



Review Article

The transformative influence of sustainable development on sexual health

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Date of Submission:

10 September 2023

Date of Acceptance:

26 October 2023

Abstract

This paper examines the intricate relationship between sustainable development and sexual health, highlighting how comprehensive sexual education, improved access to healthcare services, empowerment of individuals, and the reduction of societal stigmas collectively contribute to healthier societies. By exploring the multifaceted impact of sustainable development initiatives on sexual health outcomes, we uncover the interconnectedness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their influence on promoting respectful relationships, preventing sexual violence, and fostering well-being. Through comprehensive education, individuals are skilled with absolute information regarding sexually transmitted infections (STIs), consent, contraception, and healthy relationships. Enhanced access to healthcare services, including family planning methods and STI testing, ensures that individuals can make informed decisions about their sexual well-being. The interconnectedness of SDGs underscores the synergy between different facets of well-being and development.

Keywords: Sustainable development, Sexual health, Interconnectedness, Well-being

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How to cite the article: Panda, S., Khan, I. (2023). The transformative influence of sustainable development on sexual health. *Indian Journal of Health, Sexuality and Culture*, 9(2), 86-100.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10434093

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Gender equality, quality education, access to clean water, reduced inequalities, and strong institutions are all interconnected with sexual health outcomes. Ultimately, this paper contends that the integration of sexual health into the broader structure of sustainable development reflects a shared commitment to human rights, equality, and the creation of a world where every individual's sexual well-being is nurtured and upheld.

Introduction

Sustainable Development refers to balancing economic, ecological, and social goals to fulfil the requirements of the current scenario without putting the abilities and requirements of the future generation at stake.^[1] It aims to promote prosperity while ensuring the well-being of people and the planet over the long term.^[2] This concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of financial growth, protection of the environment, and social equity.

Sustainable Development involves integrating economic, ecological, and social well-being to create a balanced and lasting future.^[2] The purpose of sustainable development is to create a better quality of life for everyone while safeguarding the planet's resources for the long term.

The goals of Sustainable Development, referred to as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), include a set of 17 global objectives established by the United Nations to address various interconnected challenges facing the world.^[3] These goals include

- ◆ Eradicating Poverty
- ◆ Zero Hunger
- ◆ Promoting Good health
- ◆ Ensuring quality education
- ◆ Achieving Gender equality
- ◆ Clean water and sanitation
- ◆ Affordable and clean energy
- ◆ Decent work and economic growth
- ◆ Industry innovation and infrastructure
- ◆ Reduced inequalities
- ◆ Sustainable cities and communication
- ◆ Responsible consumption and production
- ◆ Climate action
- ◆ Life below water
- ◆ Life on land
- ◆ Peace and Justice
- ◆ Partnerships to achieve these goals

The aim is to create a more just, prosperous, and sustainable world by 2023.

Sexual Health is a fundamental aspect of overall well-being because it encompasses the physical, emotional, mental and social dimensions of a person's life. It is not just about avoiding diseases but also having respectful and satisfying relationships, making informed decisions, and experiencing a positive sense of self.^[4] Good sexual health contributes to individual happiness, healthy relationships, and a better quality of life. It also has broader societal impacts by promoting gender equality, reducing stigma, and supporting public health efforts.^[5]

1. Access to education and awareness

Sustainable development initiatives often prioritize education as a critical component. As per SDG 4, Ensuring quality education- By promoting education, especially in communities with limited resources, people gain access to information about various aspects of life, including sexual health.^[6] This increased awareness about sexual health can lead to better understanding, safer practices, and improved overall well-being, contributing to personal and community development.

Sustainable development initiatives often target marginalized or underserved populations, which can be especially beneficial in promoting sexual health awareness. The initiatives address disparities in access to information and healthcare services by providing knowledge and creating awareness in these communities. This, in turn, contributes to reducing inequalities and promoting social justice.

Education plays a crucial role in fostering informed decision-making regarding sexual practices. When individuals receive comprehensive and accurate information about sexual health through education, they are better equipped to make responsible choices.^[7] Here's how education influences informed decision-making:

Knowledge: Education provides individuals with a solid understanding of sexual anatomy, reproductive processes, contraception methods, and the risks associated with unprotected sex. Armed with this knowledge, people can make sensible choices about their sexual activities.

