

RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW

LOOKING BACK AT 5 YEARS OF RHRN



From abandonment to advocacy

**"I wish to live in my home
with the freedom of
my gender expression"**



**Giving
a voice
to the
voiceless**



Torchbearers of change
Meet the young advocates
leading the charge



COVID-19
How has the pandemic
impacted SRHR?



“Young people have proven themselves as active agents for their own rights, creating their own spaces and taking all opportunities to grow and learn”

NCQA

RHRN National Coordinator Solange, from Senegal, on coming together and never shying away from a chance to learn.

1. Sum up what Right Here Right Now means to you in one sentence
For me, Right Here Right Now means innovation, learning and sharing experiences across the world.



Solange, from Senegal

2. What has been your highlight from the last five years?
The importance of working in coalitions – together as one – to advance human rights in Senegal. Capacity building of National Coordinators while implementing the programme is also a very strong point.

3. What advice would you give to other young people who want to advocate for a better world?
To always take advantage of learning opportunities in order to strengthen their advocacy. Be SMART and always involve other young people around them to avoid being alone. Share knowledge, experiences and documents with their peers to ensure sustainability of their actions.



16 Meet an LGBTI changemaker
Trans rights activist Julie shares a behind-the-scenes look at her fight against injustices and advocacy for her community.



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The animated stories of three young advocates demanding action.



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Abbreviations explained

Nobody likes jargon or excessive abbreviations, so we've tried to keep them to a minimum. But here are a few common acronyms that pop up throughout the coming pages.

- CSE** - Comprehensive sexuality education
- LGBTI** - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex
- RHRN** - Right Here Right Now
- SRHR** - Sexual and reproductive health and rights

We use the acronym LGBTI for the sake of legibility, but acknowledge its limitations when speaking about the full breadth of people's bodies, genders, relationships, sexualities and lived experiences.

The making of a movement

That's a wrap! Five years of Right Here Right Now has come to a close – and wow, what a five years it has been. This unique partnership has come a long way in advocating for the respect, protection and fulfilment of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people.

I have been incredibly proud to witness the building of global solidarity for the issues that RHRN stands for and to see that solidarity turn into sustainable and strategic action. Enabling us to not only push supportive laws through but also prevent discriminatory laws from progressing further. Of course, that has not always been easy. It has often been one step forward, two steps back. But the resilience shown by our partners and young people in challenging times has been striking. RHRN has evolved to become a progressive youth movement that demands all of our rights, even when that feels impossible. We also learnt not to see young people as a homogenous group and to include them meaningfully at all levels, including international spotlights. Seeing youth advocates in spaces like the Human Rights Council, expressing a world in which they want to live, has been a personal highlight. Time and again young people have proven themselves as active agents for their own rights, creating their own spaces inside the programme and taking any and all opportunities to grow and learn.

In this exciting end-of-programme magazine, we're thrilled to share a snapshot of the experiences and outcomes from the past five years, as well as learnings and challenges faced. We know there is much work still to be done so we hope that it will fuel you with ideas and energy to take forward in your work.

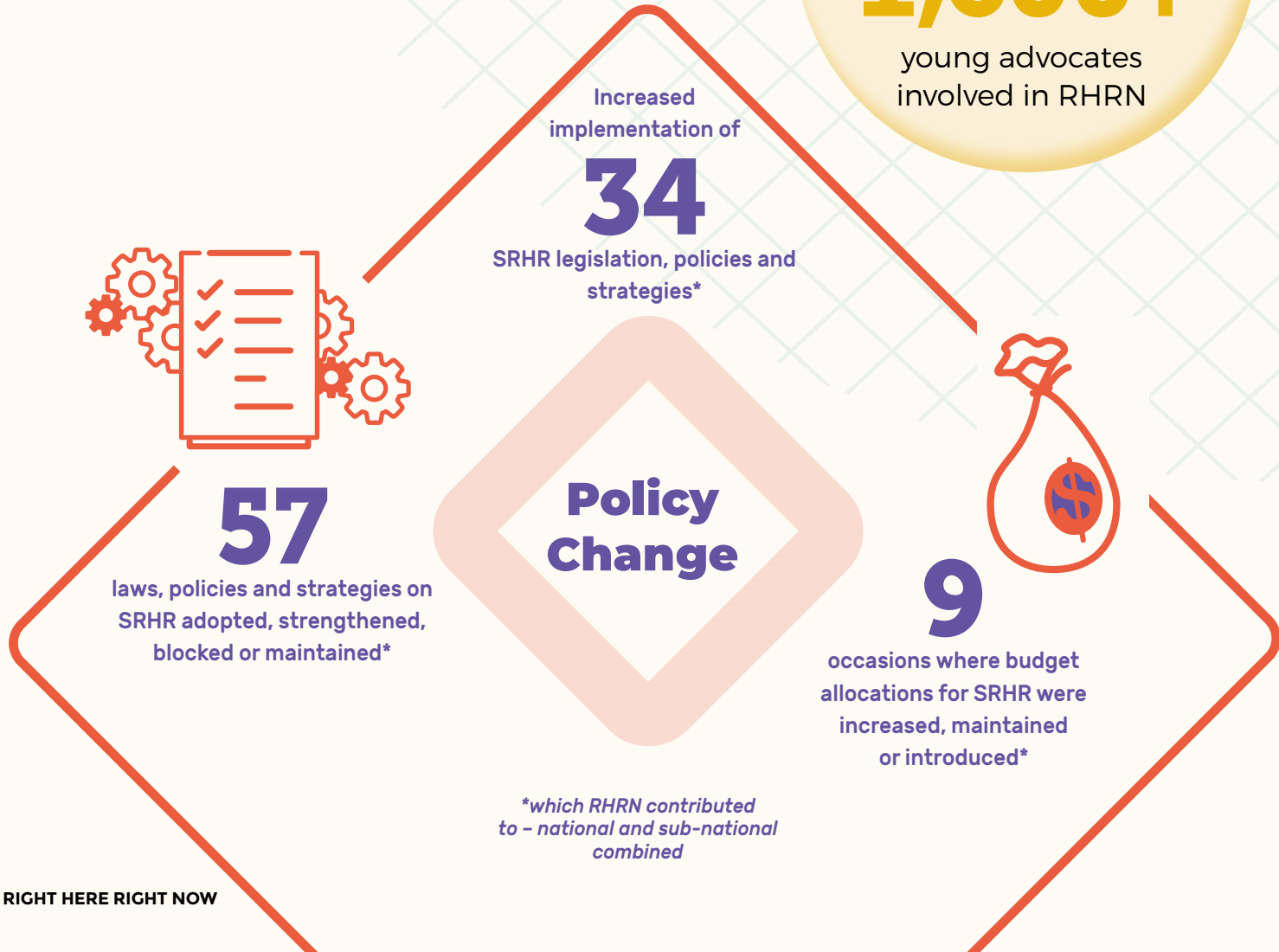
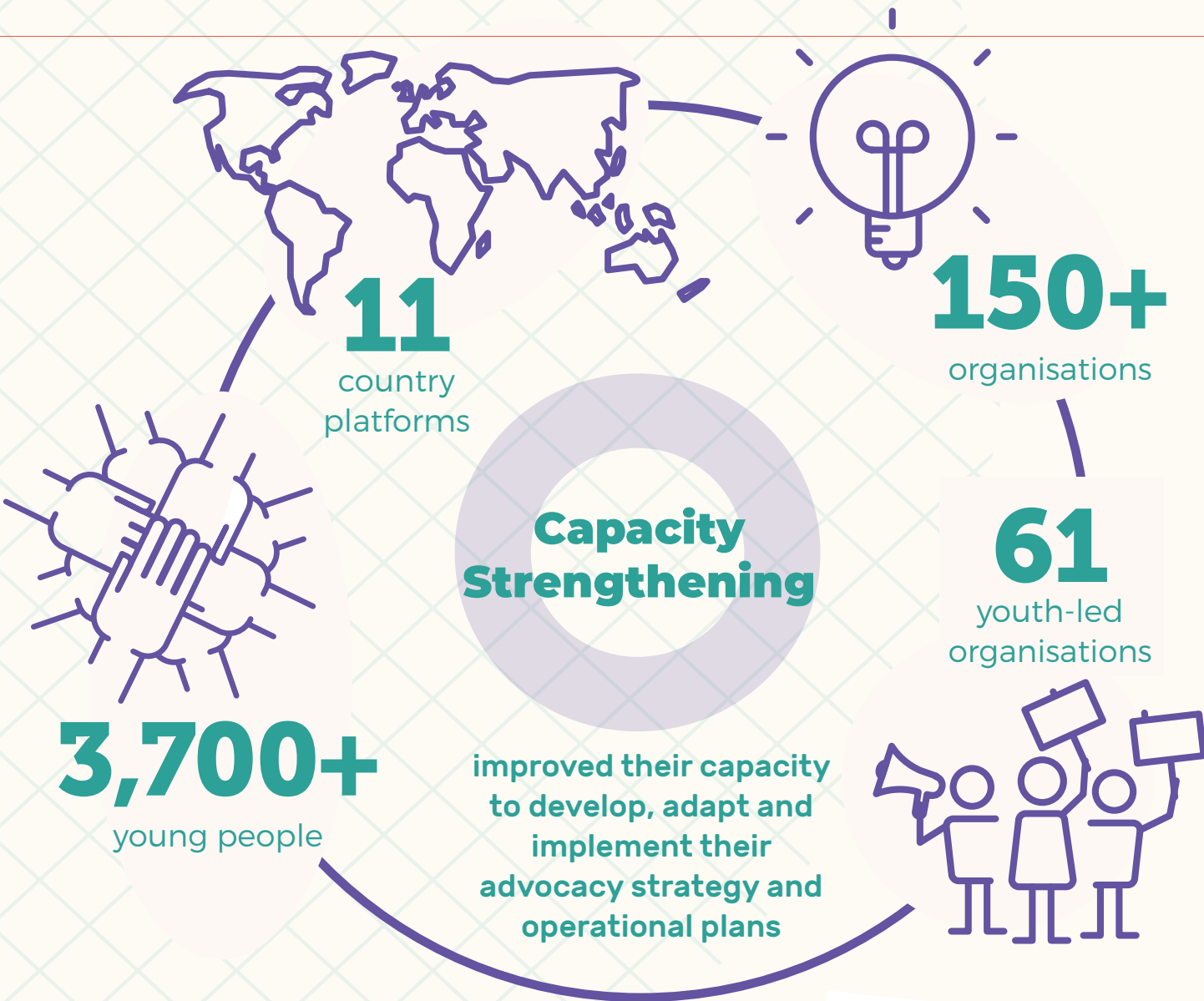
All that's left to say is thank you! RHRN would be nothing without the people and partners behind it. Thank you to our partner organisations: ARROW, CHOICE, Dance4life, HIVOS, IPPFAR and LACWHN; our 150+ in-country partners and 1,600+ young advocates who came together to create a better and more just world.

