



“My body, My rights”

PES Women Annual Conference 2010 on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Conclusions

Sexual and Reproductive Rights, still Taboo? ...what was this panel about?

Reproductive and sexual health means a state of physical and emotional wellbeing in which a responsible, safe and satisfying sex life is central. It implies the freedom to decide if, when and how often to reproduce and access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of birth control.

Sexual health specifically, is not just the absence of disease or dysfunction but a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

Yet this respect cannot be taken for granted. The focus in this context is often on *health* rather than on *rights*. The narrative is often one of biology rather than society, in which women's wellbeing is equated to their *physical* wellbeing, not so much their emotional wellbeing. The role men play in sexual and reproductive health is often left out of the picture altogether.

While in the European Union treaties and laws specifically protect women's rights, it would be a generalization to state that in all European societies, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), with an emphasis on *rights*, are discussed openly amongst women and men. Differing abortion laws in the EU are an illustration of this, with abortion still a taboo in certain EU countries.

Abortion is not the only taboo. Taboos in Europe include sexually transmittable diseases (STD's) and HIV/AIDS; teenagers and sexual relations; homosexuality; pornography and its effects; forced sterilization; gender mutilation; premarital sex; the influence and taboos of the Church, and migrants and sexual rights.



Comments from panelists and participants

Taboos: not always obvious

Many of our European societies are saturated with sexual images and have a relatively liberal attitude towards sexuality. Despite (and arguably sometimes due to) this 'openness', taboos related to sexual and reproductive rights still exist and impact on women's sexual wellbeing. These taboos include explicit ones such as for instance abortion, sexually transmittable diseases or gender mutilation but also *implicit* ones such as women's sexuality itself, which is often overshadowed by social expectations of women as mothers and caretakers. Women in certain European countries are still prevented from taking up the sexual freedom men enjoy, for instance by making access to contraception difficult and choices on abortion highly restricted.

A shift to the right

A recent political shift to the right in Europe has made the legislative context for equal sexual and reproductive rights for women more conservative and advocacy tougher. Attitudes have changed since the 60's and 70's: issues are being seized by the right more and more and growing fundamentalism is increasingly influencing policy. In the European Parliament, it is clear that political attitudes on sexuality clash: there is a strong confrontation with the right on issues such as contraception. The majority of the EP, currently dominated by the Christian Democrats, is against progressive policies on these. An illustration of this is the current movement against In Vitro Fertilization in Poland.

The role of Education and Prevention

...what was this panel about?

Sexual and Reproductive Rights cannot be respected, protected and fulfilled without adequate education and the prevention of STD's, unwanted pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and sexual violence or abuse. Sex education in school is obligatory in most EU member states. But the content of sex education courses throughout Europe differs, as does the age from which it is provided to pupils.

Furthermore, the different member states have different priorities, taboos, cultural and religious backgrounds. For instance, the taboos identified in our first panel trickle through to the way sex education is presented in schools, with many schools in Europe presenting a biological rather than a sociological narrative in which topics of balancing career and family; sexual pleasure; STD's; homosexuality and contraception are left out. Other problems include the discomfort with which many parents with religious backgrounds view sex education in school.

Outside of schools, education entails awareness-raising about STD's, HIV/AIDS and sexual violence as well as the provision of general information on people's emotional and mental wellbeing in sexual relations. Again, the attitudes of European societies to information provided by the government or presented in the media, differ.



The aim of this panel was to find specific policy proposals and practical suggestions on how to improve education in order to increase women's sexual and reproductive rights and maximize their choice based on sound professional information.

Comments from panelists and participants

Sex Education

In a time where information on sexuality is everywhere and our own sexual personality is influenced by it, it is important that comprehensive sex education is provided in all schools. Such education must be gender-sensitive and open. It must include discussing rights and responsibilities, emotional wellbeing, sexual violence, homosexuality, sexual diversity and provide students with the tools to distinguish between information on sexuality that is valuable and that which is not. Education does not stop in school: youth to youth projects can be extremely effective, for instance in raising awareness on sexual responsibility and STD's. Very important is that religion does not monopolize or control sex education.

Providing sex education in conservative or religiously dominated countries such as Poland remains difficult because the discourse on sexuality becomes predominantly negative when sex educators are expected to warn and threaten. If sex education teachers cannot tell an open, comprehensive story, young people will get their information from other, less reliable sources instead, while lacking the tools to interpret or assess the messages that are conveyed. In a context of new 'fundamentalism', consequences can be that young people do not feel comfortable or free to make their own choices regarding their sexuality. Sex education, free from religious influence, therefore remains key.

The role of the Church

The role of the church and the history of ideas influence our attitudes on SRHR. The social construction of women's role and place in society is entrenched in history, making it unsurprising the Church still sees a role for itself in fighting free choice on abortion and influencing ideas on how women should practice their sexuality. Myths about virginity and religious traditions explain today's taboos to an extent.

