



Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights

Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights Policy Brief:

Unpacking advocacy in the context of sexual and reproductive health and rights

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About Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights

Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights (Action Canada) is the leading national voice for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in Canada and occupies a unique position on the global stage as a trusted and strategic advocate in advancing human rights related to sexuality, gender and reproduction. Action Canada works in collaboration with local, national, regional and international civil society organizations to:

- Advance a comprehensive and progressive understanding of SRHR as a crosscutting issue within international human rights law;
- Hold governments accountable to their human rights obligations as they relate to SRHR;
- Facilitate SRHR advocacy at international venues conducted by diverse groups representing a broad range of communities from different regions, with a particular emphasis on marginalized and underserved communities;
- Encourage NGOs, States and UN agencies to consider SRHR from a holistic and intersectional perspective and avoid siloed approaches.



What is SRHR Advocacy?

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is an inclusive term that encompasses the full range of rights related to sexuality, gender, reproduction, including sexual and reproductive health. SRHR are premised upon the human rights of all persons to make free and informed decisions concerning their sexual and reproductive lives free from violence, coercion and discrimination. SRHR includes not only the absence of reproductive or sexual illnesses, but also the full enjoyment and well-being related to sexual and reproductive health.

What is advocacy?

Advocacy includes a collection of strategies that can be used to achieve specific outcomes related to social, economic, political, cultural, legal and civil change. For example, advocacy can be used to:

- Advance rights through seeking to eliminate harmful and discriminatory laws and policies;
- Mobilize towards the enactment of progressive, rights-based laws and policies;
- Hold governments accountable to their human rights obligations as duty-bearers;
- Create enabling environments for the realization of rights.

Advocacy strategies focus on holding duty-bearers accountable for their obligations and empowering rights-holders to claim their rights as a means of catalyzing systemic change. This focus on accountability is what differentiates SRHR *advocacy* from *public engagement* which is usually geared towards information/education/communication activities.

Why advocacy for SRHR?

Advocacy for SRHR, and support for SRHR advocacy, is particularly important for several reasons:

SRHR needs to be a priority. Issues related to SRHR are often stigmatized or labelled as controversial. The stigma associated with some SRHR issues sometimes causes them to be actively de-prioritized by governments seeking to avoid political backlash. This deprioritization leaves discrimination and violence unchecked, and the SRHR needs of populations largely unmet.

It needs political support. While governments are often motivated by public health arguments and evidence to improve elements of SRHR, public health evidence alone is insufficient to compel governments to take specific actions to fulfill their human rights obligations related to sexuality and reproduction. Advocacy is often required to galvanize political will towards change.

To address root causes. From a programmatic perspective, the field has been largely characterized by public health approaches, with a focus on reducing the burden of sexual and reproductive ill-health and related mortality and failing to address structural and societal contexts. Advocacy, and more specifically grassroots and feminist advocacy, is well placed to identify and challenge systemic barriers to SRHR, and to advance sustainable and human-rights based solutions.

To support an active and vibrant civil society. The absence of resources for advocacy at the local level prevents feminist and women's rights organizations from taking advantage of important accountability mechanisms in place to support the realization of rights.

Advocacy strategies that have been used to advance SRHR include:

Engaging decision-makers; leveraging human rights accountability mechanisms; strategic litigation; building evidence; capacity building of advocates and decision-makers; multi-level movement building and coalition work; empowering individuals to know and claim their rights; activism; and direct investment for advocates to engage in decision-making processes.



Where is Canada on SRHR Advocacy?

Canada's **Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP)** has the potential to change the way global and local communities address the needs and rights of women, girls and marginalized persons. For such change to be meaningful and sustainable, Canada must invest in new partnerships that enhance the capacity of independent feminist and women's rights organizations to organize, to challenge harmful social norms that undermine gender equality, to hold governments accountable to their SRHR obligations, and to create the conditions for enabling national laws and policies that will make a difference in the daily lives of women, girls and other marginalized people. In other words, Canada must invest in advocacy for SRHR.

Canada has made a great start, but significant and sustained commitment to advocacy for SRHR is sorely needed. Supporting advocacy for SRHR requires a feminist and principled approach, which includes:

- Developing **deliberate, reflexive and flexible models of partnerships**, based on mutual trust and accountability, and acknowledgement of power dynamics among partners;
- Being **responsive** to feminist actors leading advocacy in their communities, including the voices of those most marginalized. It is critical that investments in advocacy, that derive from the self-articulated needs and priorities of rights-holders;
- **Transparent and sustained support** for communication, coordination, movement building and sharing of learnings;
- **Centering the voices leading legal and policy advocacy for SRHR** in decision-making processes, particularly feminist and women's rights organizations and advocates in the Global South;
- **Providing long-term, flexible, sustained and core funding** to feminist and women's rights organizations leading legal and policy advocacy for SRHR;
- Demonstrating **global leadership to protect and promote** enabling environments for civil society and **human rights defenders**;
- Supporting **feminist capacity building, technical assistance, learning and knowledge-exchange among organizations and advocates** seeking to affect legal and policy change for SRHR;
- Applying a **human rights-based approach** to empower rights-holders to exercise and claim their rights and hold duty-bearers accountable to meeting their obligations;
- Supporting **participatory decision-making** processes are supported and sustained at all levels, from exploratory and implementation, to monitoring and evaluation phases;
- Exercising **diplomatic efforts to protect and promote enabling environments for civil society and women human rights defenders**, recognizing the realities facing those working on SRHR-related issues at local and national levels;
- **Integrating advocacy initiatives into service-delivery and increasing investment in standalone programming for advocacy for SRHR**;
- Adopting a **holistic, integrated and intersectional approach** to SRHR and advocacy;
- Actively working to **deconstruct artificial silos between SRHR issues**, thereby contributing to strengthening movements that adopt intersectional feminist approaches.



