

Pro-Creation

Prisma Vision Paper:
Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

-An Extensive Summary-

1 Introduction

Sexual and reproductive health problems¹, including HIV and AIDS, are the major cause of death among women aged 15 to 44 worldwide, and are responsible for approximately 250 million years of productive life lost annually². In its health programme³, the ICCO-alliance (MFS 2007-2010⁴) has made the choice for the strengthening and expansion of efforts in the area of sexual and reproductive health for women, adolescents and vulnerable groups. This choice is closely connected to the continuing increase of HIV-infections⁵ and to MDGs 3, 4 and 5⁶.

The aim of this policy paper, is to formulate a Christian view on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) linking it with HIV and AIDS (Sections 1-3). At the same time it intends to contribute to the programmes that the members of Prisma and their partner organisations are implementing within the MFS-framework (Sections 4 and 5). More specific objectives of this paper is the effective use of capacity building within the Prisma organisations, directly concerning these issues and elaborating on practical tools for Prisma members and their partner organisations.

This document has been written with input from Prisma member organisations, as well as partner organisations from Asia, Africa and Latin America. We hope it will support organisations to develop or strengthen their own vision, as well as be a helpful tool for programming activities. Prisma is keen to receive feedback on this document, and best practices from partner organisations⁷. It will help us to share evidence, best practices and further insights among our partnering organisations.

2 SRHR worldwide: issues and debates

2.1 Main issues

Facts and figures clearly indicate the importance of focussing on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR):

- Annually hundreds of millions of women suffer disability as a result of pregnancy complications. More than half a million die in pregnancy and childbirth, or due to an unsafe abortion, leaving an estimated one million or more children motherless each year. The World Bank estimates that 74% of maternal deaths are preventable through family planning, that provides access to contraceptives, skilled workers attending to births, and improved access to emergency obstetric care when necessary⁸.
- Despite very large increases in the prevalence of modern contraceptive use, in some parts of the world particularly in Africa, total fertility rates and the unmet need for family planning remain high.
- Every year, 80 million women worldwide have an unintended pregnancy and 60% of these are aborted⁹. Of these abortions taking place globally every year, an estimated 19 million are unsafe abortions with about 68,000 women dying as a result of its complications¹⁰.

¹ In this document we accept the current terminology of 'reproduction' to join the debate even though a biblical perspective the term 'procreation' would be more adequate. In our view the term reproduction has mechanistic and technocratic connotations that do not correspond well with a Christian view of mankind.

² UNFPA State of World Population 2005, <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/english/ch1/index.htm>

³ <http://www.prismaweb.org/algemeen/documentatie&lng=uk>

⁴ MFS is the co-financing system of the Dutch government, the grant framework for Dutch civil society organisations that work to achieve a sustainable reduction in poverty.

⁵ UNAIDS, http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2008/JC1511_GR08_ExecutiveSummary_en.pdf

⁶ Promote gender equality and empower women (MDG 3), Reduce child mortality (MDG 4) and Improve maternal health (MDG 5).

⁷ Feedback can be sent to info@prismaweb.org

⁸ UNFPA State of World Population 2005, <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/english/ch1/index.htm>

⁹ Alan Guttmacher Institute (1999). *Sharing responsibilities: women, society and abortion worldwide*. New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute

- An estimated 130 million women and girls worldwide have endured some form of female genital cutting. An estimated two million girls are at risk each year¹¹. This practice has serious consequences for the physical and psychological well-being of women.
- Adolescents are especially vulnerable to sexual and reproductive ill health, as they often (sometimes unexpectedly) get engaged in sex at an early age, and find that access to services difficult or denied. Each year, roughly two million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 are trafficked, sold or coerced into prostitution¹². For young girls, prostitution and early marriage usually means an end to their education, social isolation from peer networks and complicated pregnancies. Pregnancy is the leading cause of death for women aged between 15 and 19 worldwide.
- Gender, SRHR and HIV and AIDS are strongly interrelated. On a global scale, 75% of all HIV-cases are transmitted sexually and an additional 10% during pregnancy or through breastfeeding. In this policy paper HIV and AIDS will not be taken as a separate topic. We refer to the Prisma AIDS policy¹³.