Risk Awareness: Education helps individuals grasp the potential consequences of risky sexual behaviours, such as unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV/AIDS. Understanding these risks encourages individuals to take preventive measures and adopt safer sexual practices.

For instance, a cross-sectional and descriptive study conducted among 500 university students in Malaysia revealed that the misinformation or lack of information regarding the use of contraception may pose risks for cases of infertility. Some of the female participants had the misconception that the effects of contraception pills may include mood swings, weight gain, and the risks of getting different types of cancer rather than its vital significance for safer sexual life during the infertile period.^[9]

Contraception and protection: Education introduces individuals to a range of contraceptive methods and emphasizes their effectiveness. People can then choose the methods that align with their preferences and needs, reducing the chances of unintended pregnancies and STIs.

Consent and boundaries: Education teaches the importance of consent and setting personal boundaries in sexual relationships. This knowledge helps individuals communicate their preferences, establish mutual respect, and ensure that sexual activities are consensual and respectful.

Communication skills: Education encourages open communication about sexual health between partners. This enables discussions about sexual history, testing for STIs, and the use of protection, fostering a

healthier and safer sexual experience for both parties.

As per the UNESCO in a report, many young adults have misconceptions about sexual health as they are imposed towards the digital environment for these sorts of information. But proper communication and sexual education empower these young adults to make informed decisions regarding sexuality, early and unintended pregnancies, HIV, and other STIs. Likewise, a deficit of high-quality education regarding sexuality and relationships may protect children and young adults from facing deleterious sexual exploitations.^[10]

Healthcare seeking behaviour: Informed individuals are more likely to seek medical advice and support when facing sexual health concerns. They understand the value of regular check-ups, screenings, and timely interventions, contributing to early detection and treatment of potential issues.

Cultural awareness: Education helps individuals recognize and respect diverse cultural norms and values related to sexuality. This understanding promotes sensitivity in interactions and reduces the stigmatization of certain sexual practices or orientations.

2. Healthcare and services

Sustainable development initiatives play a significant role in improving healthcare infrastructure, which in turn leads to better sexual health services.^[10] As per SDG 3, Promotion of good health and well-being, here's how these initiatives contribute to enhancing sexual health services:

Investment in infrastructure: Sustainable development initiatives prioritize investments in healthcare infrastructure, including clinics, hospitals, and community health centres. This expanded infrastructure provides a stronger foundation for delivering comprehensive sexual health services to communities, especially in underserved areas.

Training and capacity building: These initiatives often focus on training healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses, and community health workers, in sexual health education and services. This builds a skilled workforce capable of providing accurate information, counselling, and medical care related to sexual health.

Many studies revealed that for convenience in dealing with patients regarding issues of sexuality, health professionals need to be well-trained and properly educated. Larger samples are to be considered for the programmes relating to inter disciplinary sexual education.

[12]

Access to information: Sustainable development projects support the development of educational materials and campaigns that raise awareness about sexual health. This information dissemination helps individuals understand the importance of sexual health, encourages preventive measures, and reduces stigma surrounding sexual health topics.

Equitable access: Sustainable development aims to reduce healthcare inequalities by ensuring that sexual health services are accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic status or location. This includes efforts to bring sexual health services closer to rural and marginalized communities, reducing barriers to access.

Infrastructure for testing and treatment: Sustainable development initiatives contribute to the establishment of facilities for testing and treating sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS. This includes setting up diagnostic laboratories, distributing testing kits, and providing necessary medications.

Counselling and support services: These initiatives often include provisions for counselling services related to sexual health. This is crucial for addressing psychological and sentimental aspects of reproductive health and offering support for individuals and couples facing challenges.

Integration of services: Sustainable development encourages the integration of sexual health services with other healthcare services, such as family planning, maternal health, and reproductive health.

Technology and telehealth: Sustainable development can facilitate the adoption of telehealth and technology solutions to extend sexual health services to remote areas. Telemedicine platforms and mobile apps can provide information, counselling, and even remote consultations.

Preventive programs: These initiatives often support community-based prevention programs that educate individuals about safe sexual practices, contraception, and the importance of regular check-ups. Preventive efforts contribute to reducing the incidence of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

Access to contraceptives, STI testing, and reproductive health services is of paramount importance for individual well-being, public health, and the overall development of societies. Here's why these services are crucial:

Preventing unintended pregnancies: Contraceptives enable individuals to make effective decisions about family planning and reproduction. By providing access to a variety of contraceptive methods, people can effectively prevent unintended pregnancies, allowing them to plan their lives and futures more confidently.

