



EMPOWER YOUTH

Amplifying Voices in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights



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Acknowledgments

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About the Population Institute

The Population Institute is a nonprofit research and advocacy organization. Our mission is to improve the health and well-being of people and the planet by supporting policies and programs that promote sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). We educate policymakers, the media, and the general public about the essential importance of achieving gender equality and promoting SRHR; the personal, social, and economic benefits that arise from expanding access to family planning services and information; and the impacts of population dynamics on the environment, natural resources, biodiversity, hunger, and poverty.

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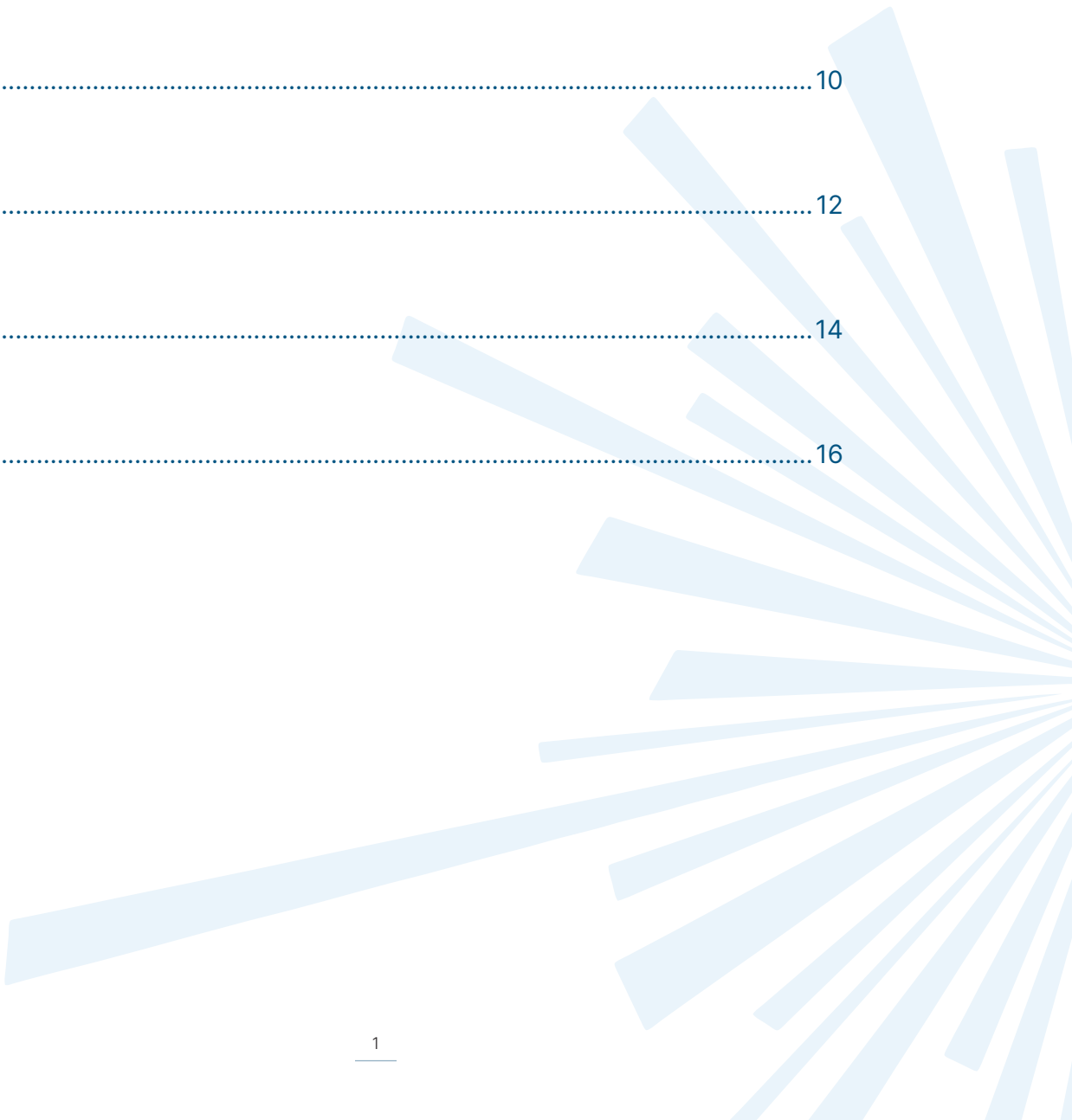
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Introduction