2.2 Main debates

International debates and its main actors

Approaches have emerged which recognise sexual and reproductive health and rights as human rights, as well as being instrumental to health and well-being. The 4th International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, recognised the reproductive and sexual needs and rights of individuals, and called for universal access to sexual and reproductive health services by 2015. Sexual and reproductive health is seen as fundamental to the social and economic development of communities and nations, and a key component of an equitable society. Main international actors are organisations like UNFPA, the Department of *Reproductive Health and Research* of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Global Fund (GFATM). SRHR is also one of the priority themes in the policy of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Christian debates and main actors

For Christians, mutual love and loving marriage relationships are the basis for sexuality. Within the broad spectrum of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical and Charismatic churches, there are many different opinions regarding SRHR issues (family planning, abortion, women rights, etc). We note that mainline churches proclaim their ideas more publicly whereas evangelical churches that focus on 'social justice' participate less in the debate but continue doing their job. Among the main actors in the broader Christian debate is the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA), who originated from the World Council of Churches, and the Catholic Family & Human Rights Institute (C-FAM).

3 Christian position

3.1 Framework

A valuable approach from a Christian perspective is the use of the main elements of salvation as an interpretative framework. The four focal points that can be distinguished are creation, the fall, redemption and restoration¹⁴. In addition to an historical understanding of those events, they can be seen as current perspectives on life and reality, offering a framework that helps to interpret reality:

Creation- God the Creator in His creation, gives an expression of His own character, implying that Creation rests on a divine purpose and morality. This implies a basically positive attitude to reality, to bodily life and to human activity in this world.

¹⁰ Grimes, D.A. et al. (2006) 'Unsafe abortion: the preventable pandemic' *The Lancet*. Vol. 368:1908-1919

¹¹ Plan (2005), Gender equality report.

¹² Idem

¹³ Prisma vision paper on HIV and AIDS Response (2009),

<http://www.prismaweb.org/algemeen/documentatie&lng=uk>

¹⁴ Wolters AM (1985) 'Creation regained'. Grand Rapids (MI).

Fall- Disbelief and disobedience destroyed the harmonious relationship with God, with each other and with nature. Hence the fundamental root of evil and suffering is not a lack of knowledge or resources, nor just blind fate, but the loss of the sound relationship with God.

Redemption- The Son of God has given Himself to overcome human enmity and alienation, thus opening the way to salvation. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world underlines the immense value that God attaches to His creation, not least to human beings. In His work Jesus demonstrated that He came to overcome sin, evil, and to restore wholeness and shalom.

Restoration- Sin, suffering, death and doom do not have the last word. This perspective is a source of hope and motivation to take responsibility and try to put up signs of Gods justice and mercy already in this world. Ultimately history is His story in which everything will be justified and put right, a concept that is beyond our imagination for our finite minds.

3.2 Biblical positions

For Christians, God's commandments are key principles. Yet, it is not always possible to give a universal interpretation of biblical guidelines and commandments. Responsibility therefore is also a key concept in Christian ethics. Human beings are accountable to God and their fellow human beings¹⁵. Hence, Prisma advocates for responsible and informed choices that originate from biblical norms and values. The church is a place where people can reflect together on their responsibilities and make choices.

Value of human life

Life is our valuable gift from God. He is the Source, Giver, and Sustainer of life. Because God gives and sustains life, we must also protect and nurture it. God is especially concerned for the protection of the weak, the defenceless and the oppressed. God calls each of us individually to moral decision making and to search the scriptures for the biblical principles underlying such choices¹⁶.

Adolescents and sexuality

Sexuality is a fundamental dimension of personality, communicating with others, feeling, expressing and of living human love. In maturing this dimension should be integrated into responsible relational behaviour. Young people need support in this difficult task. Sexuality education should begin at home. Parents and communities want youth to be sexually healthy, and teens want accurate information, accessible services, and discussions with their parents. Young people should be given the opportunity to express their questions, feelings, and attitudes about sex. At the same time they should be taught that sex is a holy gift from God, blessed only if it enjoyed in the right context.

Sexuality and marriage

God has given love, sexuality, relationships and marriage as a blessing to be enjoyed. Healthy family life is important to individual fulfilment, social stability and sustainable development. In this broken world however we see that people are very vulnerable in this area. Some main Biblical principles can be briefly summarized as follows:

- Gender relations are characterized by mutual respect, equality and by functional diversity¹⁷.
- The context for intimate sexual relationships is a monogamous relationship, based on love and fidelity, with mutual promises and duties¹⁸. This implies sexual abstinence before marriage and faithfulness within marriage¹⁹.
- Sexuality is a fundamental human characteristic given by God²⁰.
- Sexual activity aims at the experience and strengthening the unity of husband and wife²¹. In the sexual relationship within marriage, we can distinguish the functions of unification (unity between

¹⁵ Prisma (2004), Reproductieve gezondheid en rechten. Visiedocument voor de SGP en CU. Houten: Prisma

¹⁶ Based on: Seventh Day Adventist Church (2008), *Guidelines on abortion*.

http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/guidelines/main_guide1.html

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:21-33

¹⁸ Matthew 2:14, Proverbs 2:17, Ephesians 5: 31-32

¹⁹ Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:31, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5

²⁰ Genesis 1:27-28, 2:24, Song of Solomon

²¹ Genesis 1:27-28, 2:24

husband and wife), recreation (playfulness) and procreation. Sexuality, procreation and family planning are part of human responsibility²².