Empowerment and autonomy: Access to contraceptives empowers individuals, especially women, to bear the ability to make deliberate decisions regarding their sexual health. This autonomy translates into better educational and economic opportunities and the ability to participate more fully in society.

Reducing maternal and child mortality: Sexual health services, including prenatal care, safe childbirth, and postnatal care, manage to play an important role in reducing maternal and child mortality rates.

In certain countries, limitation in the reproductive rights of the women acts as the leading cause of the death of young women, and above 200 million girls and women alive today are forced into the painful process of genital mutilation.^[30]

Promoting family planning: Family planning services allow individuals and pairs to make the decisions regarding the timing and gaps in pregnancies. This leads to healthier pregnancies, better maternal health, improved child health, and reduced strain on healthcare systems.^[9]

Preventing and treating STIs: Access to STI testing and treatment services is crucial for preventing the spread of infections. Timely diagnosis and treatment not only improve individual health but also prevent the transmission of STIs to sexual partners, reducing the overall prevalence of these infections.

Community health: Widespread access to STI testing and treatment contributes to community health by curbing the transmission of infections. When a more significant portion of the population is aware of their STI status and can receive treatment, the overall prevalence of these infections decreases.

Empowering safe sexual practices: Access to STI testing encourages individuals to take responsibility for their sexual health by getting tested regularly, fostering a culture of responsible sexual behaviour.

Reducing stigma and discrimination: Access to reproductive health and STI services helps reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with sexual health issues. When these services are readily available, people are more likely to seek care without fear of judgment.

Healthy relationships: Access to reproductive health information and services facilitates open communication about sexual health within relationships. This promotes healthier

relationships based on trust, respect, and mutual understanding.

Social and economic impact: Improved reproductive health outcomes lead to healthier populations, which have a productive impact on overall productivity, financial growth, and social stability.

3. Gender equality and empowerment

Sustainable development strongly emphasizes gender equality as a fundamental principle for achieving social progress, economic growth, and overall well-being. As per SDG 5, achieving gender equality and empowerment—such emphasis on gender equality has a profound impact on reducing power imbalances in sexual relationships. Here's how sustainable development contributes to this goal:

Equal opportunities: Sustainable development seeks to provide equal opportunities for people of all genders to access education, employment, and healthcare. When women and men have equal access to resources and opportunities, it reduces the power imbalances in relationships based on traditional gender roles.

Education and empowerment: Education is a critical component of sustainable development, and it plays a vital role in empowering women and girls. When educated, women are better equipped to make wise decisions about their lives, including their reproductive health and relationships. This empowerment shifts the dynamics of power within relationships.^[7]

A recent study in Ghana highlighted the strong association between the knowledge of women regarding reproductive health services and their years of education. Likewise, for women to exercise their own sexual and reproductive rights, they need to be well-aware and educated of the essential facts regarding contraception, reproductive health, and sexuality.^[8]

Legal and policy reforms: Sustainable development initiatives often advocate for legal and policy reforms that promote gender equality. These reforms can include laws against gender-based violence, discrimination, and harmful practices. When legal protections exist, individuals are more empowered to challenge power imbalances within relationships.

Access to healthcare: Sustainable development efforts ensure that women and men have equal access to healthcare services, including reproductive and sexual healthcare services. When both partners have access to information and services, it fosters healthier communication and decision-making within relationships.

Engaging men and boys: Sustainable development recognizes the importance of engaging men and boys in discussions about gender equality. By challenging traditional norms of masculinity and promoting respectful attitudes towards women, power imbalances can be reduced within intimate relationships.

Economic empowerment: Sustainable development initiatives focus on economic opportunities for women, including entrepreneurship and employment. When women have economic independence, they are less likely to remain in relationships where power dynamics are skewed against them.

Addressing harmful practices: Sustainable development works to eradicate terrible practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage. These customs often perpetuate power imbalances within relationships, and addressing them contributes to greater equality.

Promoting consent and communication: Sustainable development programs highlight the significance of consent, open communication, and mutual consideration within sexual relationships. These principles

are crucial for reducing power imbalances and fostering healthier dynamics.

Leadership and representation: Sustainable development seeks to enhance the portrayal of women in managing leadership roles and in the process of decision-making process. When women are involved in shaping policies and programs, the needs and perspectives of all genders are better represented.