Empower Youth: Amplifying Voices in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) is meant to capture and communicate the voices of young people from around the world who are engaged in advancing SRHR. SRHR encompasses a vast range of interconnected topics, including family planning, maternal health, infertility care, safe abortion and post-abortion care, sexually transmitted infections treatment including HIV and AIDS, the prevention and treatment of gender-based violence including the elimination of harmful traditional practices such as female genital cutting/mutilation and child marriage.

This field encompasses the physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being of individuals in addition to availability and accessibility to services that promote sexual and reproductive health. Amplifying youth voices is necessary to demonstrate the ongoing demand for SRHR, as well as the cruciality of SRHR in pursuit of a brighter future for young people.

A world map with a dark blue background and light blue landmasses. Three white circles with black dots inside are placed on the map to indicate specific locations: one in Ontario, Canada; one in Ohio, United States; and one in Ghent, Belgium.

Anonymous 2
Ontario, Canada

Ashka Shah
Ohio, United States

Anonymous 1
Ghent, Belgium

Youth voices should be at the forefront of advocacy for SRHR and in uncovering the obstacles faced across the world. Through these stories, we aim to convey the universal relevance of SRHR, and spark hope in the ongoing fight for SRHR through the leadership potential in young people.

As fellow young advocates ourselves, we recognize the significance of providing a platform for the endeavors, struggles, and desires of other young people advocating for SRHR. This project uncovers the voices of six young people around the world – including what they do, why they do it, and how they envision a path to a more just and sustainable future. Their dedication serves as a testament to the transformative impact young people can inspire globally and proves to stakeholders the importance of youth voices for the future.

We interviewed six unique young people from around the world, and in this report, we have highlighted their compelling narratives and invaluable perspectives.




Taira Bhargava
New Delhi, India

Pia Catillo
Quezon, Philippines

Irene Natukunda
Kampala, Uganda

Irene Natukunda

Irene Natukunda is a dedicated individual from a close-knit family of six, residing in the western part of Uganda. Her family thrives through cattle rearing and small holder farming, embracing the timeless values and lifestyle of family farmers. Growing up in a community with diverse opportunities and challenges, Irene has witnessed the resilience of women and youth. With a desire to make a difference, Irene pursued a bachelor's degree in environmental science and management. She is an advocate for sustainable preservation of the natural environment by blending her academic pursuits and her strong connection to the agricultural community. Irene's vision for SRHR emerges as a force for positive change, poised to create lasting impact for the wellbeing of her people and nature.

A portrait of Irene Natukunda, a young Black woman with her hair styled in braids, wearing a dark blazer. The background features a stylized sunburst graphic in shades of red and white, and the word 'GENDER' is faintly visible in the background.

*"I hope for when SRHR becomes a two-way thing and we **educate boys** because when we don't educate boys... they will never understand the value of what a woman is going through."*

Irene Natukunda, 25 years old,
from Kampala, Uganda

What does sexual and reproductive health and rights mean to you? How have you seen it in your own life?

“Sexual and reproductive health is of great importance to me because throughout my childhood I have experienced some moments that were uncomfortable regarding the lack of support in terms of sexual and reproductive health, especially in the schools we studied at. For instance, in the villages, I witnessed children from local schools dropping out due to the absence of essential resources connected to sexual and reproductive health such as sanitary pads. Meanwhile, I was fortunate to come from a middle-class family and attend a private school. Nonetheless, these disparities in access to sexual and reproductive health necessities deeply affected me. I witnessed some experiences of women being regarded as a weak and inferior sex. A lot of abuse is happening to these women and young girls, but they literally don't have a voice, they don't have people to go to, to report to or to seek help from, which is a very big problem. Therefore, empowering them to at least know what they can do is a big part of SRHR.”

