

# The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Its Promises for the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Girls and Women in Africa

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## Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals take into account the economic, social and environmental challenges of our world. In relation to the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of girls and women, the Sustainable Development Goals provide a platform for the enhancement of the SRHR of adolescents and women, especially in Africa. The promises of SDGs are to eliminate gender disparities in the education sector and to ensure equal access at all levels particularly for the vulnerable girls and women in Africa. The SDGs promise to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages through universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes. Predictably, few years down the line, most African countries have not demonstrated sufficient commitment and political will towards the realisation of these noble goals. The reproductive and sexual health of concerned girls and women in Africa that have been deliberately relegated for several decades can no doubt be redeemed by the SDGs. We advocate to Governments, non-governmental organisations and stakeholders in Africa to work towards the realisation of the SDGs and for more sensitization to enable African women live a happy and fulfilled life devoid of discrimination, sexual abuses or exploitations, injustice as well as unequal access to economic, political and reproductive health services.

## Keywords

Women, Girls, Reproductive Health, SDGs

## 1. Introduction: The Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), known officially as “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, are an inter-governmental set of 17 Goals with 169 targets aspired for achievement by the year 2030. The Goals are contained in paragraph 54 United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/1 of 25<sup>th</sup> September 2015, applicable to all countries, rich and poor equally, and take into account the economic, social and environmental challenges of our world [1]. Driven and led by the United Nations through a deliberative process involving its 193 Member States, as well as the global civil society, they focused on bringing about “development that met the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [2] [3] [4] [5] [6].

The Sustainable Development Goals seek to change the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, addressing key challenges such as poverty, inequality, and violence against women and girls. SDG 2.2 by 2030 aims to end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025 the internationally agreed targets on overcoming the problems of and associated with stunting and wasting in children under five years of age, and addresses the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women as well as elderly persons. In the same vein, SDG 4.1 aims that by 2030, all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes; while SDG 4.2 by 2030 desires to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education [7] [5] [8].

SDG Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The targets in goal 5 as elucidated below specifically clarify how gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls can be achieved [9]. Target 5.1 desires to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. 5.2 seeks to eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking, sexual violence and other types of exploitation. 5.3 is aimed at eliminating all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage as well as female genital mutilations (female genital cutting). 5.4 recognizes and values unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate. 5.5 is aimed at ensuring women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. 5.6 seeks to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the ICPD and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences [10] [11] [12] [13] [14].

SDG target 5.a undertakes seeking reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and

other forms of property, financial services, inheritance, and natural resources in accordance with national laws. 5.b seeks to enhance the use of enabling technologies, in particular ICT, to promote women's empowerment. 5.c is aimed at adopting and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels [15] [16] [17] [18].

## **2. The SDG's in Relation to Sexual and Reproductive Health of Girls and Women in Africa**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in relation to the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of girls and women, provides a platform for the enhancement of the SRHR of adolescents and women, especially in Africa. The goals and targets such as those related to health, education and gender equality encompass many key aspects of SRHR of adolescent and women which includes access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, comprehensive sexuality education and the ability to make decisions about their own health. SDGs adopt a framework that explicitly recognizes how integrally important enhancing SRHR is to achieving its larger goals [11] [15] [19].

Extant evidence reveals that girls have enormous potential to contribute to world development and its sustainability. It has also been shown that girls involvement is a prerequisite to the achievement of development and sustainability. The Sustainable Development Goals thus rides on this and emphasizes the role that girls can and do play in achieving the vision for 2030. Central to the efforts of the SDGs is the recognition of gender equality as an indivisible and vital condition necessary to the achievement of the overarching 2030 Agenda. It emphasizes the indispensable need to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls everywhere, to put a stop to harmful practices like child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, and to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights [14] [20] [21] [22].

Girls are key stakeholders in the implementation and accountability of the SDGs. All SDGs processes and mechanisms take girls' needs, voices, and disparate experiences into account. Girls represent a population group that cannot be left behind the bid to meet the goals agreed to in Agenda 2030. Girls are formidable agents for change with enormous potential to change realities for themselves, their friends, families, communities and countries. Despite this, girls remain one of the most marginalized populations in the world, facing the double discrimination of being both young and female. Girls, who come from minority ethnic groups, live in poverty, or have a disability are even more likely to be left behind and invisible [23].

The end of poverty can only be achieved with the end of gender-based discrimination. All over the world, gender inequality makes and keeps women poor, depriving them of basic rights and opportunities for well-being. Women

make significant contributions every day from bringing an income to her household as an employed wage earner, to creating jobs as an entrepreneur, to taking care of her family and elders. Poverty comes with many risks; discrimination leaves women less resilient to these. In an economic downturn, poor women are less likely to have savings and abilities to make up for lost income. Poor girls are more than twice as likely to marry in childhood as those who are wealthy. They then face potentially life threatening risks from early pregnancy, and often lost hopes for an education and a better income. Women have a right to equal access to all avenues to end poverty, from the application of social protection safety nets; to the use of the latest technology and a pre-condition for this to effectively be put in place is the empowerment of women. Therefore, achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is a stand-alone goal (Goal 5) of the SDGs. As shown earlier, it is also part of all the other goals, with many targets specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution [24] [25].

The SDGs promise to put an end to hunger, by achieving food security via the promotion of sustainable agriculture. The SDGs promise to support this role through the provision of training for women farmers and access to information and technology is a welcomed development. Thus, the SDGs promise to put an end to hunger, by achieving food security via the promotion of sustainable agriculture, providing training for the women farmers, access to information and technology and other strategies that will enable girls and women in Africa to get the nutrients they need, to manage the physical demands of pregnancy and breastfeeding in order to continue the reproductive cycle and to see to the sustainability of the universe [26] [27].

The highest attainable standard of health is a fundamental right of every person. Gender-based discrimination, however, emasculates this right. It can render women more susceptible to sickness and less likely to obtain care, for reasons ranging from affordability to social conventions keeping the home. The promises of SDGs are to eliminate gender disparities in the education sector and to ensure equal access at all levels particularly for the vulnerable girls and women in Africa. It is expected that the goal will provide the much-needed knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development within the African sub region, promote culture of peace and non-violence, create opportunities for the vulnerable to exercise the right to human dignity. The SDGs promises to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages through universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes. This will bring about a drastic reduction in maternal mortality ratio, infant mortality ratio, unmet need for contraceptives, non-utilization of antenatal care, sexually transmitted infections/HIV, and enhances the wellbeing of adolescent and women in Africa. But abstract commitments made on paper are not nearly enough. The need for quick and effective steps toward imple-

mentation is urgent, particularly in the stark shadow of normalized and unacceptable human rights abuses faced by some of the most vulnerable populations in the world, especially girls [28] [29].

### 3. Conclusion

The sustainable development goal is a wakeup call for African leaders and policy decision makers to appreciate and engender the right and human dignity of girls and women within the region. The reproductive and sexual health of concerned girls and women in Africa that have been deliberately relegated for several decades can be redeemed by the SDGs. African women can be supported to live a happy and fulfilled life devoid of discrimination, sexual abuses or exploitations, injustice as well as unequal access to economic, political and reproductive health services if the SDGs are realized.

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