Empowered individuals are more likely to prioritize their sexual health and negotiate safe practices due to the confidence, knowledge, and self-awareness that come with empowerment. Here's how empowerment contributes to healthier sexual behaviours:

Knowledge and awareness: Empowered individuals tend to be well-informed about reproductive health topics, which include contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and safe practices. They understand the potential risks and consequences, making them more likely to take preventive measures.^[7]

Confidence in communication: Empowerment often leads to better communication skills and increased self-confidence. Empowered individuals are more comfortable discussing sexual health matters with their partners, ensuring that both parties are on the same page regarding safe practices, testing, and protection.

Boundaries and consent: Empowerment involves a strong sense of self-worth and the ability to set personal boundaries. This translates into being assertive about practising safe sex and obtaining explicit consent from partners before engaging in sexual activities.

Access to resources: Empowered individuals are more likely to seek out and utilize resources related to sexual health. This includes accessing healthcare services, seeking accurate information, and utilizing the process of contraception effectively to avoid unintended pregnancies and STIs.

Taking responsibility: Empowered individuals take responsibility for their well-being and sexual health. They are proactive in seeking regular check-ups, STI testing, and taking necessary precautions to maintain their health and the health of their partners.

Resilience to peer pressure: Empowered individuals are less likely to succumb to negative peer pressure or engage in risky behaviours to fit in. Their confidence in their choices helps them make decisions aligned with their values and health.

Advocacy for safer practices: Empowered individuals often become advocates for safe sexual practices within their communities. They are more likely to share accurate information, encourage open conversations about sexual health, and promote responsible behaviour.^[11]

Education and access: Empowered individuals pro actively seek education and healthcare services. They recognize the importance of staying informed and having access to contraception, testing, and treatment services, which are essential for maintaining sexual health.

4. Reproductive rights and family planning

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) encompass a range of global targets to resolve various social, economic, and ecological challenges while highlighting human well-being.^[12] Reproductive rights are integral to these goals, recognizing the importance of individual autonomy, equality, and access to comprehensive reproductive health services. Here's how SDGs often include provisions for reproductive rights:

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being: Goal 3 explicitly highlights the need to ensure universal accessibility to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, information, and education. It calls for reducing maternal mortality, improving

access to safe abortions, and preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

SDG 5: Gender equality: Goal 5 is dedicated to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.^[13] It emphasizes the significance of reproductive rights, including access to contraception, family planning, and reproductive health information. It also addresses harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation.^[14]

SDG 10: Reduced inequalities: Goal 10 aims to prevent inequalities within and among countries. Reproductive rights are essential for achieving this goal, as they ensure that marginalized and vulnerable populations have access to the same level of reproductive health services as others.

SDG 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions: Goal 16 recognizes the significance of eliminating violence and harmful practices against women and girls. This includes efforts to address gender-based violence, forced marriage, and other forms of coercion that impact reproductive rights.^[15]

SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals: Goal 17 underscores the importance of global partnerships to achieve the SDGs. Reproductive rights are integral to these partnerships, as they require collaboration between civil societies and government organisations to ensure global access to reproductive health services.

Interconnected goals: Many other SDGs indirectly contribute to reproductive rights by addressing issues such as poverty (SDG 1), education (SDG 4), water and sanitation (SDG 6), and decent work (SDG 8). For instance, improved access to education and economic opportunities can positively impact reproductive choices and outcomes.

National implementation: Countries are encouraged to align their national policies, strategies, and laws with the principles of reproductive rights. This involves recognizing

the importance of autonomy in reproductive decision-making and ensuring accessibility to comprehensive reproductive health services.

Data collection and monitoring: To track progress, the SDGs promote collecting disaggregated data, including data related to reproductive health services and outcomes. This data helps identify disparities and assess the effectiveness of interventions.

Access to family planning has a profound impact on reducing unwanted pregnancies and maternal mortality and promoting overall sexual health.^[16] Here's how access to family planning contributes to these positive outcomes:

Reducing unwanted pregnancies: Family planning methods allow individuals and pairs to control the timing and gaps between pregnancies. By offering a range of contraception options, access to family planning helps individuals prevent unintended pregnancies, which can lead to safer and healthier pregnancies when desired.

