



A S T R A N E T W O R K

ASTRA - Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

## Advocate's Tool No. 1:

# SRHR and Demography

## The Issue

Concerns over population changes are driving new demographic policies. These policies either promote and respect sexual and reproductive health and rights, restrict and deny these rights, or, more often than not, ignore them all together. Advocates can advance SRHR through demography and must work to protect these rights in emerging policies.

## The Facts

In many developed countries, declining fertility rates, ageing, and migration are transforming the age pyramid at an accelerating rate, with more individuals over 65 than those under 16. The concern is that there will not be enough economic stability and productivity from a potentially decreased labor force to support the increasing ageing population. Demographers refer to this as the "dependency ratio": how many young people (under 16) and older people (over 64) depend on people of working age (16 to 64). Declining fertility rates are often attributed to economic instability, obstacles in employment and social services, and postponement of childbearing. Higher fertility rates are often found in developed countries with wider childcare availability, lower direct costs of children, part time work availability and longer leaves. Most policy research suggests adopting measures which are aimed at younger childless individuals, making it easier to have children while remaining economically stable.

Experience from Sweden shows that ensuring comprehensive access to reproductive health services and information does not decrease birth rates. In fact, Sweden has one of the highest birth rates in Europe and one of the most liberal abortion laws in Europe. It also guarantees access to comprehensive contraceptive services and sexuality education at a young age. Importantly, Swedish social and employment policies promote gender equality and target individuals' needs. These policies include programs such as provision of parental leave benefits for both parents, establishment of extensive public child care services subsidized by the state, and flexible working hours for both parents.

As could be expected, the role of sexual and reproductive health has been controversial, though disappointingly not central. While a few countries have adopted policies which respect and promote SRHR (and have seen good results), most have either ignored this critical aspect (and focused on superficial fixes such as economic incentives) or, worse, attempted to restrict access to reproductive health services such as safe abortion and contraception. Restrictive and discriminatory laws on assisted reproductive technologies also contribute to the debate. The relationship between SRHR and demography is clear: respecting and including sexual and reproductive health in demographic policies returns positive, long-lasting results, while restricting access will lead to negative outcomes.

## The Questions

*Does restricting access to abortion and contraception lead to higher birth rates?*

No. Restricting access to reproductive health services does not solve negative population growth rates as some politicians claim. Poland's birth rate, for example, has been consistently decreasing despite the introduction of restrictive abortion legislation in 1993. Moreover, by creating barriers to contraceptives and abortion services governments are threatening the lives and health of thousands of women every year, which will of course negatively affect population growth.

*Can promotion and protection of SRHR address demographic concerns?*

Yes.

- Sexual and reproductive health services and policies raise awareness and early detection of STIs, which be a powerful tool in preventing infertility, decreasing spread, and encouraging behavior modification
- Women who are denied access to safe abortions either suffer serious health problems which affect later pregnancies or are too economically and socially disadvantaged to be able to have more children
- Comprehensive, accurate sex education for adolescents and youth will allow young women and men to make informed decisions about childbearing.
- Men's sexual and reproductive health is critical to addressing these issues and calls for comprehensive accessible services, as well as men's equal partnership and responsibility in childbearing
- Safe motherhood can lead to more children and healthier mothers capable of contributing to the labor force.
- The situation clearly illustrates the need for health system reform, with a focus on comprehensive primary preventative care. As officially stated in Alma Ata, this not only includes but *prioritizes* sexual and reproductive health care.

## ASTRA Recommendations

- Explicitly call for the protection and promotion of reproductive health and rights and gender equality as essential components in demography policies.
- Emphasize that demography policies should refrain from measures that restrict reproductive decision making and that policies guarantee the right of each individual to decide freely on the number and spacing of their children, as stated many legally binding international agreements.
- Monitor the implementation of demography policies and address the possible discrepancies in the national policies that affect women's reproductive choices.
- Ensure comprehensive and affordable public child care services, equal pay, and parental benefits that will encourage and allow men and women to equally share parental responsibilities.
- Remove discriminatory and other barriers which prevent women and men from accessing reproductive health services including reproductive technologies.

**For more information...**

**...Contact: [info@astra.org.pl](mailto:info@astra.org.pl)**

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All of the above as well as various research notes and studies from the European Observatory on the Social Situation – Demography Network, are available at [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/social\\_situation/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_situation/index_en.htm)