Rose Koenders
Global Programme Manager,
Right Here Right Now



5 years in 10 figures

While the last five years of hard work, resilience and progress certainly can't be represented by data only, we want to share a snapshot of the high-level results achieved by the programme. This overview, of the combined impact of each platform's contribution and commitment, is cause for celebration, as we keep the context behind these figures and the work still to be done front of mind.



Meaningful Inclusion



The RHRN DNA

1

Diversity, inclusivity & intersectionality

RHRN brings together the expertise of diverse SRHR organisations, including service providers, LGBTI groups, women’s groups and human rights organisations, in a unique partnership. The diversity of these organisations equals a diversity in the topics on the table and in the voices and perspectives shared, helping to form a more inclusive environment. We learnt over time to also apply an intersectional lens to inclusivity and recognise the diversity within groups too, such as our young people identifying as LGBTI. This diversity and inclusivity has, at times, slowed down our policy advocacy but it has paid off in terms of increased solidarity between different groups of SRHR activists, increased resilience of organisations, shared resources and shared access to decision makers or spaces.



“Capacity strengthening has helped me understand what I need to do to address the challenges and barriers to youth-friendly health services. I’m now vocal about SRHR issues in forums and meetings where I actively urge government and policy-makers to adopt a gender lens and have a more gender-sensitive approach in their plans and strategies.” Tara, RHRN Advocate Nepal



“When it comes to advocacy for sensitive issues, such as LGBTI rights and safe abortion, we know that there are safety and security risks and we see civic spaces shrink. If we work together, we create more safety and security, and we’re cost effective.” Tendaishe, National Coordinator Zimbabwe

2

Strengthening civil society

Opposition groups have become better organised, funded and outspoken. This can threaten the work of human rights advocates and leave individuals and groups more vulnerable. But we know there is strength in numbers. RHRN works to bring organisations together to build a movement and create strong, sustainable connections. In the face of opposition, this leads to solidarity among human rights groups, and organisations speaking out on each other’s behalf. On a day-to-day level, it results in organisations sharing learnings, strategies and resources.

However, resilience isn’t born from nowhere, especially in challenging circumstances. Capacity strengthening has been a core component of RHRN, as an important investment to support advocates and organisations, and further their advocacy efforts. This takes the form of online training, workshops, experience sharing or on-the-job support, based on individual needs.

3

Meaningful and inclusive youth participation

Young people have agency over their own lives and should be meaningfully included in all decision-making affecting them. Globally, however, it isn’t common for young people to be at decision-making tables and there can be a risk of tokenism. RHRN strengthened efforts to meaningfully involve young people throughout the entirety of the programme, from initial planning stage right through to the evaluation stage. We’re also invested in youth-adult partnerships – where both parties are seen as equal partners, value each other’s contribution and have equal decision-making power – as well as young people’s leadership. In most countries, a young person is National Coordinator, leading on planning, target-setting and reporting.

RHRN gives a platform to youth advocates (often in the place of someone more ‘experienced’) and amplifies their voices on a national, regional and international level. Ultimately strengthening youth-led organisations who are traditionally less visible and have fewer resources. Young people have shown that they have the strength, courage and capacity to advocate for their rights and communicate their needs and priorities.

4

National, regional & international advocacy

The overarching goals for the RHRN programme are the implementation of inclusive and progressive SRHR national legislation, policies and budgets, and improved accountability for regional and global norms, standards and policies. To achieve this takes a multi-layered approach of advocacy at a national, regional and international level. RHRN platforms have participated in the advocacy processes at key regional meetings, such as the Network of African Parliamentary Committees for Health and CARICOM (Caribbean Community). While at an international level, RHRN advocates were active civil society partners in high-level podiums, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, the 2019 Nairobi Summit and the UN Commission for Population and Development. Engaging young advocates in international processes was initially challenging. But gradually, with increased capacity, more youth advocates took centre stage to engage with political leaders and hold governments to account.



“There are moments when you get intimidated when you’re the only young person in the room with the board of directors but then I ask myself: What do I bring to the table? It’s important for young people to raise their voice. Never doubt your thoughts and never let other people shut you up.” Beverly, RHRN Advocate Kenya

5

Public support

To build momentum and create a movement that leads to real change around the norms and values that support the SRHR of young people, you need people behind you. This is especially crucial in tough political climates and where opposition messaging is strong. RHRN works to mobilise the support of the ‘movable middle’ (the silent, persuadable majority) through campaigning, social media and traditional media coverage. Balanced, fair coverage of SRHR issues is integral to the implementation of RHRN. This involves engaging the media on positive and objective reporting and encouraging them to ‘break the silence’ on certain SRHR topics all together. To achieve this, some countries have delivered workshops or briefings with journalists and others have worked directly with young writers to document compelling, lived reality stories.

Empowered and in power:

Meet the young advocates voicing their demands for a better world



The world is home to 1.8 billion young people - some 88% reside in low and middle income countries. For too long, young people have been considered passive recipients of knowledge and services. Not anymore.

Today's generation of young people is the largest the world has ever known, yet they rarely have a seat at the decision-making table. As a result, policies, programmes and services for young people don't reflect their realities and needs. Access to sexual and reproductive health services and education is inadequate. The freedom to openly express who they are, and who they love, without consequences, are not always respected, and are often denied.

Right Here Right Now works to empower a generation of young leaders, amplifying their voices to bring about change. Over the past five years, more than 1,600 young people have worked to change laws and policies that restrict young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

All platforms proudly have young people in leadership positions, such as National Coordinator, and numerous other young people taking the lead in activity planning and implementation. Youth-adult partnerships, where young people and adults work together, sharing their experiences and learning from each other, have also been increasingly used in many country platforms.

RHRN gives many young people their first experience of advocating in high-profile spaces and directly addressing decision-makers. Investing in capacity

strengthening of young advocates is therefore core to the programme, to increase their understanding of these spaces and enable country platforms to optimise their advocacy efforts. Over the course of the five-year programme, 3,700 young people took part in capacity strengthening.

Platforms have applied this increased capacity in national level advocacy efforts as well as in regional and international advocacy spaces. Particularly noteworthy was the 2019 Nairobi Summit, where over 50 young RHRN advocates were present and advocated for their country's national commitments on the implementation of the ICPD agenda. A landmark achievement for the RHRN programme.

"Youth are the future and they need to voice their demands. Our platform includes two youth-led organisations, one of which is gender-diverse. As National Coordinator, I feel personally responsible for the inclusion of young people and I support platform members to implement it." **Saraban, National Coordinator Bangladesh**



"Young people are most affected by health, education, employment, poverty and, of course sexual and reproductive health and rights issues. We promote dialogues in which young people are the spokespersons of their demands. It's fundamental for them to have these conversations." **Teresa, National Coordinator Bolivia**



"Young people are the torchbearers of change. They need to be in leading positions, as only they know their own issues and realities." **Rajendra, National Coordinator Nepal**

Advocates in the spotlight

Young people know speaking out for social justice, equal rights and the protection and fulfilment of SRHR services and laws is crucial. But, in doing so, they often face opposition. We worked with VICE to share the stories of three advocates - why they

are making their voices heard and the challenges they experience in the process. Read a snapshot of Beverly, Jairo and Puspa's stories below and click through to watch them in full.

Beverly's fight for safe and legal abortion in Kenya

"A lot of healthcare workers don't have adequate capacity to perform safe and



legal abortions services. Because of this so many young girls die each year in Kenya. We work on policies, standards and guidelines on the reduction of maternal mortality and morbidity through safe and legal abortion services. I also try to empower young women to help them unpack the legal framework and understand what their sexual reproductive health and rights are.

I'm a young woman in this space fighting for these rights but there's constant opposition. The patriarchal systems still limit women from being given a seat at the table. I sit down with policymakers, senators and other high officials to talk about these issues. Sometimes they see me as young but I only see that as an advantage."