Maternal health improvement: Unplanned pregnancies can pose significant risks to maternal health, especially when proper prenatal care is lacking. Gaining accessibility to family planning allows women to plan their pregnancies when they are physically and emotionally prepared, reducing the likelihood of complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

Safe abortion services: In regions where abortion is considered legal and accessible, family planning includes receiving safe abortion services. This is crucial for preventing unsafe and life-threatening abortions, which can lead to maternal mortality.

Reducing maternal mortality: Family planning contributes to reducing maternal mortality by enabling women to delay and space pregnancies. This allows their bodies to recover from previous pregnancies and

reduces the strain on their health during childbirth, ultimately lowering the risk of maternal death.

Preventing adolescent pregnancies: Access to family planning helps prevent pregnancies among adolescents, who are at higher risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. By providing adolescents with information and contraceptives, family planning addresses the unique needs of this population.^[17]

Empowering women: Family planning allows women to make wise decisions about their sexual health and futures. When women control when and how often they become pregnant, it positively impacts their educational and economic opportunities, leading to overall empowerment.

Healthy spacing of pregnancies: Family planning encourages healthy spacing between pregnancies. This practice gives women's bodies time to recover, reduces the risk of premature births and low birth weights, and improves the overall health of both mothers and babies.

Preventing STIs: Some family planning methods, such as condoms, not only prevent pregnancies but also offer protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Promoting condom use as part of family planning contributes to overall sexual health and STI prevention.

Healthier families: Access to family planning allows pairs to determine the number of children they can provide for and care for adequately. This leads to smaller, healthier families where parents can invest more time, resources, and attention into each child's well-being.

5. Addressing stigma and taboos

Sustainable development initiatives can play a significant role in breaking down societal stigmas and taboos around sexual health by fostering open discussions and promoting

awareness through the SDG 4 of ensuring quality education. Here's how these initiatives contribute to this significant change:

Education and awareness: Sustainable development emphasizes education as a critical component. By providing comprehensive sexual health education in schools and communities, these initiatives ensure that individuals have accurate information, which can lead to informed conversations and reduced stigmatization.

Cultural sensitivity: Sustainable development initiatives respect diverse cultural norms and values related to sexuality. By promoting culturally sensitive education and communication, these initiatives create an environment where discussing sexual health becomes more acceptable within different cultural contexts.

Healthcare services: Improved access to healthcare services, including sexual health clinics and counselling, creates a safe space for individuals to discuss their concerns without fear of judgment.^[19] This fosters an environment where open conversations about sexual health occur.

Media and communication: Sustainable development can leverage media campaigns to challenge stereotypes, promote healthy behaviours, and encourage open conversations about sexual health. These campaigns help normalize discussions that were once considered taboo.

Youth empowerment: Sustainable development often targets young people who can be particularly affected by societal stigmas. By empowering youth with information, resources, and platforms to discuss sexual health, these initiatives contribute to shifting societal attitudes.

Changing gender norms: Sustainable development initiatives that emphasize gender equality challenge traditional gender norms that can perpetuate stigmatization. When

conversations about sexual health are approached from a perspective of respect and equality, it helps dismantle harmful stereotypes.

Legal and policy reforms: Advocacy for legal changes and policy reforms related to sexual health can help create an environment where open discussions are encouraged. When laws protect individuals from discrimination and promote access to information and services, it sends a positive message about discussing sexual health.

Media and education play a crucial role in destigmatizing topics like contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual orientation. By disseminating accurate information, promoting awareness, and challenging stereotypes, they create a more informed and accepting society. Here's how media and education help destigmatize these topics:

Accurate information dissemination: Media platforms, including TV, radio, internet, and social media, have the power to reach large audiences. They can provide accurate information about contraception methods, STIs, and sexual orientation, dispelling myths and misconceptions that contribute to stigma.

Humanizing stories: Media can share stories of real people who have dealt with contraception, STIs, or issues related to sexual orientation. These personal narratives humanize the experiences and challenges, helping the audience relate and empathize.

In a national study, 805 young adolescents, their peers found a lot of information regarding violence, sex, sex exploitation, and drugs from movies, television shows, and other media channels.^[18]

Youth education: Comprehensive sexual education in schools provides students with accurate information about contraception, STIs, and sexual orientation. Educating young people early on reduces the likelihood of misconceptions and stigmatization in the future.

Addressing myths: Media campaigns and educational programs can directly address common myths and misconceptions about contraception, STIs, and sexual orientation. Providing clear, evidence-based information counters false beliefs that contribute to stigma.

