



WEST AFRICAN INSTITUTE
OF PUBLIC HEALTH

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN WEST AFRICA.

A POLICY BRIEF BY EBINABO VIOLET URIAH

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RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND
PUBLIC HEALTH IN WEST AFRICA.**

A Policy Brief by
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**REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN WEST
AFRICA.**

BACKGROUND

Reproductive Health encompasses the holistic well-being and optimal functioning of all reproductive organs throughout the stages of reproduction, encompassing physical, mental, and emotional aspects.

Reproductive rights constitute the legal freedoms and entitlements concerning reproduction, ensuring individuals the autonomy to make decisions regarding their reproductive choices. It encompasses the ability to engage in safe and satisfying sexual activity, the freedom to choose when and if to have children, and the means to do so safely¹.

Central to reproductive rights is the concept of reproductive choice, affirming individuals, particularly women, the right to determine whether to conceive, including the option of terminating unwanted pregnancies. Additionally, it involves the prerogative to select preferred methods of family planning and contraception².

However, entrenched gender inequalities and societal norms often impede young women and girls from exercising agency over their reproductive health decisions. Consequently, they face obstacles in accessing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services, rendering them vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, and complications associated with childbirth and pregnancy³.

Numerous barriers persist, including patriarchal structures, gendered practices such as early marriage and son preference, as well as pervasive violence against women. These systemic factors contribute to limited economic opportunities for women, hindering their socioeconomic advancement and overall health outcomes⁴.

Addressing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that integrates the participation of both young men and women. By promoting gender equity and inclusion, sustainable advancements in reproductive health can be achieved. Recognizing reproductive rights as fundamental components of gender equality and public health is imperative⁵.

In the context of West Africa, persistent obstacles in reproductive healthcare exacerbate gender disparities and undermine public health outcomes. This policy brief aims to dissect the complexities of reproductive rights issues, access policy implications and propose recommendations to overcome barriers and enhance access to reproductive health services.

¹ World Health Organization: Sexual and Reproductive Health (2003).

² World Health Organization: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2007). The Right to Health.

³ Plan international: Reproductive Health Rights (2018).

⁴ National Library of Medicine: Gender Issues In Reproductive Health (2011).

⁵ National Library of Medicine: Gender Issues In Reproductive Health (2011).

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Gender Equality and Reproductive Rights:

Gender norms, cultural beliefs, and societal expectations influence women's autonomy over their reproductive choices in West Africa. Limited access to reproductive rights perpetuates gender inequalities, compromising women's economic opportunities and well-being. Empowering women to make informed decisions about their reproductive health is essential for advancing gender equal⁶

Contraception and Family Planning:

Access to contraception and family planning services remains a challenge in many West African countries. High fertility rates, limited awareness, and financial barriers hinder individuals' ability to plan their families and futures. Inadequate access contributes to unintended pregnancies, maternal and infant mortality, and socioeconomic disparities⁷.

Impact on Public Health:

The lack of accessible and affordable reproductive healthcare services contributes to high rates of maternal mortality, unsafe abortions, and poor maternal and child health outcomes. Inadequate family planning contributes to overpopulation, straining healthcare systems and hindering sustainable development

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing a comprehensive policy on Reproductive Health & Rights, Gender Equality and Public Health in West Africa could lead to improved access to health care services, reduced maternal and child mortality, increased empowerment of women, enhanced gender equality and better overall public health outcomes West Africa. they include;

Reduced Maternal and Infant Mortality; this helps to contribute to the reduction in maternal and infant mortality rates. By increasing access to safe reproductive health care services and family planning options. It seeks to improve maternal and child health outcomes in West Africa⁸.

Enhance Equitable Access to Reproductive Health Care Services; this aims to identify and address the barriers that hinder individuals' access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services in West Africa. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to reducing gender disparities and improving the overall reproductive health outcomes of women and men in the region⁹.

Empower Informed Decision Making; This policy seeks to empower individuals with accurate information and knowledge about reproductive health, contraception, and family planning. It

⁶ World Health Organization; Sexual and Reproductive Health (2023).

⁷ Population Reference Bureau; Family Planning in West Africa (2008).

⁸ National Library of Medicine; Improving Birth Outcomes (2003).

⁹ National Centre for Biotechnology Information; Equity and Quality Health Care Access (2020).

aims to enable individuals to make informed decisions that align with their personal preferences, contributing to healthier reproductive choices and improve public health outcomes.

