



Review Article

Sexual health and the SDGs: Opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

The integration of sexual health into the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offers both opportunities and challenges. It can potentially enhance global development by addressing physical, mental, and emotional dimensions of well-being and aligning with goals such as good health, quality education, gender equality, and reduced inequalities. However, deeply rooted cultural norms, societal taboos, limited access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, and insufficient resources pose significant obstacles. Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving education, policy reform, and resource allocation. Ultimately, the harmonious integration of sexual health within the SDGs can contribute to holistic human well-being and progress on multiple fronts.

Introduction

Sexual health, a multifaceted construct encompassing physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being concerning one's sexuality, stands as a fundamental aspect of human existence. It contributes to personal well-being and plays a pivotal role in shaping societies and global development. As societies evolve and strive for progress, the importance

of sexual health has garnered recognition on international platforms. Concurrently, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a transformative global agenda aimed at addressing a wide spectrum of challenges by 2030, provide a comprehensive framework for advancing humanity. ^[1] The convergence of sexual health and the SDGs presents an intricate landscape rich with opportunities to foster holistic development, but it also unveils complex challenges that necessitate thorough consideration.

Sexual health is a human right that transcends cultural boundaries. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual health as "a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity". ^[1] This definition underscores the comprehensive nature of

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sexual health, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various aspects of human life. Sexual health extends beyond the prevention of sexually transmitted infections to encompass the broader domains of sexual rights, reproductive health, and healthy relationships. It is a foundation upon which individuals can build fulfilling lives, contribute to their communities, and engage in meaningful interactions.

At the heart of the global development agenda are the SDGs, an ambitious framework of 17 interconnected goals designed to tackle issues ranging from poverty and inequality to climate change and education. These goals encapsulate the aspirations of nations and communities worldwide and provide a roadmap for collective action. While the SDGs encompass a wide array of challenges, they also recognize that no aspect of development can be truly achieved without acknowledging the role of sexual health. For instance, SDG 3 aims to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages,”^[11] aligning closely with the multifaceted nature of sexual health. This SDG recognizes that good health extends beyond physical well-being and

encompasses mental, emotional, and social dimensions, which are intricately tied to sexual health.

The convergence of sexual health and the SDGs offers compelling opportunities for advancing global development. As recognized by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), sexual and reproductive health is “not just a matter of individual well-being; it is a matter of economic and social development”.^[2] Addressing sexual health aligns with numerous SDGs beyond SDG 3. Comprehensive sexual education, which empowers individuals with accurate information about their bodies, relationships, and rights, falls under the purview of SDG 4’s mission to provide “inclusive and equitable quality education” for all.^[3] Moreover, guaranteeing the availability of sexual and reproductive healthcare services corresponds to the objective of SDG 5, which strives to attain gender equality and enhance the empowerment of women and girls.^[4] This access empowers individuals to make informed choices about their bodies and reproductive health, reducing gender-based disparities and promoting equitable societies.

Table 1: Definition of sexual health and its significance

Aspect	Definition of Sexual Health	Significance	SDG Alignment
Definition	“Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity”.	Encompasses holistic aspects of well-being, recognizing the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, psychological, and social dimensions.	-
Human Rights	Upholds the right to make informed decisions about sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence.	Ensures individuals’ autonomy over their bodies and reproductive choices, promoting dignity and respect.	SDG 3, SDG 5
Quality of Life	Contributes to overall quality of life and self-esteem, fostering positive relationships and emotional well-being.	Impacts mental health positively and facilitates healthy interpersonal connections.	SDG 3, SDG 4

Gender Dynamics	Shapes gender dynamics by promoting respectful relationships, consent, and gender equality.	Contributes to breaking down traditional gender norms and promoting equal power dynamics.	SDG 5
Public Health	Integration into healthcare systems and policies can lead to reduced STIs, unplanned pregnancies, maternal mortality, and improved population health.	Addresses public health challenges related to reproductive health, preventing the spread of infections, and improving maternal outcomes.	SDG 3

(Source:https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual_health/defining_sexual_health.pdf. [5])

Overview of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and their aims^[5,6]

“The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a comprehensive global agenda adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to address pressing global challenges and promote sustainable development by 2030”. The SDGs build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and encompass a broader scope, recognizing that economic, social, and environmental aspects are interconnected and must be pursued simultaneously. Comprising 17 goals and 169 targets, the SDGs aim to tackle various issues, including poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and inadequate access to essential services.

