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# On World Sexual Health Day We Must Ask If We Make Decisions About Our Own Bodies

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Since 2010, September 4 is observed as World Sexual Health Day to promote greater social awareness across the globe on the issue of sexual health. The theme for 2018 is 'Sexual Health and Sexual Rights: Fundamental for Wellbeing'.

Well-being is, by definition, what is good for oneself. With respect to health, for most people, well-being is only about good diet and nutrition, exercise, a healthy lifestyle, and absence of illness. Sexual health, despite being an important part of our existence, is hardly perceived as linked to our well-being. Many people probably don't even know what sexual health means.

The World Health Organization defines sexual health as "*a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality*". Sexual health does not only mean freedom from sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS) but encompasses a much more holistic perspective which includes our rights, choices, sexual pleasure, sexual dysfunction, gender identity, sexual orientation, violence, and mental health issues related to sexuality.

Sexual health cannot be achieved without fulfilling certain rights. For example, the right of each individual to make decisions that govern their own bodies without being stigmatised and discriminated against. These rights include the right to choose a sexual partner(s); to be sexually active or not; to engage in consensual sexual relations; to choose whether, when, and whom to marry; to pursue a satisfying, safe, and pleasurable sexual life; and, finally, to make free, informed, and voluntary decisions about one's own sexual orientation and gender identity.

The path to achieve sexual health and sexual rights is fraught with several challenges. At the legal level, certain sexual activities are criminalised. There has been a recent positive development where the Supreme Court of India has noted that expression of

sexuality and sexual orientation (<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2018/09/haryana-student-elections/>) is integral part of our right to privacy. But it is still a long way to go in terms of providing sexual rights to individuals, irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation.

Our government's policies and programs also directly affect sexual health. For example, comprehensive sexuality education is not provided as part of school curricula in many states, depriving children of the essential information required while growing up. As a result, most have to rely on casual conversations with friends and pornography for seeking information.

There is lack of sexual health services accessible for most people. The current Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) or National Adolescent Health Program, caters to youth between the ages of 10 and 19 only. For young adults, the focus seems to be entirely on reproductive health. However, with the increase in the age of marriage, at least in urban India, there is a growing population of unmarried young adults, who have no place where their sexual health concerns can be addressed. With globalisation, urbanisation and digitisation, the sexual health needs of this population are rapidly changing.

Prayas (Health Group) is an NGO based in Pune, working on issues related to sexuality and HIV/AIDS for the last 25 years. The NGO is currently preparing its research in the form of a report called "Youth in Transition (<http://prayaspune.org/health/index.php/ongoing-research/216-yit.html>)", focusing on unmarried youth (20 to 29 years of age) from Pune. While the research is still ongoing, the experience of talking to over 900 young people who participated in the study till now shows that young people are in need of non-judgmental supportive spaces to discuss issues related to sexuality. There are many health concerns such as depression, substance use, self-harm, suicidal ideation and behaviour, gender-based violence, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies and other emerging issues that need attention.

For achieving well-being among India's population, it is essential that sexual health and sexual rights are acknowledged as integral. Well-being can only be achieved if the decisions at the individual- as well as at institutional-level are based on human rights, and thus ensures sexual rights.

No matter who you are, what you do, where you live, all the decisions regarding your body should be yours!

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