- Both father and mother are actively involved and responsible for bringing up their children²³.

Family planning

Procreation is a responsibility of both partners. Husbands and wives should discuss contraception in the light of the circumstances and of their own personal lives, having in mind the relationship between the sanctified love of marriage and receiving children²⁴. Prisma prefers an approach towards family planning and contraception which is based on responsible and informed choices. Prisma advocates a balanced approach, reflecting both on general Christian principles (like protection of life of mother and child, responsibility for family and its environment) as well as at the role of couples in being responsible for the size of their own family and what planning method is most appropriate.

Unborn child

Unborn human life is a gift of God. God's ideal for human beings requires respect for unborn or prenatal life²⁵. Abortion therefore is never an action of little moral consequence. Some guiding principles:

- The human embryo deserves to be protected. It is a new biological organism, an entity with its own unique genetic characteristics and has the potential to fully develop as a human being.
- From a Christian ethical point of view abortion should only be performed for the most serious reasons, like to save the life of the pregnant mother (the vital medical indication). The availability of safe abortions under such circumstances and in specific institutions is desirable.
- Decisions about life are made in the context of a fallen world. In that world human beings are confronted with tragic dilemmas that more frequently than is desirable lead to an abortion. Christians need to be present in that world, demonstrating love and care, assisting those in crisis when alternatives like adoption can be considered.
- Since so many pregnancies are unintended and unwanted, it is of utmost importance to address the circumstances that lead to (mostly unsafe) abortions.

Gender

Gender inequality has a profound impact on sexual and reproductive health and maternal mortality. Many aspects of (traditional) societies are organised according to gender. This often leads, not only to different positions and roles for men and women, but also to unacceptable inequalities. Understanding which neglects the fundamental equal value of men and women and leads towards violence and oppression should be rejected. Not only is it incompatible with the universal declaration of human rights, but it also contravenes God's purpose for people. Prisma underlines the importance of the empowerment of both men and women within their social context.

4 Focus areas for partner organisations

The input in this section has been gathered through interviews, interactive workshops and expert meetings with partner organisations of the Prisma members. Partner organisations do not necessarily share exactly the same values about all these issues. Most partners however agree that the general approach related to SRHR issues is the protection of life. The partner organisations have indicated the following priorities regarding SRHR:

²² H. Jochemsen (2009), 'Family planning and abortion – Christian ethical remarks'. Presentation given during learning session ICCO-alliance on Family Planning and abortion, 12 March 2009.

²³ Deuteronomy 6:7, Ephesians 6:1-4

²⁴ Slootweg-van de Kraats, H. (2006) 'Seksualiteit en gezinsvorming'. In: Wagenaar, P. (red.), Samen genieten; gids voor groei in je seksuele relatie. Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum

²⁵ Cf. Psalm 139

4.1 Reproductive health and reproductive rights

Access to services

Problems related to pregnancies and child birth are mostly referring to the extent to which beneficiaries are able to access services, e.g. long distances to antenatal services and/or lack of proper health care systems. Vulnerable people often have little or no access to health services. Access to both information and treatment are seen as essential to reducing complications in pregnancies and child birth. Only when people have adequate and balanced knowledge will they be able to make informed choices.

Family planning

Partner organisations have different ideas about family planning. Partners in Asia see the problem of the ever increasing population numbers as a significant factor. In this light and also in the context of the mother's health and quality of life in general, family planning is seen as important. In Africa however, family planning is a much more sensitive issue; children are seen as a blessing and marriage without children is no marriage. The high unmet needs for family planning in both Africa and Asia are recognized.

Abortion

Prevention of both unsafe and safe abortion is in general seen as very important by the partner organisations. Abortion is recognized as being a culturally destructive process. Life is a gift; therefore abortion is not acceptable, unless there are medical reasons. When people can make their own informed choices, abortion can be prevented by avoiding unwanted pregnancies. At the same time it is noted that in case of unwanted pregnancies women should be supported by looking for alternatives to abortion.

Sexual rights

According to the partner organisations SRHR from a rights based perspective has both negative and positive aspects. Pregnant women should be given more rights and freedom, instead of dying during child birth. The right of one person, however, is not more important than the right of the other. According to the partners many people are not aware of their basic rights. Women think they don't have the right to say yes or no to sexual intercourse. Women's rights therefore should be discussed openly, especially in the light of harmful cultural practices.