- ◆ *Goal 1: No poverty:* The aim is to end poverty in all its forms by implementing social protection systems and policies that promote economic growth and resilience.
- ◆ *Goal 2: Zero hunger:* This goal targets eradicating hunger, achieving food security, improved nutrition, and sustainable agriculture.
- ◆ *Goal 3: Good health and well-being:* The goal focuses on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages, addressing issues such as disease prevention, maternal and child health, and access to essential healthcare services.
- ◆ *Goal 4: Quality education:* The aim is to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, addressing issues like access to education and improving educational quality.
- ◆ *Goal 5: Gender equality:* This goal seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by addressing gender-based discrimination and ensuring equal rights and opportunities.
- ◆ *Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation:* The focus is on ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, with an emphasis on access to clean and safe drinking water.
- ◆ *Goal 7: Affordable and clean energy:* This goal aims to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
- ◆ *Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth:* The goal aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- ◆ *Goal 9: Industry, innovation, and infrastructure:* The focus is on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and fostering innovation.
- ◆ *Goal 10: Reduced inequalities:* This goal targets the reduction of inequalities

within and among countries, addressing disparities in income, social protection, and representation.

- ◆ *Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities:* The aim is to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, addressing issues like urbanization, housing, and infrastructure.
- ◆ *Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production:* The goal promotes sustainable consumption and production patterns, addressing issues like waste management and resource efficiency.
- ◆ *Goal 13: Climate action:* This goal seeks urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts through mitigation, adaptation, and capacity-building.
- ◆ *Goal 14: Life below water:* The aim is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
- ◆ *Goal 15: Life on land:* This goal focuses on protecting, restoring, and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, managing forests sustainably, and combating desertification and land degradation.
- ◆ *Goal 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions:* The aim is to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.
- ◆ *Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals:* This goal emphasizes the importance of global partnerships and cooperation to achieve the SDGs, focusing on financing, technology transfer, capacity-building, and data availability.

The integration of sexual health into the

SDGs presents both opportunities and challenges for global development

The integration of sexual health into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embodies a complex and multifaceted intersection that holds both significant opportunities and formidable challenges for global development. This synergy underscores the essential role that sexual health plays in achieving holistic and sustainable progress. However, navigating this integration requires addressing deep-seated societal taboos, resource constraints, and the need for policy reforms to harness its potential fully.

Opportunities

- i. Holistic well-being and SDG 3: Sexual health encompasses physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being, aligning seamlessly with SDG 3's objective to ensure good health and well-being for all.^[1] Addressing sexual health concerns, such as reproductive health and sexually transmitted infections, promotes healthier lives, reduces disease burden, and enhances overall quality of life.
- ii. Empowerment through education (SDG 4): Comprehensive sexual education (CSE) is a cornerstone of sexual health promotion. By integrating sexual health education into SDG 4's commitment to quality education,^[3] individuals gain knowledge about their bodies, relationships, and rights. This empowers them to make informed decisions, fostering responsible behaviors and reducing their vulnerability to risky sexual practices.
- iii. Gender equality and SDG 5: Promoting sexual and reproductive health services aligns with SDG 5's focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.^[4] Ensuring access to these services

enables women to exercise control over their reproductive choices and health, thereby reducing gender-based disparities and promoting women’s rights.