Challenging stereotypes: Media can challenge stereotypes associated with these topics, portraying them in a more realistic and empathetic light. This helps break down negative stereotypes that perpetuate stigma.

6. Youth engagement and education

Sustainable development efforts frequently target young people by providing comprehensive sexual health education to address their unique needs and promote healthier behaviours through SDG 4 of ensuring quality education.^[9] Here's how and why these initiatives focus on youth:

Early intervention: Comprehensive sexual health education aims to provide accurate information to young people before they become sexually active. This early intervention helps them make informed decisions and prevents the risk of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Empowerment: Educating young people about their sexual and reproductive health empowers them with understanding and the urge to make responsible choices. This empowerment contributes to building their confidence, self-awareness, and decision-making skills.

Risk reduction: Adolescents and young adults are often endangered for engaging in risky sexual behaviours due to factors like peer pressure and limited knowledge. Comprehensive education equips them with strategies for reducing risks and adopting safe sexual practices.

Breaking stigmas: By addressing topics like contraception, STIs, and sexual orientation in schools and communities, sustainable

development efforts help break down the stigmas and taboos that often surround these subjects.

Promoting respectful relationships: Youth-focused sexual health education emphasizes the importance of consent, communication, and respectful relationships. This education contributes to healthier interactions and reduces instances of sexual coercion and violence.

Preventing early parenthood: Comprehensive sexual health education helps prevent early parenthood among adolescents. When young people understand the consequences of early pregnancy and parenthood, they are more likely to delay starting a family until they are ready.

Access to information: Many young people lack access to accurate information about sexual health due to cultural taboos or inadequate education systems. Sustainable development initiatives ensure that all young people, regardless of background, have access to this crucial information.

Informed youth who receive comprehensive sexual health education are more likely to make responsible choices and adopt healthier sexual practices. Here's how their knowledge contributes to these positive outcomes:

Understanding risks: Informed youth are aware of the potential risks associated with exposed sexual activity, such as unexpected pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This understanding motivates them to take preventive measures and practice safe sex.

Contraceptive knowledge: Comprehensive sexual health education teaches youth about various contraceptive methods, their effectiveness, and proper usage. Armed with this knowledge, informed youth are more likely to use contraception consistently and correctly.

STI prevention: Informed youth understand the importance of using barrier methods, like condoms, to prevent STIs. They are more likely to prioritize protection during sexual activity, reducing their risk of contracting or spreading infections.

Empowered decision-making: Knowledge empowers youth to make autonomous decisions about their sexual activities. Informed individuals are better equipped to assess the consequences of their actions and choose behaviours that align with their values and goals.

Healthy communication: Comprehensive sexual health education emphasizes the importance of open communication with partners about sexual history, preferences, and boundaries. Informed youth are more likely to engage in these discussions, promoting respectful and consensual sexual experiences.

Delaying sexual debut: Informed youth may choose to delay their sexual debut until they feel ready and have access to contraception and protection. This decision can reduce the likelihood of early pregnancies and risky sexual behaviours.

Reduced peer pressure: Knowledgeable youth are less likely to succumb to peer pressure related to sexual activities. Their awareness of the risks and rights empowers them to make choices based on their values rather than external influences.

Regular health check-ups: Informed youth understand the importance of regular sexual health check-ups, including STI testing and screenings. They are more prone to seek medical care when needed, contributing to early detection and treatment.^[27]

Respecting boundaries: Informed youth have a better understanding of consent, respecting personal boundaries, and the importance of mutual agreement in sexual interactions. This knowledge promotes

healthy and respectful relationships.

Long-term health focus: Comprehensive sexual health education emphasizes the long-term health implications of sexual behaviours. Informed youth recognize that responsible choices today can positively impact their future well-being.

7. Prevention of sexual violence and exploitation

Sustainable development places a strong emphasis on creating safe environments that reduce the prevalence of sexual violence and exploitation. These efforts aim to ensure the safety, well-being, and dignity of individuals, particularly women and vulnerable populations.^[20] As per SDG 5 of reducing gender inequalities, here's how sustainable development initiatives work towards this goal:

Gender equality and empowerment: Sustainable development acknowledges that gender equality is important for preventing sexual violence and exploitation.^[21] By empowering women and promoting their rights, these initiatives challenge traditional power dynamics that contribute to violence.