 **Watch Beverly's full story here**



Jairo's perseverance for the protection of LGBTI rights in Guyana

"LGBTI rights are a major issue in Guyana considering we still have colonial laws. There's a law on gross indecency which prevents any person from the same sex from even holding hands and walking on the road or even hugging or touching each other. It hurts me as a gay man to know that I can't express love and affection in a way any heterosexual person can.

I'm trying to fight these laws by community advocacy and by political lobbying, meeting stakeholders and government and policymakers. In Guyanese society, children are always taught to be seen and not heard. But you must! Whenever you walk into a room just remember that you're there for a purpose. Use your presence. Use your voice."

 **Watch Jairo's full story here**

Puspa's championing of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Indonesia

"I decided to be an advocate for sexual reproductive health and rights at 18 years old. In Indonesia, we have a penal code that criminalises the provision of



information on contraception. If people give out condoms, you will be jailed. The penal code is also trying to criminalise LGBTI people. They want to restrict sexuality. They think it will control the morale of people in Indonesia. I'm trying to fight the law.

One year ago, we had a big demonstration against the penal code. More than 10,000 people were involved, trying to convince the parliament to stop the process. The demonstration was successful because the parliament has started to discuss the issues now. I believe from the bottom of my heart, and also from my experience, that young people can change the world to be a better place."

 **Watch Puspa's full story here**

Standout outcomes: Africa

In spite of the challenges facing SRHR globally, all of our platforms have achieved and contributed to a number of pivotal successes over the past five years. Here we home in on some of the key outcomes from our platforms in Africa.



Kenya



Landmark rulings for safe abortion

One of RHRN Kenya's long-term advocacy goals was achieved in 2019, when the **Kenyan High Court cancelled the withdrawal of the Standards and Guidelines on reducing maternal mortality and morbidity due to unsafe abortion, finding it a violation of human rights.** In the same ruling, the High Court reinstated a training curriculum for medical professionals and ordered compensation to a mother whose daughter was raped and later died of unsafe abortion. The platform contributed to the ruling by leading like-minded organisations in developing a communications strategy, that ensured public and media support, and preparing the lead counsel through moot court sessions.

The launch of CSE policy

The launch of the **School Health Policy in 2019 saw the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality**

education and gender transformative approaches for the first time. The Kenyan platform played a crucial role in ensuring this was included in the reviewed policy, through review meetings, submitting memoranda and supporting drafting meetings. By launching this policy, stakeholders now have the power to hold decision makers accountable on its implementation. The ministries involved acknowledged the support provided by RHRN.

Inclusion of post-abortion care in COVID guidelines

The Kenya COVID-19 Reproductive Maternal and Newborn Health guidelines, launched by the Ministry of Health, included provision of post-abortion care for young people. This is a step forward in ensuring that the policy framework relating to safe abortion and post abortion care is implemented.



Zimbabwe



Informed and objective SRHR media coverage

The RHRN Zimbabwe platform achieved notable coverage of **SRHR topics, including safe abortion, in several state-owned publications.** This included *The Herald* newspaper's article on SRH and family planning issues from a human rights perspective. Prior to this, these issues were covered from a conservative standpoint only. *The Herald* also later published a piece amplifying RHRN's advocacy on the need to broaden circumstances under which abortion is permitted. Both pieces of coverage were a result of the platform holding a media forum for both the state-run and private media houses. RHRN Zimbabwe sensitised journalists on the platform's advocacy. Resulting in the platform creating a strategic partnership with the country's media houses and articles being published from an informed perspective.



Uganda



Continuing the fight for national SRHR standards

In 2017, the Ministry of Health declined to launch the national guidelines and standards for SRHR services. This refusal meant the platform had to go back to the drawing board and strategise on how to better engage stakeholders. However, in 2018, **the Minister of Health, reviewed and approved (with comments) the SRHR policy. If this policy is launched, health service providers will have a reference document to guide them in the delivery of SRHR services for young people in Uganda.** Of particular interest to RHRN is the clause that explains circumstances under which medical workers can be allowed to conduct safe abortion, provide young people with contraceptives and provide health services to young LGBTI people. The platform convened several meetings, in collaboration with other SRHR organisations, with stakeholders to explain the importance of the reinstatement of the policy.

School Health Policy: signed, sealed and launched

In 2018, the government of Zimbabwe signed and launched the School Health Policy, which outlines CSE as one of the key activities that can be done for the implementation of the policy. This was the first time ever that this was done in accordance with the legislative provision. Previously, there was no policy in schools to guide the development of clear procedures, guidelines and tools. RHRN's contribution included engagement with the ministry stakeholders and producing materials calling for the signing of the policy.

The collaborative road to implementing inclusive CSE

RHRN Uganda provided notable input into the School Health Policy to try and make it more inclusive of all young people. **They also advocated for important steps towards its approval, thanks, in part, to the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) including a RHRN member in its Technical Review Team for the first time.** This gave the platform greater influence and enabled them to make progressive inputs during the final review process. The MOES entrusted RHRN with supporting other organisations to review the draft implementation plan. Previously, the MOES had not allowed organisations to input into any policy documents. Another first came when the Uganda National Teachers' Union pledged its support to the School Health Policy after RHRN convened meetings with representatives of the union – triggering their interest in advancing this cause.

The Regulatory Impact Assessment, a precondition assessing whether a policy is worth investing in, was conducted in 2019. It spoke positively about the need for the School Health Policy and was a significant step towards approval.



Senegal



Unanimous vote to criminalise rape

In 2019, the deputies of the National Assembly voted unanimously to pass a bill criminalising rape and paedophilia. Rape was previously punishable by five to 10 years in prison. This reform makes the perpetrators liable to sentences ranging from 20 years to life imprisonment. This result is the fruit of a long struggle led by the DafaDoy Collective (locally known as 'ça suffit' – enough is enough), which brings together several organisations, including some members of RHRN Senegal, to fight against violence against women and girls. The collective organised a sit-in and press briefing and handed a memorandum to the President. RHRN provided capacity building sessions, equipping organisations with the tools to communicate and convince the public and decision makers.

Dedicated budget to SRH in Saint-Louis

The municipality of Saint-Louis allocated a portion of its 2019 budget to Youth Reproductive Health for the first time. **RHRN Senegal contributed to this success by collaborating with several actors, including other human rights organisations, community and religious leaders, the municipal council and the media.** They held orientation sessions on reproductive health and the planning process for municipality stakeholders, and dialogue sessions with community stakeholders. Radio programmes on the need to allocate funds to adolescent reproductive health were broadcast too.

Changing abortion legislation in Zimbabwe

Every year around 80,000 abortions occur in Zimbabwe among women and girls aged 15-49. High poverty levels intertwined with a lack of available contraceptives, as well as legal and administrative obstacles, provide a fertile ground for many of these abortions being carried out in unsafe and illegal conditions.

“Young girls end up going to the ‘backdoor services’, to a person lacking the necessary skills or in an environment that does not conform to minimum medical standards, to get assistance in aborting,” says Lorraine Mtizwa, a 23-year-old Construction Engineering student and abortion rights activist. “If you want to go to a public hospital, they will ask you to get three reports from different hospitals. In the current economic circumstances, most girls and women have no money to splash on endless trips to the hospital.”

When subjected to these ‘backdoor’ methods, women may suffer from complications, such as intensive bleeding, irreparable damage to the reproductive organs, or even death. This frequent and devastating reality has been a driving force for Lorraine’s advocacy for the review of the Termination of the Pregnancy (ToP) Act.

Exposing the barriers

Under the current law, abortion in Zimbabwe is legal under three circumstances: if the pregnancy endangers the life of a woman, threatens to permanently impair her physical or mental health, or if the fetus was



The sky is the limit for Lorraine Mtizwa, an abortion rights activist who cannot wait for the review of the Termination of Pregnancy Act

conceived as a result of rape or incest. The RHRN Platform in Zimbabwe has focused its safe abortion advocacy work on reviewing the ToP Act since 2016. Their primary aim has been on expanding the conditions under which abortion is allowed: to include legal, safe abortion as a right, accessible in any circumstance. Exposing the administrative obstacles for timely access to safe abortion has been another key objective. Obstacles include ambiguity around the procedures, such as the number of doctors that should examine a person who wants to terminate a pregnancy after being raped, and the number of hours that doctors and the police examine and investigate a rape case.

Harnessing the voice of young advocates

After receiving training from RHRN in 2016, on how to disseminate information on the importance of reviewing the ToP Act in her community and on engagement with MPs, Lorraine’s life changed. She now leaves no stone unturned in her efforts to campaign for safe abortion. Lorraine has mobilised 20 of her friends to join the safe abortion movement and has even engaged her own mother. “When my mother saw me disseminating information on promoting safe abortions, she thought I was encouraging other young women to engage in prostitution. I then invited her to a dialogue meeting in

the community where the ToP Act was being discussed. Since attending that meeting, she has been supporting me,” said Lorraine, who continues her fight despite some members of her church shunning her.

Breaking the culture of silence

The RHRN platform wants to break the culture of silence on the issue of abortion – considered taboo by traditional leaders and an abomination by religious groups. Strategies used to mobilise public opinion have included dialogue sessions with community members and videos demonstrating the dangers of unsafe abortion.

Mock abortion trials have been particularly effective in changing the mindset of some abortion antagonists. Dr. Ruth Labode, an MP and the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Health and Child Care, is one of the people that participated. In one trial she recounts: “Lawyers continued to bombard her (the girl in the mock trial) with questions during the cross examination. When she started crying, I saw some of the male MPs crying too. This has been a wake-up call to male MPs like Honorable Munetsi, who was a critic of safe abortion.” He is now one of the 20 MPs championing for safe abortion.