- iv. Inclusion and reduced inequalities (SDG 10): Integrating sexual health into the SDGs acknowledges marginalized populations’ unique vulnerabilities, contributing to SDG 10’s aim of reducing inequalities within and among countries.^[6] By providing equitable access to sexual health services and education, we address disparities and promote social justice.
- v. Cultural shift and SDG 16: Fostering a culture of consent, respect, and equality through sexual health education aligns with SDG 16’s vision of peace, justice, and strong institutions.^[7] Promoting healthy attitudes towards relationships and sexuality creates societies where human rights are upheld.

Challenges

- i. Societal taboos and cultural norms: Societal taboos and cultural norms surrounding sexuality present significant barriers to integrating sexual health into

the SDGs. These norms can inhibit open discussions, hinder comprehensive education, and perpetuate stigmas around sexual health issues.

- ii. Conservative paradigms and gender disparities: Conservative attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles pose challenges in achieving SDGs related to sexual health and gender equality. Such paradigms can perpetuate gender disparities, hinder access to reproductive health services, and limit progress in achieving related goals.
- iii. Unequal access to services: Access to sexual and reproductive health services is often unequal, particularly for marginalized populations. Discrimination, lack of information, and limited resources can hinder access, exacerbating health disparities and impeding progress toward SDGs.
- iv. Political will and resource allocation: Integrating sexual health into the SDGs requires political commitment and resource allocation. Inadequate funding, lack of political will, and competing priorities can hinder the implementation of comprehensive sexual education programs and healthcare services.

Table 2: Opportunities of integrating sexual health and the SDGs

SDG	Opportunity	Description	Citation and References
3	Holistic Well-being	Addressing physical, emotional, mental, and social aspects of sexual health aligns with SDG 3’s aim to ensure good health and well-being for all. ^[1]	United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goal 3. ^[1]
4	Empowerment through Education	Comprehensive sexual education empowers individuals with knowledge about their bodies, relationships, and rights, contributing to SDG 4’s focus on quality education. ^[2]	United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goal 4. ^[3]
5	Gender Equality	Promoting sexual and reproductive health services empowers women and girls, aligning with SDG 5’s goal of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. ^[3]	United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goal 5. ^[4]
10	Inclusion and Reduced Inequalities	Integrating sexual health acknowledges the vulnerabilities of marginalized populations, contributing to SDG 10’s objective of reducing inequalities within and among countries. ^[4]	United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goal 10. ^[8]

16	Cultural Shift	Fostering a culture of consent, respect, and equality through sexual health education aligns with SDG 16's vision of peace, justice, and strong institutions. [8]	United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goal 16. [7]
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Table 3: Challenges in integrating sexual health and the SDGs [9-12]

Challenge	Description
Societal Taboos and Cultural Norms	Societal taboos and cultural norms surrounding sexuality hinder open discussions and comprehensive education, undermining efforts to integrate sexual health into the SDGs.
Conservative Paradigms and Gender Disparities	Conservative attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles can perpetuate gender disparities and hinder progress in achieving SDGs related to sexual health and gender equality.
Unequal Access to Services	Unequal access to sexual and reproductive health services, particularly for marginalized populations, exacerbates health disparities and impedes progress toward related SDGs.
Political Will and Resource Allocation	Adequate resource allocation and political commitment are essential for integrating sexual health into the SDGs. Inadequate funding and lack of political will can hinder implementation.

Societal taboos and cultural norms

Societal taboos and cultural norms surrounding sexuality stand as substantial barriers to the successful integration of sexual health into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These deeply ingrained attitudes and beliefs have the potential to hinder open conversations, comprehensive education, and effective implementation of sexual health initiatives within the broader framework of the SDGs. [13, 14, 15]

Challenges

- ◆ Stigmatization of discussions: Societal taboos often stigmatize discussions about sexual health, treating the subject as inappropriate or shameful. This lack of open discourse hampers the spread of accurate information, creating an environment where individuals might be hesitant to seek guidance, share experiences, or address concerns related to their sexual well-being.
- ◆ Limited comprehensive education: Cultural norms discouraging frank discussions about sexuality often lead to

inadequate comprehensive sexual education. Lack of proper education can result in misconceptions, misinformation, and the perpetuation of harmful practices, preventing individuals from making informed decisions about their sexual health.

