



Wilton Park



Image:

## Report

# **Working together to promote comprehensive, universal sexual and reproductive health and rights**

Monday 24 – Wednesday 26 April 2023 | WP3163

*Given the sensitive nature of the discussions, this report does not attempt to capture detailed next steps. We are pleased to hear from many participants that the event has galvanised a lot of follow up action, new and innovative ideas for how we approach rollback, and new networks of partners to collaborate with as we advance this agenda.*

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In association with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office



## Report

# Working together to promote comprehensive, universal sexual and reproductive health and rights

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### Introduction

In the context of concerted efforts to roll back on women's and girls' rights and the disproportionate impact of COVID, conflict and the climate crisis, there is a need for a concerted, collective effort on, for and with women and girls. The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) will use the full range of levers at its disposal to unite partners in standing up to those who want to hold back women and girls, and champion women and girls as agents for change through local leadership, including grassroots women's rights organisations. The new FCDO 'International Women and Girls Strategy 2023–2030' was launched in March 2023, setting out campaign principles and goals. The Strategy is framed around the 3 Es of Educating girls, Empowering women and girls, and championing their health and rights, and Ending violence against women and girls.

The Wilton Park series forms an important part of this commitment to partnership-building, to pushing back on the rollback, and to supporting women's rights organisations while delivering progress on the empowerment and rights of women and girls around the world in the context of growing global threats and shocks.

This conference, the second in the series, addressed **sexual and reproductive health and rights**:

[New UN analysis](#) has revealed a staggering backsliding amongst women's, children's and adolescents' health, as a result of Covid-19 and conflicts around the world. Today, a woman in sub-Saharan Africa has around a **130** times higher risk of dying from causes relating to pregnancy or childbirth than a woman in Europe or North America. Each year there are 35 million unsafe abortions, resulting in life-changing injuries for millions and the death of at least 23,000 women each year.

At the multilateral level, SRHR has become a political lightning rod. Opposition to SRHR is well organised and well-funded, and the polarisation of debate around SRHR risks undermining and weakening multilateralism, which could have damaging effects on international human rights more generally.

Despite the tensions, it's notable that at the local and national level, communities, medical providers, legislators and national governments are working to increase access to SRHR in many places across the globe. There have been huge strides in access to family planning and reproductive health services. Since 1994, only 4 countries have taken steps to reduce the legal grounds for safe abortion. In contrast over 60 countries have taken some steps to expand the grounds for legal abortion over the same period. At country level, the general direction of travel, is still one of strengthening women's rights and increasing access to SRHR.

In October 2022, the UK, US, Mexico, Liberia, Albania and Nepal co-led a landmark statement on SRHR at UN Third Committee on Human Rights which was signed by 71 countries. It re-stated our intention to join together and to reaffirm that all women and girls

have the right to bodily autonomy, including the right to make their own informed decisions about sex and childbearing; to avoid unwanted sexual contact; decide if, and when, to have children; and to face fewer risks during pregnancy and childbirth.

### **Aims of the conference**

The conference aims were to broaden and deepen alliances with key actors, exploring the challenges to - and opportunities for - championing SRHR at the UN during negotiations. The meeting considered how to work together to widen the number and geographical spread of countries that speak out in favour of SRHR, in multilateral fora.

The conference also provided an open space in which to discuss and demystify certain contested issues and terms. Participants engaged in a deep dive on comprehensive sexuality education (“CSE”) and how pushback on pre-agreed language on CSE played out in multilateral fora this year. Building on commonalities to unite partners, the conference explored innovative strategies to overcome challenges and risks, predominantly at the multilateral levels.

### **Summary**

1. On 24-26 April 2023, the UK’s Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) convened key partners from states, civil society, UN agencies, foundations and academia at Wilton Park. The Conference was an opportunity to better understand and respond to attempts to rollback progress on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The key outcomes were a stronger shared understanding of rollback on SRHR; new and stronger alliances; and commitments to action framed around four broad themes: building the movement; narratives; multilateral spaces; and funding.

### **What is the attempted ‘rollback’ on SRHR?**

2. Opposition to SRHR is not new, but in recent years we have seen increased attempts to reverse progress on women’s and girl’s rights and gender equality. This broad movement is spearheaded by a coalition of state and non-state actors known as the ‘anti-rights’ or ‘anti-gender’ movement, reflecting the fact that it is transnational, well-financed and increasingly coordinated. Safe abortion, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and adolescent SRHR are often touchpoints used by the anti-rights movement to galvanise support. Faith actors continue to play an important role mobilising opposition to SRHR at national level as well as during negotiations.
3. Rollback is characterised by division, disinformation and disruption: While many of the tactics of the anti-gender movement are familiar and borrow from the success of feminist movements over the years, other tactics are new and include the use of fake news, disinformation and sowing and exploiting division. Opposition to SRHR is connected to wider geopolitics, and can be used as a distraction technique by actors to mobilise their base and undermine civic space, and the multilateral system.
4. The impact of rollback has far reaching consequences: at the centre of this are the health and lives of women and girls and other marginalised groups. New data from the World Health Organisation shows how the reduction in maternal mortality rates has stagnated in nearly every region in the world, highlighting the need for accelerated action to progress and protect comprehensive, universal sexual and reproductive health and rights. The impact of restricting access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is often greatest on those with intersecting and marginalised identities including sexual orientation, race, disability and age.