In your opinion, how is SRHR significant for individuals and communities in the context of their cultural background?

“In my culture, there has been noticeable change, as the world evolves. However, in the past, women were considered weak and voiceless, facing various hardships without support. For instance, girls missing school due to lack of access to menstrual products leads to embarrassment and dropout rates, but this is getting better with time. Boys, also, should take the initiative to understand and support girls, but instead, they shame them. This discomfort leads girls to miss school and affects their education. Additionally, people in workplaces and institutions often assume everyone can afford pads and other essentials, disregarding the challenges faced by young girls, for example recent graduates without income seeking opportunities usually resort to uncompensated internships to make ends meet and they sometimes get sexually harassed in pursuit to sustain their livelihoods, this issue needs to be navigated and urgently addressed to protect their rights. Teachers and school heads should also be trained and capacitated to better understand how to cater for the needs of young girls in schools. Integrating a comprehensive SRHR program into the curriculum would provide deeper understanding and support for all individuals.”

What do you think are effective ways to raise awareness and engage communities in discussions about SRHR?

“Policymakers, especially governments should play a pivotal role in promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights by first enhancing awareness and understanding of SRHR among the public. Capacity building programs can help bridge the knowledge gap. Additionally, there is a need to develop comprehensive policies that address SRHR, as the existing ones are limited and poorly accessible. Moreover, policymakers should actively involve the community, including parents, teachers, and young people, in the policymaking process. Inclusive participation and understanding local challenges through pilot studies would ensure effective implementation of SRHR policies that truly address the needs of the community. Young people are coming out to bring voices, innovations, and solutions but there is a great need for businesses and all stakeholders mobilize financial resources to implement possible solutions to make a change towards addressing SRHR. And with the government having the power to initiate policies, the private sector including businesses and all stakeholders must play their part. Everyone has a role to play.”

Taira Bhargava

Taira grew up in a family of four in the vibrant city of New Delhi. She is a rising junior at Duke University, pursuing a degree in Evolutionary Anthropology with a concentration in Human Biology. Her passion for population health and rights brought her to Population Institute, where she served as an intern and conducted research on the intersection of SRHR and climate issues. Beyond her academic pursuits, she demonstrates a strong passion for giving back to society through her volunteer work such as founding the DoubleRoti Foundation, a resolute endeavor dedicated to combating malnutrition in India. She also spearheaded Project Dhara, an ambitious initiative to address the pressing water crisis in India through recharging groundwater resources. Her exceptional dedication to making a positive impact on critical societal issues shows her dedication to social and humanitarian causes. Taira exemplifies the profound transformation that can be achieved when passion and purpose converge.

*"I hope for a future in India where SRHR is more universally recognized and respected, and I hope to see **increased awareness and a more educated population** who can thrive and voice their opinions when they need to exercise their rights."*

Taira Bhargava, 20 years old,
from New Delhi, India

What does sexual and reproductive health and rights mean to you? How have you seen it in your own life?

“In my opinion, SRHR means access to comprehensive healthcare services, information, and education related to sexual and reproductive well-being. It includes the ability to make informed decisions about one’s own sexual and reproductive choices. In my own life, SRHR is crucial for ensuring personal autonomy considering the diverse cultural and social context of India.”

In your opinion, how is SRHR significant for individuals and communities in the context of their cultural background?

“Yes, SRHR is significant for individuals and communities in India, irrespective of their cultural background. It is a universal human right that should be upheld for everyone regardless of race, class, creed, gender. In India, diverse cultural backgrounds and practices coexist, making it essential to respect and protect SRHR while considering the cultural nuances and sensitivities of different communities. There are instances where certain cultural practices may prevent menstruating women from entering temples or consuming specific foods. Such regressive notions need to be addressed, and efforts should be made to promote inclusivity and respect for individual rights. Despite cultural differences, the significance of SRHR remains undeniable.