- ◆ Barriers to seeking care: Societal taboos can discourage individuals from seeking sexual and reproductive health services, even when they require medical assistance. Fear of judgment or social ostracization prevents people from accessing essential healthcare resources, contributing to the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies.
- ◆ Impact on vulnerable groups: Cultural norms might disproportionately impact vulnerable groups, including adolescents, LGBTQ+ individuals, and marginalized communities. Discriminatory norms can lead to exclusion from sexual health discussions, limiting access to critical information and services and perpetuating health disparities.

Overcoming societal taboos and cultural norms

- ◆ Promoting open dialogue: Raising awareness and promoting open dialogue about sexual health can help break down taboos. Initiatives that encourage conversations in schools, communities, and families can create spaces where individuals feel comfortable discussing sexual health issues.
- ◆ Comprehensive sexual education: Implementing comprehensive sexual education programs that provide accurate information about sexual health, relationships, and consent is crucial. This education should be age-appropriate and culturally sensitive to challenge myths and misconceptions.
- ◆ Cultural sensitivity: Approaches to integrating sexual health into the SDGs should respect cultural diversity while challenging harmful norms. Collaborating with local communities and tailoring initiatives to cultural contexts can help reduce resistance to addressing sexual health issues.
- ◆ Media and entertainment: Utilizing media and entertainment platforms to portray healthy discussions about sexual health can help normalize these conversations. Positive representation can challenge stereotypes and contribute to changing societal perceptions.

Conservative paradigms and gender disparities^[16,17]

Conservative paradigms and deeply entrenched gender disparities pose significant challenges to the successful integration of sexual health into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Challenges

- ◆ Reinforcement of stigma: Conservative

paradigms can reinforce stigma around sexuality, viewing discussions and education on sexual health as taboo. This stigma discourages individuals from seeking information, accessing services, and engaging in open conversations about their sexual well-being.

- ◆ Gender inequality and health outcomes: Gender disparities rooted in conservative paradigms can lead to unequal access to sexual health resources. Women and girls may face limited agency in sexual decisions, restricted access to reproductive health services, and higher vulnerability to sexual violence and coercion.
- ◆ Impaired autonomy: Conservative norms might limit individuals' autonomy over their bodies and sexual choices, particularly for women and marginalized gender identities. This can result in a lack of control over reproductive decisions and exposure to risky sexual behaviors.
- ◆ LGBTQ+ discrimination: Conservative paradigms can perpetuate discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, hindering their access to appropriate sexual health education and services. This exclusion contributes to health disparities and increased vulnerability to mental health issues.

Overcoming conservative paradigms and gender disparities

- ◆ Raising awareness: Education campaigns and public awareness initiatives can challenge conservative beliefs by providing evidence-based information on sexual health, gender equality, and human rights. These efforts can debunk myths and promote informed decision-making.
- ◆ Policy reform: Advocacy for policy changes that promote gender equality and comprehensive sexual education is

essential. Revising existing laws to protect sexual rights and reproductive health can mitigate the impact of conservative ideologies.

- ♦ Community engagement: Engaging religious and community leaders in open dialogues about sexual health can help bridge gaps between conservative values and evidence-based practices. This approach can lead to more inclusive and informed perspectives.
- ♦ Inclusive education: Integrating LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual health education into curricula can challenge discriminatory attitudes, promote empathy, and contribute to more accepting societies.

Unequal access to sexual and reproductive health services^[18, 19, 20]

Unequal access to sexual and reproductive health services is a significant challenge in successfully integrating sexual health into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Disparities in access hinder progress in achieving SDGs related to sexual health, gender equality, and overall well-being.

Challenges

- ♦ Marginalized populations: Unequal access disproportionately affects marginalized populations, including low-income individuals, rural communities, migrants, and ethnic minorities. These groups often face barriers such as limited healthcare infrastructure, geographic isolation, and discriminatory practices.
- ♦ Youth and adolescents: Adolescents may encounter barriers due to social norms, inadequate sexual education, and lack of confidential services. Limited access to information and contraception can lead to early and unintended pregnancies, exacerbating educational and economic disparities.