It is now a personal issue for many MPs. “I never thought abortion was an issue because I have money. If my daughter gets an unwanted pregnancy, I will take her quietly to a private doctor. I did not think beyond myself,” Dr. Labode adds. Lorraine puts it bluntly: “Abortion is illegal for the poor but legal for those with money.”

Engaging the media to create support

RHRN trained young journalists to play a key role in advocating for safe abortion, which paid off generously. *The Herald*, a state-run media house, published an article amplifying the RHRN’s advocacy on the need to broaden circumstances under which abortion is permitted. State-owned



Dr. Labode during an interview with evaluators for the RHRN programme

“Abortion is illegal for the poor but legal for those with money”

newspaper *The Mirror* also published a story about the Parliamentary Consultative Forum on safe abortion and review of the Termination of Pregnancy (ToP) Act. For RHRN, the lesson learnt from media engagement is that training on SRHR is critical in converting journalists to cover abortion positively and objectively.

Creating impact at a regional level

A regional breakthrough on the issue of abortion has also been scored at the Southern African Development Community. Armed with skills provided under the RHRN initiative, the Parliament of Zimbabwe, led by Dr. Labode, successfully advocated for all SADC countries to commit to safe abortion in the SADC Parliament. She explains why this is so important: “The commitment on safe abortion at SADC Parliament level makes it easy for us to convince other parliamentarians in Zimbabwe. I can challenge the Zimbabwe Speaker of Parliament to say, ‘You signed

at SADC level.’ Or if the SADC adopted it, Zimbabwe is obliged to approve the review of the ToP Act”.

Safe abortion legislation within reach

A petition on the review of the ToP Act is currently being drafted by RHRN members and public hearings will commence once the petition has been published. Lorraine is happy that work on reviewing the ToP Act has gathered momentum, although she does feel frustration that the review is taking too long due to parliamentary processes. It is thanks to the capacity of enthusiastic young advocates like Lorraine, the efforts of MPs like Dr. Labode, and the commitment of RHRN members, that Zimbabwe looks to be on track to attaining safe abortion legislation. The programme has even become a slogan in parliament, as put by Dr. Labode: “Mr. Speaker Sir, we need to review the ToP Act: Right Here, Right Now!”

Standout outcomes: Asia

Our Asian platforms have shown commendable resilience and commitment to their advocacy goals. Let's look at a snapshot of their outcomes from across the programme.



Bangladesh



Youth advocates come together to discuss advocacy strategies and actions

Successful lobbying towards UPR recommendations

In 2018, 11 member states made strong recommendations to the Bangladesh government, calling for a legal and policy framework to enable women and girls' SRH. All recommendations shared were issues highlighted in the UPR submission by RHRN Bangladesh and during lobbying interventions with reviewing member states.

RHRN Bangladesh drafted the first ever youth-led civil society report. Young advocates also shared key findings and recommendations at the diplomatic briefing held in Dhaka. This served as an important lobbying opportunity at national level and was crucial for influencing diplomats from reviewing member

states. Further lobbying was carried out by RHRN partners and the Bangladesh platform, in the form of panel discussions, bilateral lobbying meetings and email communication.

Positive media coverage of SRHR

RHRN Bangladesh's training of journalists, in 2018, led to the publishing of supportive articles on CSE, youth friendly services and LGBTI issues in national Bangla daily newspapers. This included a piece about sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, and another about the importance of SRHR for young people. Later, in 2019, 11 journalists published positive SRHR-focused reports, including on the rights of Hijra people.

Indonesia



Amends and postponement of Draft Penal Code

In 2018, a number of significant text changes were made to the Draft Penal Code, including the deletion of the phrase 'same sex' in the article of decency. This shows a change in the legal perspective: that adulterers need not be differentiated by their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. Improvements were also made around the provision of contraceptives and abortion.

RHRN worked intensively with others to contribute to this change – through meetings, policy briefings and seminars, and the sharing of recommendations with the drafting committee, MPs and the media. Alongside 138 organisations and 700 individuals, RHRN sent a letter to the President of Indonesia, highlighting contradictions between the Draft Penal Code and the Indonesian Constitution.

The Draft Penal Code still sadly criminalises same-sex relationships. But, in 2019, the platform contributed to the postponement of the ratification of the Draft Penal Code, avoiding the discriminatory articles for now, and allowing for more time to advocate for change.

Regional

Carving out civic space for young people

RHRN strategic partner ARROW has organised a Youth Pre-Forum at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) for a number of years. It has proved so valuable that it's now part of the official agenda – significantly increasing civic space for young people.

Participants have also had direct influence on the discussions and outcomes of the main APFSD. Such as a RHRN Nepal representative's selection to deliver an oral intervention during the APFSD plenary discussion. In 2017, APFSD Member States also adopted an outcome document with several references to gender equality and meaningful youth participation. This is a big achievement compared to 2016, as that outcome document only included one reference to gender equality and no mention of youth participation. These references were a direct contribution of RHRN partners in Asia.



Using social media to increase public support

The Indonesian platform's advocacy has garnered a boost in public support of SRHR issues. This includes the high-profile support of Kalis Mardiasih, a young female Muslim writer and activist with a huge social media following. Kalis has been vocal about the need for CSE.

RHRN Indonesia also collaborated with Beda Itu Biasa (Different is Usual), a community of activists focused on diversity, for a social media takeover. Sharing resources, interviews and webinars to raise solidarity and amplify SRHR issues, as well as issues related to the anti-sexual violence draft bill and Penal Code.

Nepal



Act protecting women's reproductive health and rights

After two years of discussions, in 2018, the government of Nepal passed the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health and Right Act. The Act recognises women's reproductive health as a right and includes that safe abortion (within the legal framework of the Penal Code) should be provided without stigma and discrimination. In December 2020, the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights Regulation was issued to effectively implement the Act.

Alongside the Reproductive Health Right Working Group, RHRN Nepal members organised meetings and consultations with government bodies to discuss the issue of abortion and its inclusion in the Act. This joint advocacy helped avoid repetition of work and show solidarity, especially at a time when the government was transitioning to federalism. RHRN members were also invited to meetings as

technical experts and involved in the reviewing the draft of the regulation.

Committed funding for LGBTI organisations

Kathmandu Metropolitan City disbursed a budget of 800k NPR to three organisations working with and for LGBTI rights, with a commitment to allocate the budget annually. This was the first time a specific budget had been allocated to address LGBTI issues. The fund's objective is to conduct vocational and skills-building programmes to empower the LGBTI community.

RHRN worked with the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens' LGBTI focal person to conduct formal and informal lobby meetings and sensitisation workshops. These interventions increased understanding and knowledge of LGBTI issues, which led to the increased political will of decision makers and influenced them to allocate budget.

Pakistan



Acceptance of SRHR recommendations at UPR

In 2017, during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, the Pakistani government accepted – for the first time ever – nine recommendations relating to SRHR, and also noted another nine recommendations. While the UPR is not binding, it does put the Pakistani government in an answerable position. The government's positive response gives the platform room for lobbying and advocacy on a national level. RHRN Pakistan submitted input prior to the UPR, to inform the civil society report, outlining the gaps and priorities in youth SRHR.

Inclusion of Youth Friendly Health Services

Punjab's Implementation Plan in 2019 included initiatives for young people's SRHR needs for the first time. These initiatives included the establishment of 17 Adolescent Health Centres and the training of female clinical psychologists.

RHRN sensitised stakeholders on the importance of Youth Friendly Health Services (YFHS) – giving them the opportunity to ask questions, raise concerns and better understand the concept. This strategy helped create a group of officials concerned for the inclusion of YFHS in the implementation plan.



Turning trauma into advocacy for the trans community

Julie was born in a small village near Faisalabad, into a typical Pakistani family, yet she was anything but. Julie is a transgender woman. Like most transgender people in Pakistan, she was abandoned by her family. She was 10. Begging on the streets, dancing at parties and sex work replaced school and playing with friends. Her focus was to survive. And some days were harder than others, like when she was gang raped. One day she decided to speak out and to fight. This fight has grown and it has shaped her. Most of all, this fight is not over. This is Julie's story.

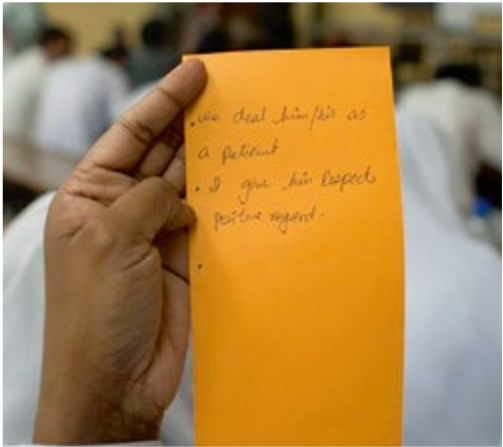


After Julie was outcast from her family, she had to slowly start again. Eventually, she formed a new and unconventional family and found a place to call home in Islamabad. Here is a rare photograph of Julie in her teens with her sister and brother who were the only ones who fully accepted her gender expression.

“ I cannot live with my family members because of my gender expression. I miss them all the time. I celebrate all occasions alone. I wish to live in my home with the freedom of my gender expression. I will fight for it until my last breath and one day I will go back home and they will accept me as their daughter.”