By advocating for and implementing SRHR programs, we can create a more equitable society that empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, leading to healthier and more prosperous communities.”

What do you think are effective ways to raise awareness and engage communities in discussions about SRHR?

“I think an overarching strategy to address sexual and reproductive health and rights in India could involve collaborating with community leaders, religious institutions, and local organizations to tackle cultural sensitivities and promote open dialogue. Comprehensive sexuality education, tailored to respect cultural diversity, should be implemented in schools and community settings to dispel myths, provide accurate information, and encourage healthy attitudes and behaviors. Utilizing media platforms, including social media, to share informative content, stories, and experiences that normalize discussions around SRHR while respecting cultural sensitivities would enhance community engagement. Additionally, involving local healthcare providers, counselors, and educators in providing confidential and non-judgmental services and support, while considering the specific cultural context of different communities, would further strengthen SRHR efforts in India.

I also feel policymakers and the Indian government have a crucial role in promoting and protecting SRHR services and rights. Governments have committed to investment in SRHR through international accords. However, progress has been impeded by a lack of political will, insufficient resources, continued discrimination against women and girls, and a refusal to address sexuality issues openly and thoroughly. Governments should develop and implement inclusive policies that ensure universal access to quality sexual and reproductive healthcare services, comprehensive sexuality education, and promote gender equality in India. They should also work towards eliminating discriminatory practices by focusing on allocating adequate resources to support these initiatives, with particular focus on the specific needs and challenges of the Indian population.”

Ashka Shah

Ashka grew up in a quiet suburban town in a tight-knit family of four. As she approaches her fourth year at Duke University, Ashka's journey has been shaped by a commitment to exploring her passions in reproductive justice and community engagement through leading a SRHR magazine in an effort to normalize sexual health. Currently, she works at the Population Institute, where she advocates for the expansion of SRHR in the US and beyond. Her personal background, growing up in a more conservative town, fostered an environment where conversations about sexual health were seldom discussed. Her transition to a more progressive area for college offers her a unique perspective on how the diversity of the US influences the SRHR landscape across the nation. Ashka's perspective demonstrates the power of personal growth in nurturing an understanding of critical SRHR issues.



*"I hope that in the future, **SRHR** is a more normalized topic to talk about and the first time a child hears about reproductive rights in the US is as a part of healthcare, and not as a heated political debate."*

Ashka Shah, 20 years old,
from Ohio, USA

What does sexual and reproductive health and rights mean to you? How have you seen it in your own life?

"I think that sexual and reproductive health and rights means that every person should be able to make informed decisions about their own health and have adequate access to healthcare that they want or need based on those decisions. And this includes the power to get an education and have access to that in schools and make decisions without pressure from cultures or communities around you."

What are some barriers to care that you have observed in your community?

"Culture currently plays a really big part in sexual rights because it is such a political issue here in the US. The US is so diverse, and there's so many different communities... and so there's so many different opinions on how conversations about sexual health should be treated. In my town it was a not really talked about subject and in our school in the state of Ohio, sex education is not required. And so, I never learned about it in school and growing up my friends and I didn't really talk about anything like that. But after coming to Duke, I realized that some of my friends grew up in more liberal states with more of a focus on sex education in schools and had more knowledge and just seemed more comfortable talking about their sexuality and reproductive health. The first time I had ever heard of reproductive rights was not as like a health issue, but more of a political debate because a lot of politicians will run on reproductive health issues because it's such a dividing topic. So, in my head, reproductive justice started as a heated political debate over sex education in schools. That was the first time I'd heard of it. And I think that the issue just kept getting more and more political with the fight over access to contraception and abortion, which has recently become a really big issue in the US. I think the fact that it's such a political issue can be a big barrier to care in the US because instead of people thinking about it in terms of health care, they think about it in terms of Republican vs. Democrat."


