

Special Edition  
"Sexual Health for All"

## Commentary

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# Sexual Health for All

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## INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined 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. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled"<sup>1</sup>

While this definition is clearly stated, the context for understanding what it means for populations and communities globally is not well researched and/or discussed in the mainstream, scholarly literature.<sup>2,3</sup> In the newly established Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations has created one goal target about sexual health—it is 3.7, which states that by the year 2030, governments will "ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services"<sup>4</sup> What "sexual healthcare services" means is not defined, and as a consequence, sexual health and how people identify needed services must be further researched so that "Sexual Health for All" can be understood in the context of the varied populations around the world.<sup>3</sup> Rather than simply discussing sexual health in terms of reproductive health, sexually transmitted infections and/or as a woman's issue, research about sexual health is critical and more information is needed to educate people about positive sexual health.<sup>3</sup>

In an article by Frost, et al<sup>5</sup> health was defined in a broader context than simply reproductive health—sexual health could be considered a part of reproductive health, but should also be a component in social/cultural, emotional, and spiritual health.<sup>6</sup> In a recent article by Cougar Hall et al<sup>7</sup> researchers noted that in popular magazines sexual health was framed in the context of what was important to make a man happy during sex; interestingly, these popular articles did not address (1) what was important to make women happy during sex, (2) sexual responsibility, (3) the impact of rape/sexual violence, (4) non-heterosexual sexual health, and/or (5) open and positive communication strategies about sexual health, etc.<sup>3</sup>

A key component for understanding and promoting sexual health will be in obtaining and using evidence-based information for educating governments, communities, and individuals about the right for sexual health. Specifically, areas for which more research is needed is noted in Berglas et al<sup>6</sup>: "gender equality and norms," "race, ethnicity, and class," "sexual orientation and diversity," "violence," "relationship rights and responsibilities," "sexual expression and pleasure," and "citizenship and advocacy". In addition, when discussing research areas about sexual health, Veale et al<sup>8(p.3)</sup> noted that various social networking platforms are available to promote intervention strategies for sexual health and that these platforms are used by the general public on a number of health topics.<sup>8,9</sup> Thus solutions are available for promoting sexual health—but there is a need for current evidence-based research that highlights a rights-base holistic view of healthy sex for heterosexual and marginalized groups, e.g., transgender/transsexual, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) populations, refugees, youth/adolescents, disabled women, aging women, etc.

This special issue of the Women's Health – Open Journal will begin an interdisciplinary exploration of sexual health and provide an opportunity to explore critical thinking and research on a number of areas about sexual health. The articles in the special issue will provide

a theoretical frame as well as critical analyses of either new research or current practical problems in working in the arena of global women's health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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