

THE FIGHT FOR SEXUAL SELF-DETERMINATION: THE NEXT ROUND



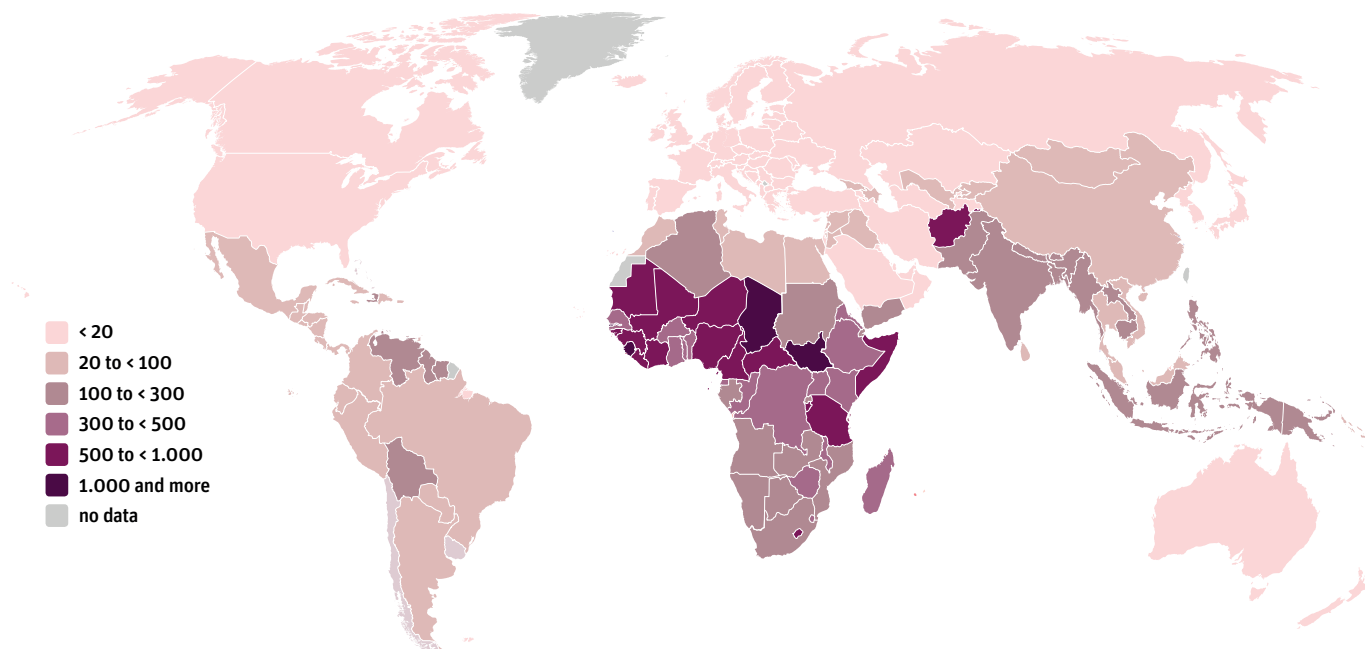
At the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994, the international community agreed that all individuals should have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly about the number and the spacing of their children and have the information, education and means to do so.¹ After all, self-determination – especially for women – is key to sustainable development.

The study 'A contested issue. The rise in international opposition to the right to sexual self-determination' was developed by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development for the occasion of the Nairobi Summit (the conference marking the 25th anniversary of the ICPD in November 2019). It presents an analysis of progress made since 1994 and highlights what action is needed to reach the ICPD goals. It also discusses the opposition of sexual and reproductive self-determination around the World and in Europe, and presents recommendations on how to counter such activities.

Unattained goals

While some progress has been made since the groundbreaking ICPD in Cairo, many of the goals agreed there and in the consequent Programme of Action remain unachieved. In developing countries, for example, more than 200 million women would like to avoid pregnancy but don't have access to modern contraception. In addition, over 45 million women receive inadequate or no care during pregnancy.² In Sub-Saharan Africa, maternal mortality was in 2015 around 550 deaths per 100,000 live births. This is almost 36 times higher than in North America or Europe.³

Furthermore, given that comprehensive sexuality education is by no means a standard everywhere, many women simply do not know how to limit their family size – as they have never received any education or information. In Chad, Mauritania and the Central African Republic for example, every third woman does not know a single modern method of contraception.⁴



- 1 United Nations Population Fund (2014). Programme of Action. Adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development Cairo, 5-13 September 1994. New York. www.unfpa.org/publications/international-conference-population-and-development-programme-action.
- 2 Starrs AM, Ezeh AC, Barker G et al. (2018). Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission, The Lancet.
- 3 World Bank (2019). World Development Indicators. Washington, DC. databank.worldbank.org/home.aspx.
- 4 The DHS Program. STATcompiler. Rockville. statcompiler.com/en/index.htm.