It's hard because the US's stance on health education changes depending on who's in power. And so, every four years there can be a new set of laws... and there could be a huge difference from one state to another. And so, making sure that care is more normalized and talked about is important in making sure that it's standardized across the country."

What do you think are effective ways to raise awareness and engage communities in discussions about SRHR?

"I think that education can lead to women's empowerment because the lack of education in schools can lead to stigmatization and frequent embarrassment of girls. I also think normalizing it would make it a much less polarizing issue, meaning that people would see how this issue affects so many parts of everyday life. I also think that if women have more knowledge about contraception, they can help to delay pregnancy, which is important to get females into the workplace and making them more financially independent and empowered vs. being more dependent on someone else to support them and their families. I think young people are bringing awareness especially well because in the US there have been recently so many different rallies or calls to action to get people to vote or to call their congressmen/congresswoman about different policies that are being implemented."

Pia Castillo

Pia grew up in the rural province of Isabela, in the Philippines. Her family is very close and intimate, but conversations on sexual and reproductive health issues or concerns are still taboo. Currently, she works with the Family Planning Organization of the Philippines (FPOP) as a Youth Program Coordinator. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in Family Life and Child Development at the University of the Philippines Diliman. Since entering college, she has moved to Quezon City, an urban community. Despite residing in the city, her passion for ensuring SRHR for all through community-based approaches takes her primarily to rural areas, forming her unique perspective on SRHR throughout the Philippines.

A portrait of Pia Castillo, a young woman with dark hair and glasses, smiling. She is wearing a blue polo shirt with a logo and a light-colored jacket. The background features a stylized sunburst graphic in shades of purple and white.

*“I hope for a world where everyone can **freely decide on their bodies and on their sexualities**; having control without any discrimination. I am also hoping for people to evaluate and challenge traditions. Just because we are used to this, does not mean we have to stick to it - especially if these traditions harm and restrict our human rights and contribute to poor decision making of young people.”*

Pia Castillo, 23 years old,
from Quezon City, Philippines

What does sexual and reproductive health and rights mean to you? How have you seen it in your own life?

“SRHR for me is about owning one’s body and having autonomy and control over it without discrimination or other people’s judgment. It also means that you are equipped with knowledge and information about your sexual and reproductive rights and all the other interconnected and related rights. It’s also deciding who you are as a person, your sexuality, gender identity, and how you present yourself. So, SRHR for me is having to be yourself in a world without judgment and having the capacity to make smart decisions, choose your partner, your sexual partners, and engage in sexual activities in a way that’s safe for you and your partner.

In terms of SRHR in my community, traditionally it’s something that we really don’t talk a lot about. It’s a pretty taboo topic in the Philippines, especially in rural areas. One factor is that we are predominantly Catholic. As much as I don’t want to generalize the church, it is one of the institutions that promote outdated ideologies on one’s body affecting the policies and programs created and passed in our country. However, the situation has been evolving one day at a time with the help of SRHR advocates and activists in the Philippines.”

Have you seen SRHR connect to other issues like climate issues or women’s empowerment in your life? In which ways?

“In the Philippines, we are visited by countless typhoons in a year... I see it connected to SRHR during disaster and post-disaster. People in the communities, especially women and young people, do not have access to sexual and reproductive health services. In normal times, it is already difficult to access these services, especially for young people as adolescent-friendly health facilities are not easily accessible. At shelters or evacuation centers, there’s another issue – maybe because of the lack of private spaces – we see that there is an increase in gender-based violence and sexual harassment. During disaster response, local governments forego menstrual hygiene and other related needs during their planning or disaster response affecting the health of women and young girls in the communities who have no access to water in evacuation centers.

Another example could be seen when women are expected to perform multiple tasks that could fit into their day. They have to take care of their children and families, find means to make ends meet, and in times of drought, they also have to fetch water for their family because they are socialized to perform those roles, leaving them limited time for sexual activity, pleasure, or even just having their sexual or reproductive health needs checked up.”


What do you think are effective ways to raise awareness and engage communities in discussions about SRHR?