How do we deal with the contradictions the Church preaches? If the Church is against contraception, logically it should be supporting far-going sex education to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Paradoxically the Church is not in favour of open sex education.

Challenges of legislation and implementation

Sexual and reproductive rights, in practice, are part of the private sphere. This means *informal* attitudes are important to ensure women and men are aware of sexual rights- wellbeing and – responsibility. As sexual health also consists of emotional wellbeing, school and the family play an important role in shaping attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behaviour. This does not mean legislation is not an effective tool: the more space we leave for certain facets of religious or historical tradition (for instance through failing to legislate effectively on genital mutilation, abortion, gender-based discrimination or homophobia) the more space there is for peer pressure and exploitation. Thus rather than leaving SRHR in the private sphere, we need very open legislation to make women free in their choices.

This presents us with a challenge: in practice, it will often be men who are deciding about our rights; they are often the judges, policemen and legislators whose attitudes matter. (Host)



Countries in the EU must thus take up an active, human-rights based approach by voicing clearly what is acceptable in their societies.

Formal and informal attitudes towards SRHR are thus intertwined and part of the same coin: progress in achieving equal sexual and reproductive rights for women in Europe will depend on both.

The power of Civil Societies and Feminist Movements ...what was this panel about?

We live in a tri-polar world of large businesses, powerful governments, and global civil society. Civil society is composed of the totality of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society, as distinct from the formal structures of a state and commercial institutions of the market. Civil society refers to the arena of collective action around shared interests, purposes and values and is often populated by organizations such as charities, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, professional and business associations and so forth. The organized feminist movement is part of civil society.

Over the years, civil society and more particularly feminist movements have proven to be a strong force in giving women access to rights; be it in the private or public sphere. Yet on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, a lot of work remains to be done.

In this panel, we looked at the *power* of civil society, that is said to be ‘cultural’ as opposed to economic- (such as for businesses) or political (such as for governments). This cultural power implies that civil societies and feminist movements play an important role in shaping political views; in the development of full human capacities; in generating knowledge as well as in defining ideas on identity and ethics.

Comments from panelists and participants

Civil Society

There is a clear role for lobbyists and women’s rights movements in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, underlined for instance by what these did for the recently adopted maternity leave directive. In SRHR specifically, it is the role of civil society to draw red lines around the policies of European governments that fail to make women’s sexual and reproductive rights part of the political agenda, as well as ensure debate on the issue is not forgotten or pushed aside. International commitments don’t mean they are implemented at national level and the new Commission Strategy on Gender Equality contains no binding measures. It is the role of civil societies to expose this and confront policy makers.

Secondly, civil societies and women’s movements can document trends or issues and provide statistics and facts that are fundamental to framing SRHR problems and their solutions. Their expertise is invaluable in countries with few resources or hostile governments.

Apart from creating awareness and documentation, civil societies tend to put women’s rights in a human rights context which helps to shape public and policy-makers’ opinion. Civil societies and feminist movements have become a vital part of changing legislation as well maintaining and not backtracking on what has been achieved.



To do the above, they need the support of their counterparts and make alliances. But reaching out to others in SRHR can be difficult. For instance, while the Catholic Church is still strongly opposed to the use of contraception it is also one of the main bodies that provide help for AIDS/HIV infected people. It is easy to cooperate with those who think alike, harder to reach out to organisations that work on the same topic but do not share our views, and to *men* as well as women.

Conclusions

The fight for women's equal sexual and reproductive rights is currently suffering from a conservative backlash throughout Europe that manifests itself in the lack of implementation of international treaties on women's rights and silence on SRHR at the European as well as the national level. We need to put up a strong, human-rights based counter movement both to expose this and not to lose ground on what has already been achieved.

Civil societies and feminist movements play an important role in this. They create awareness, provide documentation and shape policy on SRHR. Yet 'preaching to the converted' is easy, reaching out to those who hold different views on sexuality, harder. Political parties such as the PES must build alliances with NGO's and civil societies and all must try to connect with others in the same field, even when difficult. The role of men in this must not be forgotten: changing perceptions on women's sexual and reproductive rights and achieving equal rights for all women cannot be done without starting a dialogue and forming alliances with progressive men too.

While legislation is the framework we need to work in, perceptions on SRHR don't disappear with implementation or new legislation. Attitudes as well as taboos are often implicit rather than explicit and therefore difficult to tackle. To counter this, sex education in schools must be gender-sensitive, comprehensive and open and those providing it, supported. A positive attitude is needed that embraces the enjoyment of sexual life without disregarding responsibility. We need to highlight the contradictions some of the religious institutions teach and support sister parties and NGO's in countries where the religious institutions are still dominant in limiting women's sexual choice and wellbeing.

Despite sex education being provided in most European schools, the importance of parenting cannot be emphasized enough: we must start breaking taboos at home by speaking about sexuality. The family is the most important place of education, where attitudes, perceptions and mentalities on sexuality are shaped.