Sexuality education

The importance of comprehensive sexuality education for young people is often mentioned. Partner organisations are very much aware of the importance of focusing on young people. Young people receive many mixed messages (life skills, media, family) and parental and church involvement is often lacking. Lack of guidance in matters of sexuality is seen as a consequence of spiritual bankruptcy: "Christians should reclaim the issue of sexuality."²⁶ Adolescents themselves also have an important role to play, and they can be role models and peer educators.

4.2 Gender and equality

Healthy relationships are the starting point of people's wellbeing in the area of SRHR. Both culture and religion have a role in gender inequality. Women are often not in a position for negotiating or decision making. Girls marry too young and bare children at that young age. According to partner organisations women's dignity requires that they should be involved in decisions about sex. Domestic violence is mostly gender based: men dominating women. It can include sexual violence, sexual assault and rape by relatives. Gender-based violence is often directed towards women who do not have children or those who want to limit the number of children²⁷.

One of the main challenges is strengthening the communities understanding of men's and boys' roles in enhancing women's and girls' SRHR. The issue of redefining masculinity in a positive image was discussed: what is a real man? Since it is the women who are mostly raising children, women need skills on how to educate a new generation, to prepare a boy for responsible adulthood.

²⁶ Genesis 1:27-28, 2:24, Ecclesiastes 9:9

²⁷ See for instance <http://www.who.int/gender/violence/en/>

4.3 Role of society and churches

Many of the mentioned issues are deeply rooted in culture. Most cultural practices have evolved around the protection of social structures and families. Cultural practices often have positive and negative sides. Some practices encourage promiscuity and render people more vulnerable while other traditions have a positive impact on society. Except for traditional practices, we should take into account more recent practices that have emerged. These practices are due to changing contexts like migration, modern media, etc.

With regard to families, we often see that parents struggle to talk with their children about Christian values. Partner organisations clearly see the role of parents in educating their children but raising children is a difficult task.

One of the challenges mentioned in the area of SRHR, is the unwillingness of many churches to discuss issues of sexuality. A discrepancy is seen between what is said in the church and acted out in practice. The church can break through the silence of both churches and society on sexuality. In dealing with cultural issues we should be willing to discuss harmful practices, be transparent, but preach the Word of God.

5 Strategies: from vision to practice

In reviewing the discussed issues, the need of suitable and applicable strategies is obvious. Possible strategies focussing on SRHR issues are mentioned below.

5.1 Improvement of quality care

SRHR services need to be comprehensive, interlinked, and offer a range of services, including:

- Access to comprehensive reproductive health services like family planning services and antenatal care.
- Skilled care by nurses, midwives or doctors during pregnancy and childbirth.
- Emergency care for all mothers and newborns with complications.

Quality care by staff can be improved by training nurses, midwives, doctors and other health workers in comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and family planning. This will give appropriate specialized care (reproductive health, midwifery, sexual health) to women and their newborn children.

In order to improve psycho-social counselling skills we support churches and other community organizations to give pastoral and psycho-social care to patients and their families.

In realizing the need for improved access to sexual and reproductive health services, we should pay special attention to people with disabilities. Social and economic circumstances often make people with disabilities more vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health problems than non-disabled people²⁸.

Family planning

- It can be helpful to revise or reflect on the name of a programme. Where 'family planning' is sensitive, 'family welfare' might help to address family planning in a wider area of activities like body hygiene, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and respiratory tract infections (RTIs), counselling.
- Men and women should be able to make joint informed decisions on family planning. Because information is not neutral, the right to information needs further exploration: to whom, what and why is the information given.
- Family planning could also be advocated as part of a more complete package of 'birth planning': planning for prenatal care, place of delivery, attendant at delivery, emergencies (decision making, money and transport), postnatal care.

²⁸ See also Dutch Coalition on Disability and Development (DCDD) (2008). 'Universal Access Now! Including people with disabilities in HIV and AIDS policies and programmes'. Utrecht: DCDD.

- Giving correct information about birth control and prevention methods is considered important, without necessarily promoting its use.

Abortion

Important strategies for the prevention of abortion are:

- Reducing reliance on abortion. Women and couples need more contraceptive choices.
- Providing full information is essential. Abortion services are only a small part of the picture; alternatives to abortion and information about the growth and development of the foetus are equally important.
- Alternatives to abortion should be thoroughly reviewed with the partner organisations: what are possible options for the unborn child in case of unwanted pregnancies?
- Supporting women with unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. This can be done by raising awareness about an unwanted pregnancy and its impact on women. It is also important to guarantee a conscious decision making process since abortion is irreversible and often has long lasting emotional implications for women and couples..
- Reducing unsafe abortions. This includes providing quality care when abortion is needed on medical grounds.
- Improving the ability of health care providers to manage and treat incomplete abortions and complications. There is often a need to strengthen post abortion counselling and contraceptive information.