“Mobilizing young people is powerful in raising awareness amongst their communities. In our chapters, we have youth core groups that facilitate peer education among young people in their barangays; they also go to geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas to reach adolescents and young people who have little to no access in terms of CSE. Our youth core groups undergo capacity-building and strengthening sessions with our organization, and they become youth leaders in their communities in terms of CSE and SRHR. To raise awareness, we strongly believe in the power to mobilize young people, especially because young people are receptive and very open in terms of this topic. Moreover, we value peer education because young people are more receptive when they see themselves in the person who shares information (their peer) unlike if it’s an older person giving them a CSE lecture.

Social media is also a tool for awareness-raising. Young people come to our Facebook pages, and they send in questions ranging from menstrual hygiene, family planning methods, and how to access services. But then it’s also a double-edged sword because, as we know, it is a free, unregulated source of information, and there may be cases when the information isn’t filtered. So, it’s really important to also teach young people how to be smart about the content they see online especially now with alarming cases of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children in the Philippines.”

Anonymous 1

Anonymous 1 comes from a high-income country and grew up in a privileged setting as part of the upper middle class. Because of this, she recognizes the advantage of having open-minded friends and appreciates how she can have open communication about SRHR in her community and family, even with generational differences. She earned a medical degree and is now completing residency in obstetrics and gynecology. With a background in global health and climate vulnerability, she brings a unique perspective on how normalizing SRHR can contribute to the wellbeing of a community and the climate.



"I hope for more awareness about the importance of SRHR... I would also really love to see that the topic is not like framed in a political spectrum... It's not right wing or left wing, but it's something that every party finds important."

Anonymous 1, 25 years old,
from Ghent, Belgium

What does sexual and reproductive health and rights mean to you? How have you seen it in your own life?

“To me, sexual and reproductive health and rights encompass a broad concept related to basic human rights. It extends from individual to larger contexts, and even on a global scale. And then in my own life, yeah, I’ve seen it in a lot of global health topics. Often in global health, you also talk about sexual and reproductive health and rights. Mostly, we talk about reproductive health or maternal health, etc. But SRHR has a broader spectrum, and this aspect also comes back a lot. And then I’ve seen it in the clinic, I’ve seen it in my personal life. I think you can really apply it on many different levels.”

Have you seen SRHR connect to other issues like climate issues or women’s empowerment in your life? In which ways?

“My thesis focused on the impact of climate change on fertility preferences and how it affects people’s desire to have children in the context of climate change. It’s concerning to see the messages circulating in sources like social media and news, which add to the complexity of the issue. Currently, I’m actively involved in a working group that addresses both climate change and SRHR. Within this group, we undertake various projects with different scopes. One example is studying the impacts of heat on maternal health, which ties into both SRHR and climate change and influences fertility preferences. This connection between climate change and fertility preferences isn’t limited to specific areas; it extends to fertility in general.”

What role do you think policymakers and governments should play in SRHR services and rights?

“I think as a first step, it’s important for them to listen to people who have expertise about this, like institutions, research organizations, or NGOs working on SRHR. Governments should be open to considering and utilizing their research findings. It’s also important to listen to the people on the streets, the citizens, and their perspectives. Additionally, I believe it’s crucial for policymakers to disseminate information to the people, explaining why SRHR is important and addressing specific problems faced by different communities. Taking action is vital too. Funding for SRHR policies is crucial. As for raising awareness about SRHR, especially in sensitive areas, I think spreading information in small bits can be effective. Sponsored posts on social media, posters in public places like the cervical cancer screening posters we had in Belgium, and radio and television broadcasts can help reach people, even hard-to-reach groups. As for the future, I hope for more awareness about the importance of SRHR. It would be great if many people were aware and find it important. More equity and funding for all aspects of SRHR, including sexual health and rights, is essential. These topics should not be sensitive or controversial; they should be seen as normal aspects of healthcare and human rights.”

