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The importance of sexual and reproductive health rights in the context of human rights education

Access to affordable sexual and reproductive services and to accurate, comprehensive health education, are fundamental human rights. Additionally, Articles 19 of the UDHR and ICCPR guarantee the right to receive information.

[The essential requirement to realising sexual and reproductive health is for people to have control of their own fertility, which, relevant for us here, requires information and education about effective methods of family planning. The implication of denying this can be grave: for example, an increase in sexually transmitted infections and diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and more broadly across the world, an increase in maternal mortality.]

Accordingly, we were pleased to see a reiteration of “sexual and reproductive health rights, such as access to family planning, contraception, etc.” in the OSCE’s guidelines on human rights education for health workers¹.

Despite this recognition however, across the OSCE region the right to sexual and reproductive health education is being undermined, both by governments’ reluctance to make sex education statutory and because of inappropriate and unrestrained interference from conservative religious dogma within the education system.

The Catholic Church has a particularly shameful record in this area. Run by men, it has wielded its significant power and global influence to control women’s reproductive rights and sexual freedom; it openly opposes abortion and the use of contraception, and denies education in the area of sexual and reproductive health rights².

Notably, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child includes the child’s right to access information aimed at the promotion of their mental and physical health³, and their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion⁴. It is contrary to human rights standards therefore, for parents or religious institutions to impose any one doctrine on children without concurrently giving them full information, education and access in terms of health choices.

1 <http://www.osce.org/odihr/105053?download=true>, p31

2 http://www.astra.org.pl/pdf/publications/EE_factsheet.pdf, p1; Also “the sexuality component in education Poland and Croatia for example is strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, which condemns contraception and sex outside of marriage”

http://www.astra.org.pl/pdf/publications/EE_factsheet.pdf,

p23 <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/reform/documents/2006womenreproductiverightsandthecatholicchurch.asp>;

<http://catholiceducation.org/articles/sexuality/se0027.html>

3 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art.17

4 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 14, §1

Religious doctrine should never be put before the fundamental health and education rights of children, or health rights of women, and it should never be used to legitimise the denial of those rights.

We call upon all OSCE states to reject religious doctrine as a justification for denying women their basic right to control and own their bodies, and children the sexual and reproductive health education they need.