5.2 Education on sexual and reproductive health and rights

Sexuality education should be aiming at developing responsible sexual behaviour. In this respect the difference between *personal responsibility* or *personal response-ability* is a good distinction between how much is possible to decide on in your own sexual well-being. People should have the ability to make informed and responsible choices. When addressing sexuality education our main focus is on education of life-skills, family values, pre-marital counselling and peer education in which sexuality education takes place in line with biblical principles.

Prisma supports culturally sensitive, youth-friendly services and sexuality education programmes. Some important strategies to reach children and young people and their care givers are:

- Development and/or implementation of programmes for life-skill education and peer-group education for schools and (church) youth groups, using evidence based approaches to find out what methods are most effective in each cultural context.
- Having practical and good adolescent health teaching materials, providing accurate information about sexual issues. Topics can be: adolescent health, refusal skills, knowing myself, my family, marriage, etc. Using evidence based information can help to discuss culturally sensitive issues.
- Identifying the key persons influencing children and young people. These should be role *models* rather than role *players*. Creating mentors in the community that can coach and advise young people / create models amongst young people.

5.3 Addressing cultural issues and gender

In implementing programmes organisations should start from the people, not by only focusing on changing behaviour, but also on thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. Transformation is needed in order to internalize behavioural change. Therefore existing structures should be addressed: family, church leadership, etc. Members of the community can be agents of change, using participatory approaches and bottom up relational approaches.

Around the world, many men are silent to women's needs, offering few role models of men who advocate with understanding and respect for women and their situation. Churches and FBOs however have the potential to change this and enable women to be fully and freely involved in making choices regarding their sexuality, health and life. Churches could be effective agents of change to empower both women

and men, considering the various relationships in which they live and meet²⁹. Some strategies that can be used in gender programmes are:

- Empowering/enabling education on knowledge, beliefs and attitudes through formal and informal ways. Some organizations already have started to also teach couples on sexuality and family issues and pre-marriage counselling to prevent domestic violence.
- Empowering and involving churches. The church has an important role to play in the discussion about gender and cultural issues.
- Developing theological and biblical teaching, and how to relate this to everyday life for its community
- Addressing and equipping persons on powerful positions (community/politics/church) to become agents of change
- Mainstreaming gender equality in other areas and programmes.

5.4 Role of churches

In many countries churches and church leaders are respected in the community. Involving them in programmes should be motivated intrinsically (from a biblical perspective) as well as instrumentally. The cooperating organizations aim at partnering with Christian leaders in the implementation of development programmes:

- Human sexuality needs be discussed within churches, with adults and youth. Theological and ethical reflection needs to be stimulated and best practices exchanged, including ideas on subjects like power, gender relations, positive and negative aspect of (traditional) culture etc.
- Religious leaders need more information to help their followers make informed choices about their health³⁰. This could include training of Christian leaders on topics like family planning methods, birth spacing, risks associated with early marriage, benefits of breastfeeding, antenatal, postpartum, post abortion care and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, etc.

5.5 Advocacy

Churches, faith based organisations (FBOs) and governments need each other as issues should be encountered from both a (Christian) community and a legal perspective. For stakeholders partnering with FBOs, these grassroots organisations often provide dedicated community health workers (CHWs). At the same time FBOs provide large networks and access to underserved communities, filling in the gaps left by public health facilities.

Governments should be questioned on their willingness to implement policies that are in place in the area of SRHR. It is important that they put SRHR in the broader scope of the cultural and religious context and take the Cairo declaration on abortion seriously. The role of FBOs and churches is in making clear the value of the church and FBO's to the government, in recognizing the role of volunteers in the church and in raising understanding of issues like gender, sexuality and justice in their organisations.

Strategies necessary in advocacy are:

- Partner with secular organisations and other FBOs, local community structures, secular organisations, government departments, human rights groups/organisations (e.g. on advocacy, church, education) on key advocacy issues.
- Generate evidence, starting with existing research and evidence and share evidence based sites.
- Fighting stigma and helping to change policies.

²⁹ Micah Network (2008) 'Reflections from the Global Consultation on HIV and AIDS'. Pattaya, October 21-25, 2008

³⁰ Mary K. Burket (2006) 'Advancing Reproductive Health and Family Planning through Religious Leaders and Faith Based Organisations'. Pathfinder International.