Promote Gender Equality by Addressing Challenges Related to Reproductive Rights and Access; This aims to promote gender equality. It seeks to challenge cultural norms, social expectations, and legal barriers that contribute to unequal power dynamics and limited autonomy, particularly for women, in matters of reproductive health¹⁰.

This policy brief aims to address the prevalence of unsafe abortions by advocating for legal reforms and accessible reproductive healthcare services. By doing so, it seeks to mitigate the health risks associated with unsafe practices and contribute to improved overall reproductive health outcomes.

This policy brief seeks to enhance the capacity of healthcare providers in offering gender-inclusive, culturally sensitive, and non-judgmental reproductive healthcare services. By promoting comprehensive training, it aims to ensure that healthcare providers can offer respectful care and support informed decision-making.

This policy brief aims to foster collaboration among stakeholders, including governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and international agencies. It seeks to create a united front in advocating for policy changes, implementing strategies, and enhancing reproductive rights and access.

Advocate for Legal Reforms: The policy brief aims to advocate for legal reforms that align with international human rights standards and protect reproductive rights. By working towards the decriminalisation of abortion and the promotion of reproductive rights, it seeks to ensure that individuals have safe and legal options for reproductive healthcare¹¹.

Contribute to Sustainable Development by Addressing Reproductive Health Challenges and Promoting Gender Equality: The policy brief aims to contribute to sustainable development in West Africa. It seeks to create an environment where individuals can make informed reproductive choices, leading to healthier populations and improved socio-economic outcomes.

Gender Equality and Public Health Nexus

The interconnection between gender equality and public health has gained prominence as a crucial consideration in shaping policies, programs, and interventions aimed at improving health outcomes and promoting social equity. The term "gender equality and public health nexus" underscores the undeniable influence of gender dynamics on various aspects of

¹⁰ United States Agency for International Development; Promoting Gender Equality Through Health (2021).

¹¹ Amnesty International: My Body, My Rights; the State of the World's Sexual and Reproductive Rights (2020).

health, highlighting the need to address gender-related disparities to achieve comprehensive public health goals.

Gender equality is more than a social principle; it is a determinant that significantly shapes health behaviours, access to healthcare services, and overall well-being. Recognising gender as a pivotal social determinant of health emphasises the broader societal context in which health disparities exist. This recognition is particularly crucial in understanding the unique health challenges faced by individuals of different genders¹².

Distinct gender-based health risks emerge due to biological differences, social expectations, and power imbalances. Women's reproductive health needs, such as maternal health and family planning, are distinct from men's health requirements. Gender minorities often face heightened health risks due to stigma, discrimination, and limited access to healthcare services. Acknowledging these differences allows for tailored interventions that address specific health vulnerabilities.

The gender equality and public health nexus is further illuminated by its impact on health behaviours. Gender norms and roles influence how individuals perceive and engage with healthcare services. Traditional gender norms might discourage men from seeking medical care or engaging in preventive health practices, while women may prioritise caregiving over their own health needs. Such behaviours, deeply entrenched in societal expectations, affect health outcomes and underscore the necessity of considering gender dynamics in health interventions.

Reproductive health plays a significant role in the gender equality and public health nexus. Ensuring access to reproductive healthcare services and empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their reproductive health are integral to achieving gender equality. Gender-responsive family planning programs and maternal health services contribute not only to better health outcomes for women but also to improved overall public health.

Gender-based violence is another dimension of the nexus. Discrimination, domestic violence, and sexual assault have profound physical and mental health consequences. Addressing gender-based violence is paramount not only for individual well-being but also for fostering environments conducive to public health.

Economic empowerment is closely linked to gender equality and public health. Gender-based economic disparities impact access to healthcare, nutrition, and living conditions. Empowered individuals, regardless of gender, are more likely to prioritise health and invest in the well-being of their families, contributing to better health outcomes and sustainable communities.

Policy implications of the gender equality and public health nexus emphasise gender-sensitive approaches in healthcare provision. Policies that address gender-based health disparities,

¹² National Library of Medicine; Gender Equity and Public Health Outcomes (2020).

promote gender-responsive healthcare services, and ensure equitable access to care are vital in dismantling barriers to health and achieving optimal public health outcomes for all.

Some key challenges the policy brief seeks to tackle include:

Limited Access to Reproductive Healthcare Services: This policy brief addresses the challenge of limited access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services, particularly in rural and underserved areas. This lack of access hinders individuals from receiving essential reproductive health services, contributing to poor maternal and child health outcomes.

Gender Inequalities and Norms: Cultural norms and gender inequalities play a significant role in limiting women's autonomy over their reproductive choices. The policy brief seeks to address these norms by advocating for policies that empower women to make informed decisions about their reproductive health and challenge societal expectations¹³.