Resistance from different sides

Progress on sexual and reproductive self-determination is also slow due to the continuing resistance from different sides. The main points of contention continue to include access to modern family planning, sexual education for young people and the discussion on abortion. Headwinds on these issues come from very different directions and have even increased in recent years.

During the ICPD in Cairo, which took place during Bill Clinton's presidency, **the United States** was one of the pacemakers on the agenda for more sexual self-determination. This completely changed under Republican presidents – including the current President, Donald Trump. The US has once again turned from a temporary champion of self-determined sexuality to a strong opponent. Under the growing influence of the Christian Right, Trump has re-introduced and even intensified the Mexico City Policy (MCP), which was last implemented by his Republican predecessors. According to this policy, foreign Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) cannot receive US development funds if they are in any way involved with abortion – that is, if they offer information and counselling for affected women, perform abortions or work towards their legalisation. The consequences of US policy are particularly noticeable in developing countries, where international NGOs provide important healthcare services. The financial losses for the organisations that do not bow to the MCP often force them to reduce staff numbers, stop their services and sometimes even close clinics.

The Catholic Church also hinders progress in the field of sexual and reproductive self-determination. Even under Pope Francis, who is considered progressive, the Vatican continues to vehemently reject any form of modern family planning. Its conservative positions on the subject of family planning affect many people, particularly in developing countries, where the doctrine of the Holy See carries even more weight. The influence of the Vatican is particularly strong in African countries, where a large part of the population is Catholic. The opinion of local bishops contributes to the fact that African Catholics' approval of contraceptives is still lower than in other parts of the world. In addition, via its observer status at the United Nations, the Vatican works with conservative states to make international decision-making, which could further strengthen the right to freedom of choice, more difficult. In 2012 for instance, an alliance of the Holy See with states such as Syria and Egypt prevented the mentioning of reproductive rights in the final document of the Rio +20 conference (which initiated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)).

European imbalances

The European Union (EU) has always been an advocate of human rights and thus also of the right to sexual self-determination. It has also taken this matter forward in its development cooperation. In 2017, for example, it contributed a total of 216 million euros for projects worldwide through various channels. The contributions of the ten largest donors among the EU member states further amounted to 600 million euros in 2017.⁵

Much progress has been made in Europe in this area since 1994. However, the ability of Europeans to plan their own family and to make self-determined decisions about their sexuality and reproduction varies greatly from one country to another. Some countries are upholding their resistance against the goals adopted in Cairo. Malta, for example, already expressed reservations about the concepts of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) at the ICPD in 1994 and clarified that abortion is incompatible with the national law of the island state. In Poland and Hungary, some politicians and parts of the population see sexual self-determination as a threat to their own cultural values.

However, parties and organisations opposing the ICPD and its programme of action are increasing in popularity at both the member state and EU level. With the aim of protecting the 'traditional family' and the right to life, 'anti-choice' movements and right-wing populist forces are increasingly complicating advocacy on sexual and reproductive self-determination in Brussels and in the member states. So far, the successes of the ICPD opponents at the European level remain manageable. However, the fact that they have intensified their networking since the early 2000s, and are jointly trying to move their agenda into the political mainstream is causing increased concern for advocates of sexual self-determination.

⁵ Countdown 2030 Europe (2019). European Donor Support to Sexual & Reproductive Health & Family Planning. Trends Analysis 2017-18.

Accelerating progress

With their resistance to self-determination in all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, the opponents are thus also impeding development and poverty reduction. The impetus that they are currently experiencing worldwide could not only block further progress in the future but also – in the worst-case scenario – dilute successes already achieved in the areas of SRHR.

It is therefore all the more important that advocates in favour of the commitments made in Cairo join forces worldwide. It is in the hands of the numerous international institutions, civil society organisations and governments, which have been campaigning for decades for greater freedom of decision on sexuality and reproduction, to consolidate, and if possible accelerate the progress made so far.

In particular, they should:

- **deepen the coalition of advocates on the international stage**
- **continue and further strengthen support for existing initiatives**
- **further expand financing for family planning and other programmes**
- **highlight the positive effects of sexual self-determination**
- **emphasize the importance of sexual and reproductive self-determination for achieving the SDGs**
- **improve the reach of central arguments and facts about the use of new media.**

This document presents the summary of the discussion paper 'A Contested Issue. The rise in international opposition to the right to sexual self-determination' by the Berlin Institute (2020). The summary and full English version of the study is available at www.dsw.org

The German and English version of the discussion paper are available for free download in PDF format from: www.berlin-institut.org/publikationen/discussion-papers/umkaempftes-terrain.html

The Berlin Institute for Population and Development is an independent think tank, which examines the causes and consequences of regional and global demographic changes.

Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (DSW) is a global development organisation that focuses on the needs and potential of the largest youth generation in history.

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