



The ECE is a large area rich in the diversity of cultures. But the state of sexual and reproductive health and rights varies too widely. In some communities and countries of the region, the reality is that access to sexual and reproductive health services and commodities is limited, unaffordable or of poor quality. This is also the case with comprehensive sexuality education. We need to guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights. This is a way to 1) lower the rate of teenage pregnancies, 2) lower the risks of sexually transmitted infections and HIV and 3) meet the need for contraceptives.

Let's notice that barriers can be in legislation – or just economical, social or cultural. Low-income women and adolescents, and especially marginalized groups, face greater barriers to accessing these services.

Especially adolescents face social, cultural and legal barriers to sexuality education, information and related health services. In at least 9 countries, there is a legal age restriction to accessing sexual and reproductive health services without parental consent.

And another example: Maternal mortality is the lowest in the world on average in the ECE countries, but a closer look at poor and marginalized communities within countries indicate much higher levels than national averages reveal.

Sexuality is a life-long story. The ECE has the fastest aging population in the world, with 22% aged 60 years and older today and expected to reach 35% by 2050. It is positive that people live longer than before. And the fact is that we are only just learning what aging means.

We know already that we have to guarantee decent and secure social protection and care needs, also sexual and reproductive health care, for the ageing populations.

Gender- and family-friendly work environments are important. And we need policies to enable more women to join the workforce. We need to encourage men to take more responsibility at home, too. This approach, alongside improved immigration policies, can help balance the situation and vitalize the workforce. At the same time, it ensures fuller social integration.

The High-Level Task Force for ICPD welcomes the steps that also some ECE countries have taken towards ensuring equality under the law, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. In 2010, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers made a commitment to undertake measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, acknowledging that many forms of intolerance and discrimination persist in the region—including criminalization, social exclusion and violence. This demonstrates our political will to put an end to the violations of human rights and discrimination that these communities suffer on a daily basis.

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The High-Level Task Force for ICPD urges decision-makers in the ECE region to prioritize the protection and fulfillment of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. In our Policy Recommendations paper for the ICPD Beyond 2014, we call for four key actions to address the ICPD 'unfinished agenda':

1. Respecting, protecting and fulfilling sexual and reproductive rights for all through public education campaigns and community mobilization on human rights, and enabling policy and legal reforms.

We need to foster understanding of human sexuality as a positive aspect of life. We must create cultures of tolerance, respect and non-discrimination. We must end harmful gender stereotypes and violence against women and girls. Our governments have primary duty but we must mobilize all sectors of society to create a supportive environment for the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights:

When I say everyone, I mean also:

- Men and boys
- Educators and health providers
- Policy-makers, parliamentarians and law enforcers
- Employers
- The private sector and
- Journalists.

Often people are denied their sexual and reproductive rights because of the fear of others. I suggest we all step up and decide to be brave.

As is the theme of this conference: I encourage you to work for laws and policies that enable choices and opportunities, health and well-being. Women and girls should not be blocked by attitudes and policies, which control their sexuality and childbearing decisions.

With proper legislation, education and information, we can decrease the need for abortion. Abortion is never an easy option. But for some, it is the only option. A minimum standard must be that women and adolescent girls have timely access to quality safe abortion services. Where women lack access to safe legal services, the poor ones risk their lives undergoing unsafe procedures. These are clearly matters of social justice and equity.

2. Our second key action area is accelerating universal access to quality, comprehensive and integrated sexual and reproductive health information, education and services.

Particular attention must be paid to reaching adolescents and the most impoverished sectors of society.

We can accomplish this

- By ensuring no group is left behind;
- By improving geographic distribution and availability, including in rural areas;
- By ensuring providers comply with human rights standards and that services are inclusive; and
- By making sexual and reproductive health a priority of the health sector, as well as a priority of our development cooperation policies.

3. Thirdly, we call for ensuring universal access to comprehensive sexuality education for all young people, in and out of school.

It is quite logical that the young ones have to be our priority. All young people must have comprehensive sexuality education. It is our obligation as concerned citizens, as parents and as policy-makers. It equips our young people with basic knowledge to make informed, responsible decisions about their sexuality and relationships. This way they can navigate into adulthood safely, and in good health. Sexuality education doesn't corrupt our young people; it protects them.

The Task Force encourages the international community to consider adopting an 'updated' definition and understanding of good practice on what comprehensive sexuality education entails. It should not only teach about biology, and how to prevent pregnancy and HIV, but also about human rights: gender equality, the elimination of violence against women and girls, and tolerance and respect for diversity. Such programmes should be linked to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and pharmacies that respect their rights to privacy and confidentiality.

4. Lastly, but certainly not least, our fourth call to action is eliminating violence against all people, especially women and girls.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All individuals subjected to violence, including sexual assault, must have access to critical emergency services for their safety and health. They also need access to justice.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence calls for the same. All countries should define at least a core package of services, including post-rape care. And this must include that in all cases of rape and incest, our policies, laws and services ensure access to quality, compassionate and timely safe abortion services.

Even in the wealthier countries of our region, studies show just how scarce and limited are the services available to people subjected to violence, especially by comparison to the magnitude of the problem. In times of financial crisis--when violence against women tends to spike-- we must preserve at least the limited services that are available. Otherwise the costs are huge. And this is a serious issue of human rights.

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The High-Level Task Force for ICPD urges countries to build and capitalize on what has already been accomplished through the ICPD Programme of Action. We remind you to bring those commitments to the fore in the new Post-2015 development agenda. Sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the empowerment of women and young people, lie at the heart of sustainable development – and they did especially when we all agreed to put people in focus last summer in Rio +20.

Prioritizing and acting upon these commitments is fundamental to achieving social, economics and environmental justice for the world we want for all.