Anonymous 2

Anonymous 2 is entering her fourth year of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa and has demonstrated a unique commitment to her community through planning events for the Afghan Student Association. She has lived in Ottawa, Canada her entire life and describes her community as clean, safe, and friendly in regard to SRHR. Her parents grew up in Afghanistan, and the clashing experiences with SRHR between her and her parents are evident in her household. She brings a unique perspective of a second-generation immigrant in advocating for SRHR in her community and her ancestral community.

*"I hope for a world in which... people are given access to family planning so people can **make their own informed choices** of family size and the needs of females are addressed.*

Because they're a vulnerable community, we should not limit SRHR services, because that will then contribute to gender inequality."

Anonymous 2, 21 years old,
from Ottawa, Canada

What does sexual and reproductive health and rights mean to you? How have you seen it in your own life?

“It is maintaining and promoting healthy sexual relationships. So that means giving everyone access to the services and the information they need to have healthy relationships, which includes contraceptives and preventing or treating UTIs (urinary tract infection) or STIs (sexually transmitted infection). In terms of sexual and reproductive rights, it's informed consent. The individual should have the ability to make their own decisions on how many kids they want, and when they want kids.”

In your opinion, how is SRHR significant for individuals and communities in the context of their cultural background?

“I strongly believe that it is, because different cultures have their own different diverse perspectives. Those must not be ignored. Even if you cannot relate to them, you should still try to understand them and acknowledge it. But as a Muslim, you are told to not worry about sexual matters as you are supposed to refrain from any and all sexual activities until after marriage. So, if someone needed birth control, or an abortion, since it is frowned upon in the religion/community, they would have to refrain from it, or they wouldn't feel confident talking about it or expressing themselves. So that's where stigma comes in: stigmatizing sexual behaviors. And then that could lead to discrimination, and just overall affecting your access to healthcare services.”

What do you think are effective ways to raise awareness and engage communities in discussions about SRHR?

“To raise awareness, you need to make the approach culturally sensitive. Family and culture have a big influence so it's important to understand it and respect it even if you disagree with somebody, even something as simple as acknowledging it might be all that's needed to convince someone. Not to be so hard on someone else for accessing SRHR services. Another way, in terms of culture, is to involve members of the community. Maybe even involving religious figures, someone from the mosque or a priest or, since a lot of people are using social media, involving influencers can legitimize the conversations or encourage and convince a community to participate. If there's someone they rely on and trust, then they follow you. And maybe it's all they need to be convinced.”

Conclusion

A few shared themes have emerged through these diverse perspectives:

- 1.** Improving education and normalizing SRHR empowers all individuals to advocate for their health. Comprehensive sexuality education in schools and community settings was highlighted as an effective strategy to dispel myths, provide accurate information, and encourage healthy attitudes and behaviors.
- 2.** Allocating funds for SRHR and centering these issues is crucial to creating effective policies. Interviewees emphasized the need for inclusive policies, adequate funding, and awareness campaigns to ensure universal access to quality sexual and reproductive healthcare services.
- 3.** Cultural norms surrounding SRHR can impede the conversations around SRHR, so understanding and respecting diverse cultural backgrounds is crucial for addressing SRHR issues in communities. Interviewees stressed the importance of involving community leaders, religious figures, and local organizations to engage in open dialogues and tackle cultural sensitivities.
- 4.** Mobilizing young people and involving them in peer education initiatives are effective ways to raise awareness and engage communities in discussions about SRHR. Social media can be a powerful tool to disseminate information and encourage open conversations.
- 5.** Climate issues can be both a cause and an effect of unhealthy SRHR practices. Participants discussed how SRHR intersects with various global issues, such as increasing natural disasters, climate change, women's empowerment, and gender equality. The impact of climate change on maternal health and fertility preferences, as well as the role of SRHR in empowering women and vulnerable communities, are significant areas of interest.

Overall, the perspectives these young people shared have highlighted that SRHR issues are important across the world, no matter which community a person lives in. Young people demonstrate incredible hope and resilience for a better future for their communities. Centering youth voices is crucial to the movement as they continue to advocate for comprehensive access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.



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