- ♦ Limited Availability: Inadequate availability of sexual and reproductive health services in specific regions contributes to unequal access. Limited healthcare facilities, a shortage of trained professionals, and a lack of essential supplies hinder individuals’ ability to seek necessary care.
- ♦ Gender-based discrimination: Discriminatory practices and gender norms can restrict women and girls’ access to sexual health services. Gender-based violence, lack of decision-making autonomy, and sociocultural norms limit their ability to access comprehensive sexual and reproductive care.

Overcoming unequal access to services:

- ♦ Universal health coverage: Expanding access to sexual and reproductive health services through universal health coverage ensures that all individuals can access essential services without financial barriers.
- ♦ Community health workers: Deploying community health workers in under served areas can bridge the gap between healthcare facilities and remote populations, providing information, education, and essential care.
- ♦ Mobile health technologies: Leveraging mobile health technologies can deliver sexual health information and services to remote or marginalized communities, ensuring more comprehensive access to information and care.
- ♦ Youth-friendly services: Establishing youth-friendly clinics and services tailored to adolescents’ needs creates a safe and confidential environment for accessing sexual health information and services.
- ♦ Empowerment and education: Comprehensive sexual education

programs that empower individuals with information about their sexual rights, health, and contraception can contribute to informed decision-making and improved access.

Conclusion

The convergence of sexual health and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embodies a profound synergy that intertwines human well-being, dignity, gender equality, and social advancement. This union presents a rich landscape of opportunities interwoven with critical challenges, collectively shaping a future where sexual health is integral to global development.

Opportunities and aspirations

The amalgamation of sexual health with the SDGs opens numerous transformative opportunities. It intertwines seamlessly with SDG 3, fostering a complete well-being that transcends mere absence of disease and encompasses emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. The comprehensive sexual education advanced through SDG 4 empowers individuals, equipping them with the knowledge to make informed choices, thereby curbing risks and promoting healthier behaviours. This integration resonates with the core of SDG 5, propelling gender equality as women's reproductive rights and autonomy over their bodies are acknowledged as essential components. The inclusivity underscored by SDG 10 is upheld as the marginalized are granted access to information, services, and empowerment through sexual health initiatives.

Navigating challenges for transformative change

Despite these opportunities, formidable challenges persist. Societal taboos and cultural norms cloud open conversations about sexual health, curtailing the dissemination of accurate information and creating barriers to essential services. Conservative paradigms

hinder progress by perpetuating gender disparities, constraining women's agency, and marginalizing LGBTQ+ communities. Moreover, unequal access to sexual and reproductive health services compounds disparities, limiting progress toward health-related SDGs.

Addressing these challenges requires persistent commitment and multi-pronged strategies. Destigmatizing sexual health discussions through education, media, and community engagement can shatter taboos and normalize open dialogue. Advocacy and policy reforms are needed to challenge conservative ideologies and promote gender equality in all dimensions. Innovative solutions, such as digital platforms and youth-friendly services, can bridge gaps in access, especially among vulnerable groups.

Crafting a holistic future

Integrating sexual health into the SDGs is more than a policy initiative; it's a commitment to holistic development that embraces the core values of dignity, equality, and well-being. It envisions a world where every individual possesses the knowledge and agency to navigate their sexual journey with confidence, free from discrimination and prejudice. This vision necessitates cultural shifts, policy reforms, and collective efforts that ensure no one is left behind.

In conclusion, the confluence of sexual health and the SDGs charts a course toward a world where individuals are empowered to live healthy, fulfilling lives, unburdened by societal taboos and gender inequalities. By embracing the opportunities, confronting the challenges, and fostering collaboration, we can lay the foundation for a future where sexual health is a catalyst for positive transformation, driving us closer to realizing sustainable, equitable, and dignified development.

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