After being the victim of gang rape in 2016, Julie sought legal support from the Forum for Dignity Initiatives (FDI). She didn't know it at the time, but Julie wasn't just taking one fight on that day, as her request for support led to a job with FDI. Quickly, Julie became a **sexual health and rights advocate** for young people and for the transgender community, where she began addressing the vulnerability and needs of this marginalised group.



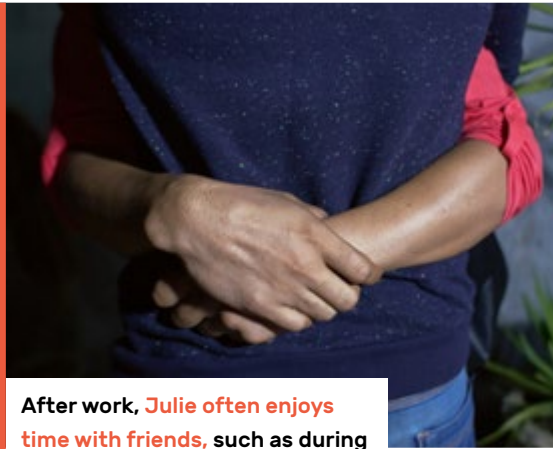


Julie's job often brings her back to her community, where she delivers training focused on the sexual health and rights of trans women.



“Julie's spirit and her battles against injustices are extraordinary”

Julie's perseverance for justice and her charisma are unquestionably contributing to the advancement and awareness of transgender rights globally. Unfortunately, her daily struggles as a trans woman in Pakistan are not unique. Yet her spirit and her battles against these injustices are extraordinary and this is undoubtedly only the beginning of her story.



After work, Julie often enjoys time with friends, such as during a birthday party, as seen here. Dancing and music are a big part of the trans community and great pride is taken in these skills, as trans women will use this to earn a living at private parties. Such gatherings are often very private and intimate, though, as they are looked down upon by the majority of society.



Julie has grown into a respected leader and advocate on trans rights and health, not just regionally, but nationally and internationally. She regularly addresses the inequality and violence that too often and overwhelmingly impact this community. In 2019, she was invited to speak at the UN headquarters during the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.





Standout outcomes: Latin America and the Caribbean Sub-Region

Bolivia



U-turn on forced participation in March for Life and Family

In 2019, RHRN Bolivia was thrilled to see the Department Director of Education of Chuquisaca cancel the instruction that forced students to participate in the March for Life and Family. This result is relevant because it helps to comply with current regulations, such as the Code of Children and Adolescents (CNNA), that prohibit compulsory participation in religious activities. The action also limited the participation of anti-rights groups alongside young people. In turn, **setting a precedent on respecting freedom of thought, the secularism of the state and human rights in a public institution, as well as in the educational field.**

Unprecedented acceptance of UPR recommendations

During the adoption session for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), in March 2020, the Bolivian state accepted five



recommendations, partially accepted two recommendations, and noted 12 recommendations, from the 19 recommendations related to the RHRN advocacy agenda. This outcome is significant, as the UPR process is one of the more relevant spaces for advocacy. **To have recommendations proposed by RHRN accepted by the Bolivian state under the current government was highly improbable, which makes the result quite remarkable.** It also allows the RHRN platform to follow up and continue working for the defence of human rights.

The recommendations accepted covered two on discrimination, two on SRHR and one on abortion; partially accepted recommendations: one on discrimination, one on abortion; and noted 12 recommendations: three on marriage and adoption equality, three on SRHR, six on abortion.

The context that the Bolivia, Honduras and Caribbean RHRN platforms operated in is undeniably challenging. Structural and cultural barriers made it difficult to advance the SRHR agenda. However, many important successes have been noted over the past five years, some of which we've captured here.

Caribbean



Updated CSE curriculum launched in Jamaica

A significant achievement of the Caribbean platform was the Jamaica Ministry of Education's acceptance of the recommendations, made by a platform member, to make the sections of the Health and Family Life Education curriculum relating to sexuality more comprehensive. This revision was released in the new version of the curriculum, with an additional section on sex and sexuality which was not there previously. **Learn more about the unique advocacy behind this outcome on page 22.**



Honduras



Supreme Court ruling on the violation of equal marriage

In 2018, the Supreme Court of Justice in Honduras accepted the unconstitutionality appeal, presented by RHRN Honduras, that the right of same-sex couples to equal marriage is being violated. Later, in February 2019, the Magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Judicial Branch of Honduras admitted the appeal of unconstitutionality on the right to same-sex marriage for their study and legal consultation. This was



filed a month before by the representatives of the LGBTI strategic objective. **This was an important act, as, for the first time, this issue was discussed in the Supreme Court of Justice, opening a possibility to recognise equal marriage through a ruling by this state body.** These actions have helped the platform to work on public support for legal reform on equality and equity, and gender identity.

Feminist newspaper column to increase support and education around SRHR

In 2020, newspaper *Libertad Digital* Honduras signed a letter committing to creating a feminist newspaper column, entitled Tinta Verde (Green Ink) – for an indefinite period of time. **The column is defined as a journalistic educational and informative project, focused on**



dealing with the problems faced by women in Honduras, and sharing tools to confront misinformation and information manipulation with sexist and discriminatory biases.

55 articles by young feminists have been published to date. The articles published contribute to the public debate on the right to decide, emergency contraceptive pills and SRHR of the Honduran population. This is the first feminist column in a Honduran newspaper; it has more than 300,000 followers on social networks.

Song released by conservative artist supporting SRHR

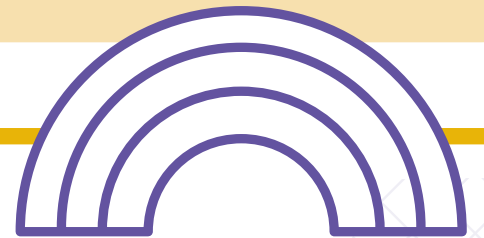
Leary Simmons, a religious conservative in St. Lucia, penned a song supporting sexual reproductive health and rights in the Caribbean in 2020. **The song seeks to increase public support for SRHR.** Coming from a strong religious background himself, Leary Simmons' song helps build support for the platform's objectives among religious conservatives.



Court rulings and momentum for LGBTI rights

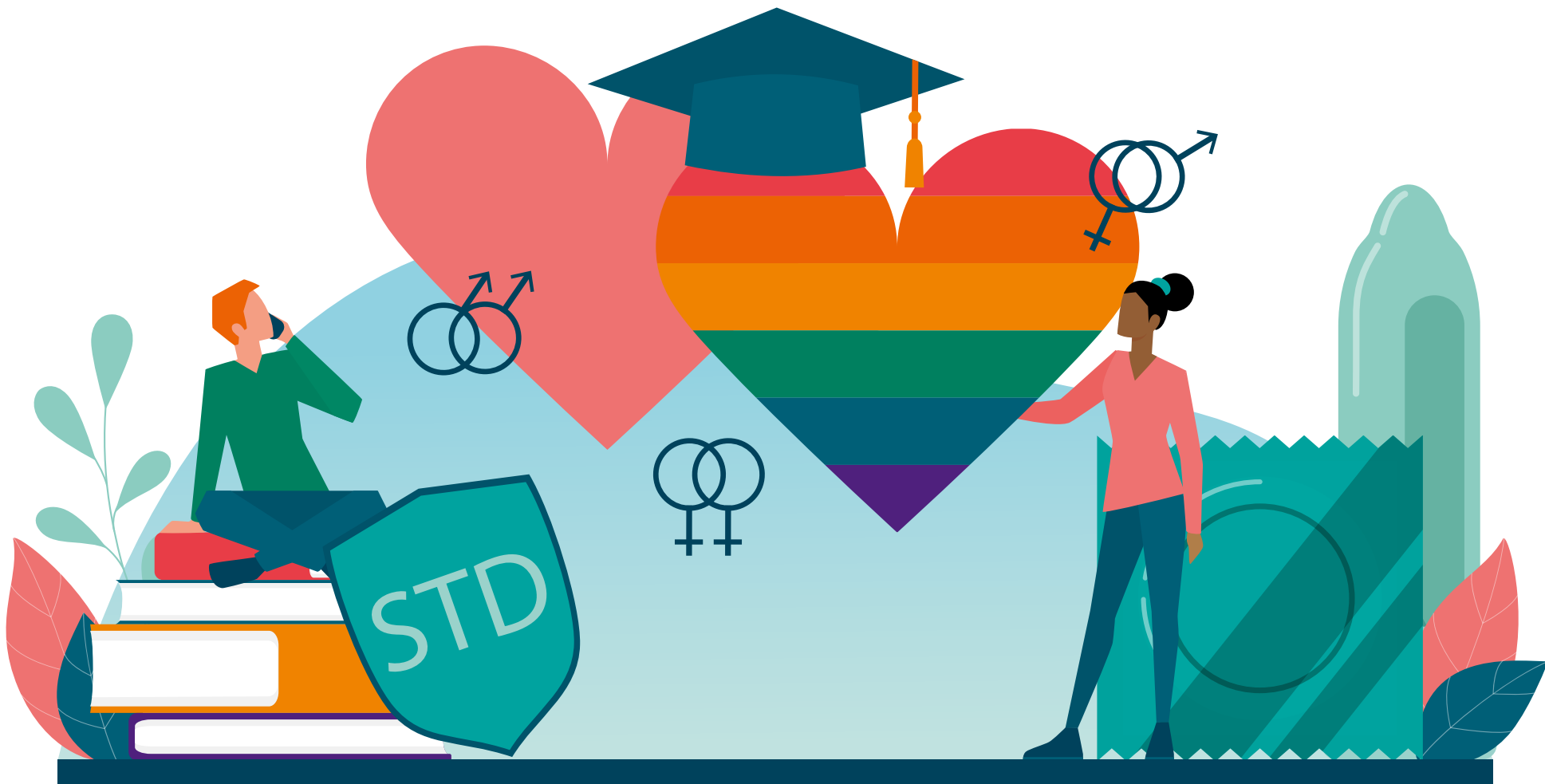
In 2018, the High Court of Trinidad and Tobago deemed the buggery law unconstitutional and legalised consensual sex between consenting adults. This creates a precedent whereby other countries in the sub-region with similar laws can be challenged based on their discriminatory nature. **The Caribbean RHRN platform participated in daily protest actions, conducted legal and strategic consultations with members of the LGBTI community to develop messaging and communication tools to combat the anti-rights and conservative movement.**

Later the same year, the Caribbean Court of Justice ruled that a law in Guyana, which makes it a criminal offence to cross-dress, is unconstitutional. Four



transgender persons had been arrested for wearing 'improper' clothing. One platform member provided legal support and the platform collaborated with like-minded organisations to conduct daily protests for their release.

Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago both hosted Pride parades for the first time in 2018. The momentum of the court cases contributed to this outcome and members of the platform participated in the parades. As a result of the favourable LGBTI court decisions, the Justice Minister of St. Lucia recommended consultations for the possible repeal of the buggery law and Trinidad and Tobago's opposition leader recommended that the country and wider Caribbean community consider support for same-sex marriage.



Going undercover: Lobbying for sexuality education in Jamaica

In March 2019, the Ministry of Education of Jamaica revised the Health and Family Life Education curriculum to make the section on sexuality and sexual health more comprehensive, and released the new version of the curriculum, with a new section on sex and sexuality. Making this happen in one of the most conservative countries in the region was, by no means, easy. We look at the clandestine strategy required and the impact its implementation has had on young people.

The RHRN Caribbean platform is comprised of 11 feminist, youth-led and youth-oriented organisations – operating in nine Caribbean countries:

- Curacao, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.



Coming from a history of colonialism and a strong influence from Pentecostal and Catholic religions, there continues to be strong opposition to SRHR in the Caribbean by religious fundamentalists, who are very well funded and organised. Their objection to progressive sexuality education has been a serious challenge to effectively implementing CSE in schools.

Jamaica has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the region. The United Nations Population Fund indicates that no less than 18% of births in Jamaica occur to adolescent mothers. It is also considered by many as the most conservative and homophobic of all nine Caribbean countries where the RHRN programme was implemented, even at legislative level (see Jamaica’s restrictive legislation on same-sex intimacy). So how did Jamaica come to achieve the most advanced outcome regarding sexuality education by the Caribbean RHRN platform? Our story starts in Panama.

The power of experience sharing

In August 2018, a two-day workshop on CSE was organised by the Caribbean RHRN platform, hosted in Panama. It was during that workshop that Jamaican Curriculum Officer, Allison (not her real name), shared her shocking experiences of being publicly vilified after it became public knowledge that she propagated sexuality education in Jamaican high schools.

Sexuality education in the Caribbean is termed Health and Family Life Education (HFLE). In each Caribbean country there is a HFLE Coordinator who works with the Ministry of Education with responsibility for curriculum development and oversight of the syllabus at the national school level. Previous attempts to include Comprehensive Sexual Education in the Jamaican HFLE curriculum had failed: the influence of the churches had been too strong.

Propagating sexuality education in Jamaica is not without risks. Government officials that are involved in the process can be publicly shamed and could even lose their jobs. In the best case, they can see their career options seriously reduced. Even with that knowledge, many participants during the two-day

“She was vilified, verbally abused and attacked in the media and even in the supermarket”

workshop in Panama were shocked when they heard Allison’s experiences.

Allison opened up about her painful experience during a sharing and learning session. Speaking about how she was vilified, verbally abused and attacked in the media, on talk shows and even in the supermarket, after her recommendations for an improved HFLE curriculum for Jamaica became public. In the words of one of the workshop participants: “Allison was personally blamed for ‘putting sex in the curriculum, thus stimulating children to have sex.”

Solidarity in secrecy

With Allison’s experiences in mind, and after earlier attempts were blocked by the strong influence of religious conservatives, a new approach was adopted, in order to make much-needed changes to the HFLE curriculum: working undercover.

As little as possible was communicated about the development of the additional sections for the curriculum. As soon as the CSE sections were finished and approved by the Jamaican Ministry of Education, they were simply introduced into the school curriculum and HFLE teachers were trained on providing these new CSE classes.

This covert strategy involved promising confidentiality to Jamaican politicians who lobbied hard for getting the CSE chapters approved. This enabled them to continue working on pushing forward important issues of SRHR at the political level without risk to their careers or personal safety.

Significantly, many of the key decision makers at the Ministry of Education, who had recently taken

office, were quite young and came with a fresh focus on youth issues. They did not mind working with the RHRN platform – as long as it was done secretly. According to one of the platform members: “They did not want to openly show their solidarity with us, so everything was done in a covert manner.”

Building relationships at every level

Another important part of the strategy was the work done by the 11 platform members in establishing relations with key people, such as the HFLE officers. A pivotal activity in this process was the aforementioned workshop in Panama, which had the main objective to train HLFE Curriculum Officers and gain their trust and support, so that they could apply more proactive and strategic approaches towards a more progressive curriculum at the national level.

Alongside this, sensitisation efforts by the Caribbean RHRN Platform at the highest governmental levels had significant impact. This included sensitising the Minister of Education and the Prime Minister during Heads of State conferences from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the United Nations. It was here where verbal promises “to make this happen” were made by high governmental officials, which turned out to have indeed been passed on to their subordinates to action.

A key role in the sensitisation efforts was played by young advocates who were empowered by the RHRN training on advocacy and the experience they got by attending high level conferences of CARICOM and the United Nations. CARICOM Youth Ambassadors signed a statement supporting CSE and this document was used to lobby policy makers. Youth representatives also had discussions on social media

“ They did not want to openly show their solidarity with us, so everything was done in a covert manner ”

platforms about the need for including CSE in the Jamaican curriculum, becoming powerful champions of change towards their peers and community.

Looking ahead to the rest of the region

The Ministry of Education of Jamaica’s agreement to include CSE in the new version of the curriculum in March 2019 was the result of numerous meetings, lobby events and meticulous curriculum revisions by different stakeholders from Jamaica and the whole Caribbean region, spanning over 15 months. Led by the RHRN Platform and Jamaica Family Planning Association, various platform members contributed to this achievement, as well as other important stakeholders like the Caribbean Coalition on Population and Development.

It now means, by law, that all schools in Jamaica have to follow the CSE curriculum. But what about the other countries in the region? With Jamaica being one of the biggest countries in the group, and considered as one of the most conservative, the feeling is: if it is possible here, it is possible anywhere.

The Caribbean RHRN Platform is still lobbying, alongside CARICOM, to implement CSE into the school curriculum of all countries involved.

“You saved my life”

Exploring the impact of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in a Jamaican high school



14-year-old Winston is currently a ninth-grade student in a high school in Montego Bay in Jamaica. “In grade 7 and 8 we discussed sexuality in class. I think it is great. We all have the right to be educated so we can make informed decisions in the future. We had several classes on this and really went in-depth. It helped most of my classmates to be more aware of their sexuality. After the teacher finished talking, we asked numerous questions.”

The first experiences show that comprehensive sexuality education has a positive influence on children to become less shy, ask questions, and speak more in-depth about the topic, both with the teacher and with their peers. Winston addresses this when he says: “At first, me and my classmates were shy but after some time we got to be more comfortable with it.”

Although Winston agrees that they could always look things up on the internet, talking about it in class allowed for a more in-depth conversation. For Winston, the classes on contraceptive methods were “the most important, because students need to know how to protect themselves”.

An increase in tolerance and openness

HFLE teacher Sophie is responsible for the classes on CSE in Winston’s Montego Bay high school. She specifically highlights the importance of discussions on tolerance in the curriculum.

“Students that are not ‘hetero-normative’ often face bullying at school. The inclusion of tolerance and respect for others that is incorporated in the sexuality

part of the curriculum has made a great impact. It has changed the social landscape of teaching and learning, and the whole school culture. If students can understand the emotional side of what others are going through in terms of their sexuality, then they will be able to be more respectful and tolerant.” This increased tolerance has also contributed to self-confidence with students who previously were not able to accept themselves. “Now they say: ‘I am me and this is who I am.’”

Sophie has also witnessed a gradual change in her students when it comes to their sexuality. “Earlier students did not easily talk about their sexuality and how they were feeling. But after the CSE lessons, more students are willing to speak to me personally, one on one, just to share how they are feeling deep down.”

After receiving CSE classes, students are especially more open and willing to speak about LGBTI issues. Sophie says: “They seldom have the opportunity to talk about this at home with their guardians. So, I think this change in the curriculum really did well for the students.”

Unlocking access to SRH services

Even though in Jamaica the legal age of consent to sex is 16, Sophie says that it is important to teach children as soon as they start high school – roughly at age 13 – about how to protect themselves in order to avoid sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancies.

This is also the reason why, for the Jamaican Family Planning Association, the most important recommendation that

was included in the curriculum is the section on access to services and advice on sexuality. Since the implementation of the new curriculum, the Jamaican Family Planning Association noticed an increase in young people contacting them.

