women. The state has plans to spend six hundred and fifty million dollars on the improvement of reproductive rights. This money would provide contraception, health care and combat states that have laws against abortion. The state aims to combat all the states that have limitations on abortion and the money would be used over the three- year plan to do so.

## United States of America

The United States of America has significantly better reproductive rights than many other states. The country supports many resolutions that aim to improve reproductive rights and health care. However, in relation to the resolution produced by Canada the USA does not agree with one clause. The clause was relating to health care and providing safe abortions. Although America encourages family planning and contraceptives are widely available they support abortions.

The USA also prevents non-governmental organisations that provide abortions from receiving funds from America. Any organisation that provides reproductive health care wishing to gain money from the USA must not promote abortions so that they may receive it. This means many people in Africa, Middle East and Asia would not have access to safe abortions and may need to resort to illegal abortions where they would risk their lives.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, 18 December 1979  
**(A/RES/34/180)**
- Aiming to Strengthen Women's Role in all Stages of Conflict Prevention, 18 October 2013,  
**(A/RES/2212)**
- Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights, 12 October 2011,  
**(A/HRC/RES/18/2)**
- Keeping the promise: united to achieve Millennium Development Goals, 19 October 2010,  
**(A/RES/65/1)**
- Preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights: follow up to Council resolution 11/8, 7 October 2010, **(A/HRC/RES/15/17)**
- Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women: eliminating domestic violence, 1 July 2015, **(A/HRC/L.16/Rev.1)**

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

A major step towards the improvement of reproductive rights for women was during the 1994 International Conference on Population & Development (ICPD), where 179 countries agreed to deliver global accessibility towards reproductive health services by 2015. In a year's time, nations invested in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995. Improving the lives of women at a global scale (including thorough accessibility to effective and safe family planning services and information), are some of the promises made by the Platform for Action.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals were established at the start of the new millennium in 2000. A set of 8 goals, these were established to better develop the global community by 2015. Goal 5 of the Millennium Development Goals aimed to lower the maternal mortality rate by 77% and ensure universal access to quality standards of family planning and reproductive health. Despite the failure of this goal to be achieved, maternal mortality rate decreased by 44% since 1990.

After the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals were implemented to last until 2030. This set of 17 goals was established to develop the world in a more sustainable and collaborative manner to allow for global peace. One of the targets of Goal 3 of the SDGs is to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio from 216 deaths per 100,000 live births to less than 77 deaths per 100,000 live births. In addition, Goal 5 of the SDGs is dedicated towards Gender Equality, which asks for nations to ensure universal access to reproductive and sexual rights and health.

## Possible Solutions

As always, education is the key combatting this issue. It is the most powerful tool to combat reproductive rights with women. Educating the women about the abuse they are being put through and educating men, women, boys, girls about what reproductive rights are and raising awareness and shedding light to the issue is the most effective and vital step the world needs to take. Furthermore, fostering sympathy with women would be necessary as it would help men or other women understand why it is up to the mother what she wishes to do with her body. Fostering sympathy by again, education, would be adding an understanding into the world.

By focusing more on the importance of this issue in treaties and in resolutions, the topic would be more talked about and thus more worked on. Currently, reproductive rights are a subtopic in gender equality goals but by making it a major concern, it would be more worked upon and the world would be able to see improvements quickly. The SDG goals on gender equality, although they do ensure universal access to reproductive rights, should have a whole section on it so more people are focusing more on tackling this issue, despite it falling under gender equality. Giving access to health care services to all women all around the world is another possible solution. Having access to health care, the women actually feel like they are not being forced into such situations but having a choice.

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