High Fertility Rates and Limited Family Planning: The challenge of high fertility rates and limited family planning options is addressed through the policy brief's emphasis on accessible and affordable reproductive healthcare services. By offering a range of contraceptive methods and promoting family planning education, the policy seeks to empower individuals to plan their families and futures¹⁴.

Unsafe Abortions and Maternal Mortality: Restrictive abortion laws contribute to unsafe abortions and maternal mortality rates. The policy brief advocates for legal reforms and comprehensive reproductive healthcare services to mitigate the risks associated with unsafe abortions and improve maternal health outcomes¹⁵.

Inadequate Reproductive Health Education: Limited comprehensive sex education in schools contributes to misinformation, myths, and misconceptions about reproductive health. The policy brief addresses this challenge by recommending comprehensive reproductive health education programs that provide accurate information about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and gender equality.

Geographic Disparities: Inadequate healthcare infrastructure in rural areas leads to geographic disparities in access to reproductive healthcare services. The policy brief proposes the establishment of reproductive healthcare centers in underserved areas to ensure equitable access to services and maternal care¹⁶.

Lack of Community Awareness: Cultural taboos and lack of awareness about reproductive rights contribute to barriers in accessing reproductive healthcare. The policy brief suggests

¹³ The Lancet; Gender Inequality and Restrictive Gender Norms: Framing the challenges to Health (2019).

¹⁵ IPAS Community Engagement: A Key Strategy for Expanding Abortion Access and Improving Reproductive Health Workforce.

¹⁶ Rural Health Information- Health Care Access in Rural Communities.

community engagement campaigns to raise awareness, dispel myths, and foster open discussions about reproductive rights and gender equality¹⁷.

Healthcare Provider Capacity and Sensitivity: The policy brief addresses the challenge of healthcare provider biases and insensitivity by recommending comprehensive training programs. These programs aim to equip healthcare providers with the skills to offer gender-inclusive, culturally sensitive, and nonjudgmental reproductive healthcare services.

Lack of Data-Driven Policies: The lack of data collection and analysis on reproductive health outcomes hinders evidence-based policy adjustments. The policy brief emphasizes the importance of data collection to monitor progress, identify trends, and enhance policies and interventions

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Health Workforce Training: To ensure effective implementation of reproductive rights and access policies, it is imperative to train healthcare providers comprehensively. Training programs should include modules on cultural sensitivity, gender-inclusive care, and effective communication. Providers must be educated about the diverse reproductive health needs of different genders, ensuring that their services are tailored to individual preferences. The West African Institute of Public Health can collaborate with medical institutions to develop standardised training curricula and conduct workshops that equip healthcare professionals with the skills needed to offer non-judgmental and respectful reproductive healthcare services¹⁸.

Legal Reforms and Policy Advocacy: Advocacy efforts and legal reforms play a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of reproductive rights and access. Collaborating with governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations, and international agencies, the West African Institute of Public Health can initiate policy dialogues and advocacy campaigns to influence legal changes. These efforts should focus on decriminalising abortion, protecting the rights of marginalised groups, and ensuring that reproductive health policies are in alignment with international human rights standards. By engaging stakeholders across various sectors, the institute can drive substantial policy changes that prioritise gender equality and public health.

¹⁷ National Library of Medicine; Raising Awareness about Reproductive Morbidity.

¹⁸ World Health Organization; Health Work Force Development (2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS;

In addressing the complex and multifaceted issue of reproductive rights and access in West Africa, the West African Institute of Public Health can play a significant role. By implementing comprehensive strategies such as reproductive health education, accessible healthcare services, community engagement, health workforce training, legal reforms, data collection, and international collaboration, the institute can drive meaningful change that positively impacts gender equality and public health outcomes.

It is crucial to recognise that no single approach can fully address the challenges at hand. Instead, a holistic and collaborative approach that involves multiple stakeholders, including governments, civil society, healthcare providers, and international partners, will be essential for achieving lasting results. The West African Institute of Public Health's commitment to advancing reproductive rights and access reflects its dedication to improving the well-being and future prospects of individuals and communities throughout the region.

As the institute embarks on this transformative journey, it is imperative to continuously evaluate the progress, adapt strategies based on lessons learned, and remain steadfast in the pursuit of gender equality and enhanced public health outcomes. By fostering an environment where every individual can exercise their reproductive rights, make informed choices, and lead healthier lives, the institute can contribute to a brighter and more equitable future for West Africa.