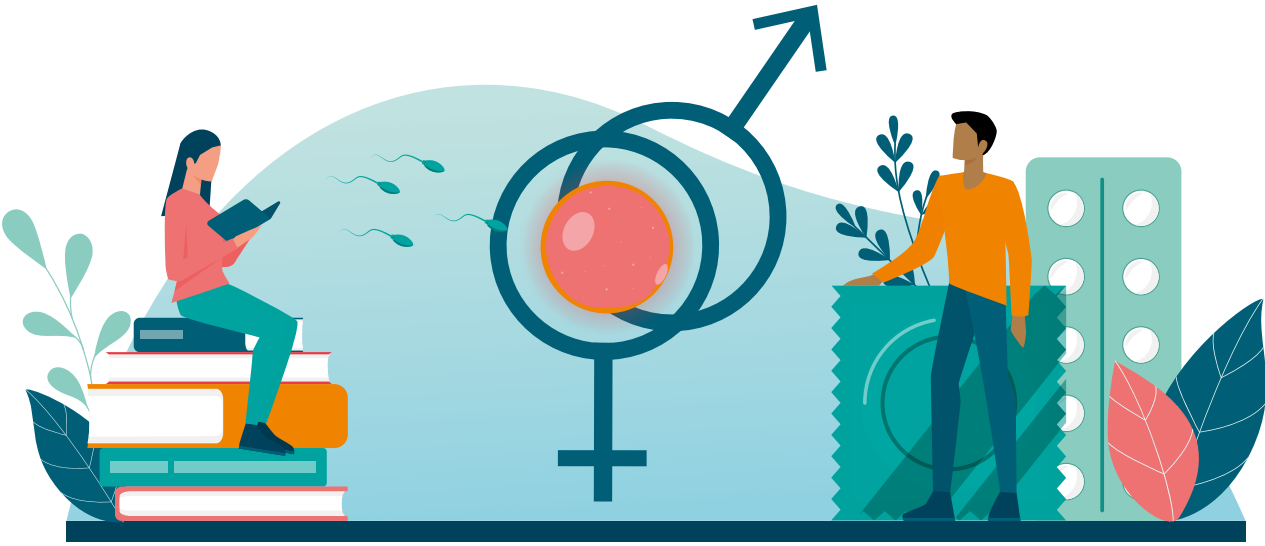
One 14-year-old girl who visited the Jamaican Family Planning Association said: “Without your organisation I would not have known where to get the morning-after pill. You saved my life.” She had received the information from discussions in CSE class.

Engaging parents and influential stakeholders

Both Winston and Sophie stress that students get primarily informed on sex and sexuality issues by their parents. However, most parents never received any sex education themselves. The passing along of misinformation is a real danger. In view of the conservative and religious society, many feel ashamed to openly talk about it with their children too.

Therefore, it is key to also include parents into the learning process, says Sophie, for example by offering extra curriculum sessions for parents. This means students and parents can receive similar information and, knowing this, might have more open conversations about the topics at home.

Traditional media and religious leaders should also be included, for their strong influence on general perceptions in society regarding sexual health and sexuality. Facilitating this will require a continuous process for many years to come.



Advocacy on the international stage

Reaching our RHRN goals requires an interlinked advocacy approach at a national, regional and international level. It’s through the latter that we assume we are best able to hold governments to account and, as a result, facilitate change on a national level.

International advocacy takes many forms: statement writing, producing shadow reports, addressing delegates in New York and Geneva, or informal lobbying. Each gives young advocates key development opportunities. But to advocate on international stages effectively and with confidence, young people need strengthened capacity. The barriers young people face in these spaces, such as marginalisation and intimidation, make this even more important. RHRN has endeavoured to provide training,

safe spaces and one-to-one support for advocates to better navigate these spaces. The outcomes of international advocacy processes vary. While human rights treaties are legally binding, commitments made at the Commission on Population and Development or during regional conferences are not – forcing activists to continue lobbying politicians, at a national level, to take action. Let’s explore some of the key international processes RHRN has contributed to over the past five years.

Commission on the Status of Women

The CSW is the principal intergovernmental body on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Meeting annually in New York, to monitor and assess the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, governments, experts and civil society representatives share lessons learned and best practices. In addition to young advocates attending on multiple occasions, RHRN co-hosted side events to create a safe space for advocates to share, network and strategise.





Universal Periodic Review

The UPR is a unique process for reviewing the human rights records of UN Member States. It provides an opportunity for all countries to declare the actions they have taken to improve human rights in their country. States are also examined by and receive recommendations from other member states. They are then expected to implement these recommendations at their national level. Over the past five years, the advocacy of many RHRN platforms has led to strong recommendations on safe abortion, LGBTBI rights and youth friendly SRH services. Our youth advocates have also played a key role in developing shadow reports, speaking at pre-sessions, and sharing recommendations.



Nairobi Summit

In 2019, to mark the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, where 179 governments adopted a landmark Programme of Action focused on reproductive health and rights and women’s empowerment and gender equality, the Nairobi Summit was held. Over 50 young advocates from RHRN attended and played an active role in planning, implementing and achieving their country’s advocacy strategy by advocating for commitments and speaking at side-events. RHRN also hosted a reception with the Dutch Embassy to provide a safe space for LGBTBI advocates, UN agencies and supportive governments to discuss strategies for a more inclusive ICPD+25 agenda. High-profile attendees included the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, and the Minister for Children and Youth affairs of Ireland.





High-Level Political Forum in New York

This UN process monitors and reviews the global implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. States are invited to present their progress on implementing the SDGs through the Voluntary National Review. This is supposed to be a participatory and inclusive process, however not all member states allow NGOs to have an active role.





“I’m sure that our issues were heard”

In 2019, youth advocate Maha Islam was invited to speak at the High-Level Political Forum in New York. Maha reflects on her presence in New York and what it means for the respect for SRHR in her home country Pakistan.

What do you remember most from your visit to New York?
“My own speech before all delegates. I was chosen to speak on behalf of several Pakistani human rights organisations. Everybody pushed to have their priority included in the statement. At the same time, we also needed to be strategic. We wanted to make a clear statement, but not be too critical about the government as that would be counterproductive. I confronted the Pakistani government about the need to break gender stereotypes, to adopt a firm anti-discrimination legislation protecting women, young people, religious and sexual minorities.”

How did you feel giving a speech at such a high-level forum?
“I was really nervous. Fortunately, RHRN provided a lot of support. Naz, from ARROW, and Evi, from Rutgers, stood by me and gave me lots of tips on how to deal with the situation. They helped me connect to the right people and provided tips on advocacy.”

How did people respond to your speech?
“Of course, the Pakistani task force mainly reacted by repeating the official position of the government on SRHR and defended what was already being done. But they also approached me and asked about my presentation and promised there would be a dialogue. Unfortunately, I didn’t hear back from them.”

What do you think the significance of the SDG process is?
“One can wonder what the effect of the ‘circus’ in New York is to the lives of

ordinary people in Pakistan. I want to say that it changed a lot, but in reality, I don’t know. Before the Forum in New York, we engaged with the SDG task force in Pakistan about our priorities regarding SRHR. That was in May, and by that time the SDG review was already drafted by the government. So that couldn’t be changed, but I’m sure that our issues were heard. Parliamentarians showed interest in what we had to say. I’m sure that at a later stage we can capitalise on this. The global SDG process obliges national governments to put things on the agenda, allowing human rights organisations to start a dialogue and to engage in advocacy.”

What does this work mean to you, personally?
“It is a cliché, but if my presence and participation has made a positive impact in the life of just one person, then it will all have been worthwhile. Beyond that, I hope that it can be empowering for women in Pakistan to see that a simple person like me can raise issues on an international platform in front of an official delegation of our country.”



Dealing with opposition to SRHR

Since the conception of RHRN, the influence of voices opposing SRHR has increased exponentially. Opposition groups are increasingly well-funded, well-organised and effective in delivering their anti-rights messages to the public and policy-makers. As a result, it has become harder for us to reach results on SRHR topics. SRHR advocates also experience increasing threats to their physical and digital safety and security, which has an immeasurable impact on their work and lives.

Strengthening capacity

As a partnership, we recognised a critical need to better respond to growing conservatism and to support RHRN platform members to work in a context affected by opposition. From 2017 onwards, Rutgers facilitated linking and learning across RHRN platforms, and beyond, at a regional level (between Kenya and Uganda; and Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh). A facilitators' guide was also created to help facilitate further strategic meetings, which was published as an open, online resource in 2020.

RHRN partner, Hivos, also developed and delivered training specific to increasing understanding of issues related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (SO/GIE/SC). The training was used to develop countermeasures against exclusion, discrimination and violence towards people who belong to sexual, gender and sexual and gender minorities.

“There is no such thing as ‘the’ opposition”

As conservative forces against LGBTI rights, safe abortion and sexuality education grow globally, how can SRHR programmes counter opposition and keep their advocates safe? We take a look at RHRN’s progress in the opposition arena.