*“Taking a bird’s eye view, the pushback is really centred on weakening governance, democracy, individual rights and equality”*

*“As the pushback plays out, we’re experiencing the undoing of much of the last century’s progressive human rights gains.”*

## SRHR rollback at multilateral level

5. At the multilateral level, we are witnessing increasing division, pushback on agreed language (especially on abortion and CSE) and failure to engage in meaningful dialogue which undermines consensus. This matters, because multilateral spaces such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Commission on Population and Development (CPD) play an important role in determining the mission of UN agencies, driving national level change and providing a framework against which civil society can hold governments to account.
6. This year's CPD failed to reach consensus and ended with no outcome document. There was significant disruption by a number of member states during negotiations. Disinformation was a key tactic used particularly on CSE, but there was wider pushback on women's and girl's rights, for example, whether girls face more barriers to education than boys was also disputed. Several wider geopolitical tensions also had an influence over the process. Previously agreed language presented as a Chairs text was not accepted in the final stages of negotiation.
7. Participation was not optimal: Positions of some member states revealed disconnect between the Mission in New York, and domestic position at capital. It was also striking that despite the thematic focus on education, there was no attendance from Ministers of Education who may have been able to bring greater insights from national level implementation to the discussion. Diverse civil society and young people also struggled to participate meaningfully in the space.
8. Like-minded governments were well-coordinated and supported by civil society. As a result, we agreed that no outcome document was better than one which rowed back on global consensus language. Coordination had a positive impact and provides a platform to build on in the future.
9. It is important to note and reflect on the progress that has been made globally, nationally and locally on CSE. 85% of countries have policies and laws in place which support CSE and 4 in 5 countries have sexuality education within their curriculum.

*“At the heart of pushback on SRHR is the control over women's bodies and their autonomy”*

## Building alliances and resources: priorities for future work

### ***Narratives***

10. While a strong evidence base has been developed, we need to build bolder, more positive narratives to advocate for SRHR. The narratives of care, families, safety and protection need to be reclaimed and we should take inspiration from other movements successes and their approaches, such as the climate movement. We need to jointly develop a new bold and progressive vision based on hope, health, equity and rights.
11. Long-term narrative building should be carefully balanced with real-time, shorter-term messaging to navigate current political spaces. Some attendees thought that to make true progress, conversations would be better focused on the essence of the topic with greater flexibility of terminology. Throughout the deployment of new narratives, it is important to monitor, respond and adapt to unintended consequences which can arise.
12. The way online spaces shape global narratives also needs to be tackled. Growing disinformation online, and harmful online content can be accessed easily by young people. We need to equip them with the tools to understand and manage this information and greater action must happen to hold social media companies to account and tackle this at the source.

*“Those who oppose SRHR use parents and families as an emotional trojan horse to stop progress, we need to be better at telling the real story beyond the statistics”*

## **Movements and alliances**

13. A challenge for the feminist movement is the nuance and division that exists within it. This is often exploited by those who are anti SRHR at national and multilateral level. Investing time and energy into strengthening the movement is not only needed to respond to the current challenges but builds a platform on which to progress together.
14. Young people are leaders today and of tomorrow, however current engagement is often tokenistic, extractive or transactional rather than strategic and supportive. Young people are seeking meaningful collaboration with governments and organisations as equal partners.
15. Professional associations remain a relatively untapped source into existing movements that can be utilised much more effectively and easily by connecting with them through their existing structures and global moments. Initial outreach could focus on gynaecologists and obstetricians, midwives and teachers.
16. Our movement needs to be broad and inclusive. In particular, we need to better involve marginalised groups to speak up on SRHR, including people with disabilities, refugees and those living in poverty and humanitarian contexts.
17. There should be a deepening of work to build relationships and dialogues between countries on key SRHR topics through coordinated outreach and engagement by like-minded governments. This outreach should also seek to improve coordination within countries between different ministries, sectors and negotiators.

## **Multilateral**

18. We will continue to safeguard global consensus at the multilateral level. There are opportunities to reorientate and ensure the spaces become as effective as possible within the geopolitical context. This should include better inclusion of civil society and youth delegates in government delegations with adequate support structures and capacity building.
19. Likeminded member states and donors should support UN agencies, such as UNFPA to use their convening power more effectively in multilateral negotiations, including through outreach and support for national delegations. All actors should be advocating for greater transparency and access for civil society in processes. It will also be important to engage with the newly established UN Youth Office and implementation of the Youth Strategy. Global north like-minded member states need to be ready to engage constructively on topics such as the right to development, debt relief, the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and racism, which are important for global consensus on SRHR.
20. There are real opportunities for progress at regional level. We celebrate the fact that 42 countries have ratified the Maputo protocol, and we will celebrate the anniversary of the Montevideo consensus which sets a powerful agenda on SRHR.

## **Funding**

21. Greater coordination is required between donors in order to tackle funding gaps, reduce duplication, and strengthen collaboration and learning. Donors should explore new and innovative areas to fund with a long-term view, and innovative funding sources should be pursued, including private sector.
22. Funding must become more responsive, adaptive and accountable to support the needs of organisations, civil society and youth led movements including higher levels of trust, transparency and long-term funding cycles. Donors need to listen and learn how to do this.

*“Look at who will be holding power in 10-15 years – we need to invest in and support them now”*

23. Long term, flexible and core funding to youth and other activist-led movements is a priority. Support should include organisational development, time and mentorship and facilitating connections and opportunities.
24. Donors must take a more pro-active approach to do no harm. This should include more robust due diligence processes and review of structures to ensure that funding is not unintentionally supporting rollback and efforts to reverse progress on SRHR and gender equality.

**Bekky Ashmore**

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