Strategies to employ in advocating for SRHR

Engaging decision-makers: Working directly with elected and unelected government officials including those at international levels, and individuals in positions of power to build their understanding of and capacity to take specific steps to advance progressive laws and policies related to SRHR.

In practice: trans rights advocates and their allies advocate for the integration of gender identity to Canada's Criminal Code and Human Rights Act list of prohibited grounds of discrimination.



Leveraging human rights accountability mechanisms: Submitting evidence to UN treaty monitoring bodies, the Universal Periodic Review process, Special Procedures, and regional human rights mechanisms to hold national governments accountable to their human rights obligations in relation to SRHR.

In practice: UN Special Procedures releases communication to Canada, condemning the Government of Ontario's repeal of 2015 sex-ed curriculum, in response to appeal from coalition of Canadian SRHR organizations

Strategic litigation: Engage in legal action to hold levels of government accountable to their human rights obligations through the elimination of harmful or discriminatory laws, policies and programmes, or the enactment of progressive law, policy or programmes related to SRHR.

In practice: Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform info sheet on the importance of the Supreme Court of Canada Bedford decision

Canada v. Bedford: The Importance of the SCC Decision

Canadian Alliance for
Sex Work Law Reform

Sex Workers, Organizations and
Individuals Advocating for Sex Workers'
Rights and Community Well-Being
www.sexworklawreform.com

In 2007, three Ontario sex workers initiated a constitutional challenge to provisions of the Criminal Code that prohibit various aspects of adult prostitution, including:

- s. 210 (keeping or being found in a bawdy house),
- s. 212(1)(j) (living on the avails of prostitution), and
- s. 213(1)(c) (communicating in public for the purpose of prostitution).



Building evidence-base and tools: Utilize evidence-based tools to build credibility, arguments, robust analysis, human rights imperatives, etc., for specific SRHR issues and adapted for diverse audiences. This may take the form of law and policy databases, policy briefs, primary research, factsheets, reports, surveys, or tools to support advocates and assist governments in evidence-based decision-making.

In practice: Sexual Rights Initiative launches database Law and Policy Database to document and compare the status of law and policy related to sexual rights issues in different countries around the world. The Database contributes to strengthening the respect for, and the protection and fulfillment of, sexual rights at the national, regional and international levels.



Capacity building: South-South, South-North and North-South capacity building for feminist and women's rights organizations to effectively engage in coordinated and sustained advocacy for SRHR, employ diverse strategies, and utilize regional and international human rights accountability mechanisms. This includes training for advocates on international and regional human rights mechanisms, facilitating knowledge-sharing and learnings related to SRHR advocacy, and briefings for government officials.

In practice: CREA, a feminist human rights organization based in India, convenes SRHR advocates to strategize towards the advancement of SRHR at local, national, regional and global levels.



reconference
Activists, Artists and Allies
Join us as we Rethink Politics and Resistance
Reimagine Change and Transformation
Reboot Struggle and Movement

Multi-level movement building and coalition work: Building coalitions, networks, communities and movements across local, national, regional and international levels to build solidarity and support for the collective advancement of SRHR. These spaces are critical for pushing progress and preventing roll-back across issues. They serve to inform national level advocates of progress/push back on SRHR in global dialogues, and inform global-level advocates of laws, policies and realities at local and national levels. They seek to support and sustain feminist and women's rights organizations to mobilize and advocate for substantive national law and policy reform and ensure SRHR advocacy at the national, regional and international level is coordinated, mutually reinforcing and inter-linked.



In practice: The Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI) is a coalition of national and regional organizations from all parts of the world that advocates for the advancement of human rights in relation to gender and sexuality at the United Nations. SRI creates political space for advocacy on sexual rights by adopting feminist principles, bridging Southern, Northern and Eastern perspectives and incorporating diverse views.



Empowering individuals to know and claim their rights: Employing public engagement, strategic communications and awareness raising to educate individuals about their SRHR and entitlements. Engagement often occurs through public outreach, events, and, increasingly, through social media and online campaigns, and is essential to growing movements and support for issues. When empowerment and the claiming of rights reaches a critical mass, it makes the issue difficult for policy-makers and media to ignore.

In practice: Polish civil society organizations and women mobilized hundreds of thousands of people, in Poland and internationally, in the #BlackFriday #CzarnyProtests to protest a proposed bill further restricting abortion access in Poland.



Activism: Fusing art and activism, “activism” is a participatory form of expression that gives voice and visibility to groups that may not have the formal means to have their voices heard. Its ability to communicate complex and political issues across linguistic and cultural divides makes it a powerful, and increasingly common, advocacy tool.

In practice: The Fearless Collective is a movement of artists and activists that create alternative, people-led narratives that engage personal histories, cultural and political realities and tell stories of universal resilience through visual campaigning, workshops and affirmative storytelling techniques.

Direct investment in advocates to engage in decision-making processes: Providing direct financial support to advocates and organizations engaging in advocacy for SRHR, at local, national, regional and global levels, with a focus law and policy change. Financing advocacy for SRHR is essential to ensure civil society is represented at decision-making tables, enabling people to claim their rights and promoting rights-based partnerships in these spaces, as was affirmed by 164 governments in 2011 at the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness.

In practice: Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights supports young advocates from around the world travel and participate in global and regional fora where they can speak for themselves and directly engage with policymakers on young people's SRHR.

