Human rights are considered central to sexual and reproductive health because:

- Rights protect against coercion, discrimination, and violence. Women’s rights, particularly reproductive rights, include the right of individuals and couples to make decisions concerning their health and reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence as expressed in human rights documents.

- Rights require access to necessary information, education and services, as well as mechanisms for redress of abuses and violations of their rights. Human rights recognize that all individuals have equal rights and entitlements to access to sexual and reproductive health education, information and services, irrespective of who they are and where they live.

- Rights require a comprehensive approach. Human rights require comprehensive response to individual’s varied and changing needs.

The consequences of this lack of attention and reaffirmation of human rights are very real. This has far too often resulted in siloed funding and vertical interventions rather than the holistic approach, with human rights at the centre.

Health is a fundamental, justiciable human right indispensable for the exercise of other human rights and is, consequent- ly, interdependent with and divisible from other human rights, including the rights to life, bodily integrity, autonomy, legal capacity, information and privacy. Every preventable death poses a challenge to health, development, and human rights initiatives.

Text Box 1. The link between Human Rights and SRH and Rights as stated in Paragraph 7.3 of the ICPD Programme of Action (1).

Text Box 2 (1).

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

*(ICPD Programme of Action Principle 1)*

“Advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women’s ability to control their own fertility, are cornerstones of population and development-related programmes. The human rights of women and the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in civil, cultural, economic, political and social life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex, are priority objectives of the international community.”

*(ICPD Programme of Action Principle 4)*
(SDGs) these enduring disparities in access and outcomes underscore the need for a closer investigation of these inequalities (5). Studies highlight that integrating a human rights based approach in health programming and policy making is likely to result in a positive web of gains across a continuum of processes and outcomes including empowerment of women and improvements in health seeking behaviours (8). Evidence further highlights that a failure of integration of a human rights based approach results in costs of inaction which can undermine the fragile gains that have been made. Inaction or inattention to the fundamental human rights principles of women’s equality has a knock on effect and interacts with other forms of inequalities such as income, rural/urban status and contributes to skewed availability of and access to critical health services, in many countries (9-11).

**Linking SRH and human rights**

Increasingly international, regional and national bodies have affirmed the centrality of human rights in the context of SRH and provided guidance on its normative content and application (12). Human rights in relation to SRH: a) protect individuals against coercion, discrimination and violence; b) call for access to necessary information, education and services, including SRH services, to be available, accessible, acceptable and of good quality; and c) call for accountability of duty bearers and mechanisms for redress of abuses and violations of rights individuals.

Women’s rights, particularly human rights related to SRH, include the right of individuals and couples to make decisions concerning their health and reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence as expressed in human rights documents (1). Human rights call for a significant shift in how health programming happens by shifting the focus from simply meeting needs to doing so in ways that fulfill human rights (see Figure 1) (13). Human rights also put emphasis on addressing inequalities, ensuring participation of
individuals and communities in health planning and decision-making and ensuring accountability. An overall impact of this approach is to achieve the empowerment of individuals to claim their rights to information, education and quality of services (14).

**Conclusion**

The new international development agenda articulated through the SDGs, offers a key opportunity both to reaf- firm the centrality of human rights protections, particularly women’s and girls’ rights, and to prioritize the specific actions required to achieve a comprehensive and integrated approach to women’s rights including SRH and rights. Failure to accelerate implementation of women’s rights will undermine not only health and human rights but also efforts to reduce poverty, secure equitable social, economic and environmental development and achieve social justice.

**Rajat Khosla**, Human Rights Adviser, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, WHO headquarters, Geneva, khoslar@who.int

**Lale Say**, Coordinator, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, WHO headquarters, Geneva, sayl@who.int

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**Who will be Accountable? Human Rights and the Post-2015 Development Agenda, UN Human Rights, Centre for Economic and Social Rights, 2013.**

Using a human rights framework, this publication addresses the accountability gaps that persist in development and impede attainment of our basic human rights, including those of SRH. Full document available in English, French and Spanish and summary available in Arabic, Chinese and Russian at:

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/PublicationsResources/Pages/RecentPublications.aspx

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This reference and resource is a valuable tool to help countries develop contextually relevant human rights indicators for implementing and measuring human rights progress in their setting. Available in Arabic, English, French and Spanish at:

http://www.ohchr.org/EN/PublicationsResources/Pages/RecentPublications.aspx

This groundbreaking report documents tangible evidence that a human rights-based approach to health contributes to real improvements in the health of women and children globally. A must read for all those working in this domain including policy makers, researchers, public health professionals, health care providers, parliamentarians, governments and civil society.