Legal and policy reforms: Many sustainable development goals advocate for legal and policy reforms that criminalize sexual violence and exploitation. These changes provide a legal framework for holding perpetrators accountable and protecting victims.

Knowledge and awareness: Sustainable development efforts often include educational programs that raise awareness about sexual violence and exploitation.^[22] Comprehensive sexual education and awareness campaigns teach individuals about consent, respectful relationships, and their rights.

Support services: Sustainable development initiatives promote the establishment of support services for survivors of sexual violence and exploitation. These services

include counselling, medical care, legal aid, and shelters, creating a safety net for those affected.

Prevention programs: Sustainable development focuses on preventing sexual violence through community-based programs. These initiatives promote positive masculinity, healthy relationships, and bystander intervention to create a culture of respect.

Economic empowerment: Economic vulnerability can increase the risk of exploitation. Sustainable development works to provide economic opportunities, especially for marginalized groups, reducing their vulnerability to sexual exploitation.^[23]

Youth engagement: Engaging young people in sustainable development efforts is crucial. By educating them about their rights, consent, and respectful relationships, these initiatives contribute to preventing sexual violence from an early age.^[29]

Data collection and research: Sustainable development goals emphasize the importance of collecting data on sexual violence and exploitation. This information helps identify trends, assess the effectiveness of interventions, and inform policy decisions.

Global partnerships: Addressing sexual violence requires collaboration between governments, organizations, and civil society at local, national, and international levels. Sustainable development encourages these partnerships to share best practices and resources.^[24]

Addressing root causes: Sustainable development efforts aim to address the root causes of sexual violence, including poverty, inequality, and harmful gender norms.^[25] These initiatives work towards creating safer environments by tackling these underlying factors.

The interconnectedness of sustainable

development goals (SDGs) is a key principle that underscores the multifaceted nature of global challenges and the need for holistic solutions. The various SDGs are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, and their achievement collectively contributes to creating healthier societies. Here's how the interconnectedness of SDGs influences societal well-being:

Health and well-being (SDG 3): Improved health conditions, including sexual health, contribute to healthier populations that are better equipped to participate in social, economic, and environmental activities, driving progress across all SDGs.^[26]

Quality education (SDG 4): Education empowers individuals with knowledge and skills that enable them to enjoy healthier lives, make deliberate decisions about their sexual health, and engage actively in sustainable development efforts.^[28]

Gender equality (SDG 5): Gender equality is central to sustainable development. When women have equal access to education, resources, and decision-making, it positively impacts their health, family planning choices, and overall well-being.

Clean water and sanitation (SDG 6): Accessing clean water and sanitation is crucial for preventing waterborne diseases and maintaining good health, indirectly contributing to sexual health by reducing infections and illnesses.

Reduced inequalities (SDG 10): Addressing inequalities ensures that vulnerable populations, including marginalized groups and individuals with limited access to sexual health resources, are not left behind in achieving optimal health and well-being.

Peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16): Establishing strong institutions and reducing violence fosters an environment where individuals feel safe discussing sexual health, seeking support, and accessing services without fear of harm or discrimination.

Partnerships for the goals (SDG 17):

Collaboration between communities, organisations, and governments is vital for achieving sustainable development. Partnerships amplify the impact of efforts to improve health, education, gender equality, and more.^[28]

Decent work and economic growth (SDG 8):

Economic growth and decent work opportunities contribute to better access to healthcare, education, and resources, ultimately positively affecting individuals' overall well-being, including their sexual health.

Life below water and life on land (SDGs 14 and 15):

Environmental well-being affects human health, including sexual health, through factors such as air and water quality, ecosystem stability, and the prevention of vector-borne diseases.

No poverty (SDG 1) and zero hunger (SDG 2):

Addressing poverty and hunger supports better health outcomes by ensuring access to essential resources, nutrition, and health services that are integral to overall well-being.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pursuing sustainable development encompasses a comprehensive and interconnected approach to fostering healthier societies. By recognizing the pivotal role of sexual health within the broader context of well-being, sustainable development initiatives pave the way for positive transformations across multiple dimensions.

The inter linkages between sustainable development goals underscore the realization that education, gender equality, access to healthcare, and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked with sexual health outcomes. By addressing these issues collectively, sustainable development initiatives create a ripple effect that resonates through societies, fostering respectful

relationships, preventing violence, and securing the good health of both contemporary and subsequent generations.

Acknowledgment: None

Conflict of interest: None

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