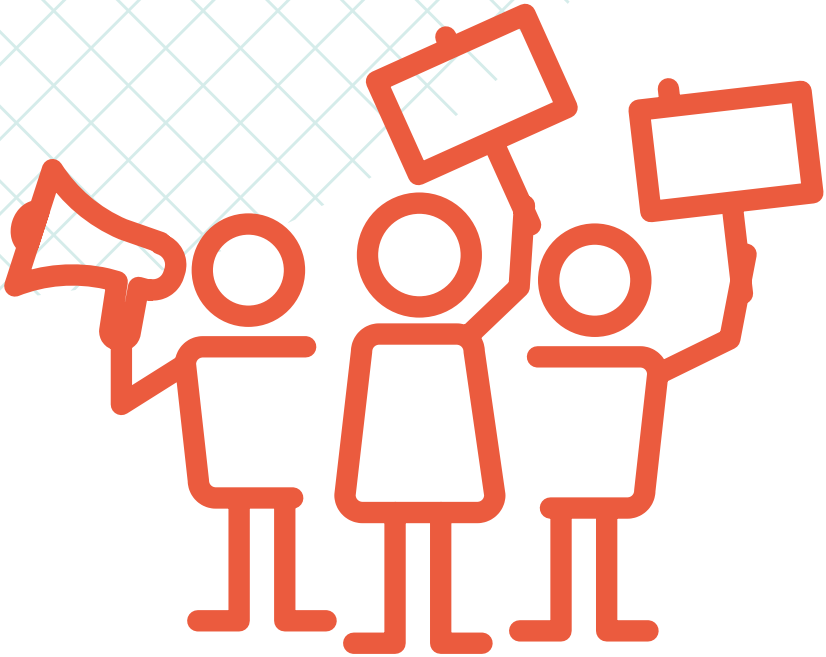
Explore the key takeaways from this learning trajectory for effective advocacy in times of opposition.

1. The opposition is not homogeneous

A running thread was the realisation that there is no such thing as ‘the’ opposition. Instead of seeing opposition as a monolith, members mapped opposition groups active in their context. Such mapping often provided more insight into who exactly opposes what, and why they oppose certain things. Based on that information platforms were better able to select strategies to counter opposition.

Dissecting opposition into different subgroups, based on themes, led one platform to develop more targeted strategies and uncover insights, such as recognising that groups who disagree with you on one issue could be your supporters on another. This inspired them to organise dialogues with opposition groups that they had identified as ‘moderate’. Through these discussions, it became clear that some opposition groups were actually lacking the correct information, so these moments became opportunities to educate and engage.

For another platform, who had previously invested in engaging with journalists and reporters, the mapping exercise helped them realise that editors often have a final say in how messages are framed and were inadvertently acting as opposition. The platform went on to include editors in their engagement and saw a big difference in the quality of articles on SRHR topics.



2. SRHR messaging around shared values is more effective

A primary focus area for all platforms was on strengthening the effectiveness of their messaging around SRHR. “We analysed the tactics of the opposition and why those messages resonate so well, and we were able to develop our own messages based on the understanding of different groups. We realised that SRHR and CSE are our values but alien to others, so we started to craft messages for different groups based on shared values,” said one of the RHRN National Coordinators.

The Indonesian platform applied these learnings in their campaign around the Sexual Violence Bill. They switched to using language around love and compassion and were careful not to paint one party as the “enemy” – instead highlighting the suffering caused by this bill. The campaign drew a lot of attention and there was little response from traditional opposition sources. Platform members surmised this was because empathy-based messages are hard to counter without damaging your own image. This was a big win from a safety and security perspective, as the Indonesian platform in particular has faced online attacks.

3. Stimulate linking and learning across countries

With learning meetings conducted at a regional level, they became highly valuable spaces for partners to connect over similar challenges faced. Both the Indonesian and Bangladeshi platforms shared that it

was useful for them to see how RHRN partners in other Islamic-majority countries were still able to advance SRHR despite their conservative or restrictive contexts.

After seeing that members of RHRN Pakistan and Indonesia were still managing to address LGBTI issues in creative ways, members of RHRN Bangladesh felt increasingly comfortable working on LGBTI issues within their own context. They drew inspiration from the ways in which the Indonesian platform has used the RHRN brand as a way to mitigate backlash and safety and security risks towards individual organisations.

4. Ensure ownership within the platforms

Following the learning meetings, we saw some of the participants take ownership of continuing capacity strengthening around dealing with opposition, such as in the case of a RHRN in Uganda. This partner organisation has been leading efforts to capacitate allies for SRHR, both within and outside of the platform, through training sessions and meetings funded through RHRN. This capacity strengthening has been focused on creating awareness of the opposition and what tactics they use through monitoring. Initially, they observed that opposition monitoring and mitigation was a new concept to platform members. But, as a result of their activities, the partner organisation saw an increase in platform members contacting them with suspected cases of opposition attacks.

However, they added that while partners are now readier to map, monitor and mitigate, a lack of human and financial resources hampers this. They emphasised that opposition monitoring cannot be done by individual organisations alone, as the opposition is too well organised and well-funded and can attack on many different fronts. They underscore the need for a rapid response team and a more far-reaching strategy that can guide their advocacy work.



Maintaining momentum

Opposition to SRHR work is unlikely to lessen any time soon. For programmes to be successful, it is vital that they continuously analyse the opposition they face and test new strategies. As a partnership, we will continue to facilitate mutual learning within all of our current and future programming.



To learn more about dealing with opposition, download our facilitator’s guide.



Unpacking the impact of COVID on SRHR



Advocates have adapted to wearing face masks and meeting outdoors during the pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of young people’s lives, from their schooling and livelihoods to their social relations. Lockdowns and restrictions on movement have also had a significant impact on young people’s access to SRHR information and services, as well as their mental health. To fully understand this impact, RHRN and Get Up Speak Out collaborated to carry out research among people aged 18-30 in Ghana, Kenya, Indonesia, Nepal, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Explore a snapshot of the qualitative and quantitative findings below.

“I feel that things are out of control and out of my hands”



A RHRN member in Uganda wears a protective face covering

RHRN’s change of tack to tackle COVID

As well as having huge consequences for SRHR, the pandemic forced RHRN to adapt its approach at rapid speed. We moved to online learning and sharing, engaged in political forums through video message and targeted restrictive laws with coordinated online campaigns. RHRN advocates proved themselves resilient in the face of these new challenges. Quick thinking and flexibility meant that, despite not being able to work in the ways originally planned, RHRN platforms achieved impressive results in their final year.

disruption in essential SRH services and shortages of medications and SRH commodities. Impacts that are compounded by the diversion of financial resources to COVID-19 responses. Conservative populist governments are also using the health emergency to constrain human rights, target specific subpopulations, destabilise social movements and further restrict SRHR by furthering anti-choice and anti-gender equality agendas.

Shrinking civic space for advocacy work
The repercussions of the pandemic are being felt keenly in civic spaces. This is particularly the case in places with stretched and underfunded health services, leaving health systems struggling to cope. And has led to a

Adapting capacity strengthening
When the pandemic worsened globally, we saw young people’s health, including SRHR and access to contraception and safe abortion services, became a non-priority in many countries. We also saw a lack of information on how young people could protect themselves during movement restriction orders.

The platforms worked quickly to find ways to overcome this threat. By reaching out to advocates to continue strengthening their capacity and knowledge on SRHR. But also, by ensuring that capacity strengthening interventions were relevant and helpful in this new context. Thanks to collaborative discussions and strategising across the country platforms, many of the planned activities and interventions were able take place in modified ways. Events, training and activities originally planned as physical activities, were adapted into online consultations, e-learning tools, webinars or virtual festivals through video conferencing.

Read the COVID report in full [here](#)

Comprehensive Sexuality Education



“I have to pay school fees and, on top of that, buy access to the internet to join the classes.”

For those without computers, smartphones or money to pay for an internet connection, classes were often inaccessible. They were also limited to academic subjects and respondents complained that CSE sessions were no longer taking place. Consequently, young people felt they were missing out on opportunities to exchange with their peers in a ‘safe space’ about their sexual and reproductive health concerns.

School closures also had a significant impact on menstrual hygiene. Female pupils often received sanitary protection for free in school but, whilst out of school, they had difficulty sourcing protection.

“I used to get money from my parents for sanitary pads when schools were open, but they lost their jobs in the lockdown and now I no longer get anything from them except for food. They say my menstruation needs are not as urgent as food.”

SRHR information

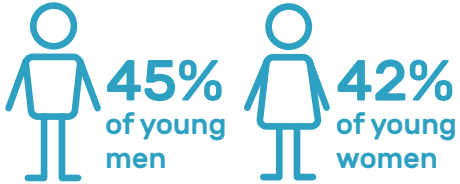
With youth-friendly health services reduced and face-to-face support put on hold, many young people relied on WhatsApp and Facebook for SRHR information. However, the accuracy of content was often in doubt. Telephone hotlines such as ‘Aunty Jane’ in Kenya were said to work well as trained health professionals provided accurate, confidential replies to callers’ questions.

SRH information gaps during the pandemic:

- 60% of young people in Kenya wanted information on STIs
- 42% of Nepalese respondents wanted information on sexual pleasure
- 60% of young women in Zimbabwe wanted information on menstrual hygiene



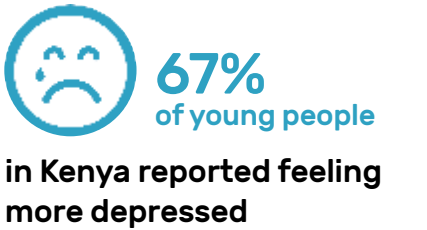
Sexual harassment and gender-based violence



in Zimbabwe felt more vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse
With couples confined together, and many experiencing financial difficulties, this has exacerbated tensions and led to violent disputes. Among young respondents who reported experiencing any harassment or abuse, partners were reported as the perpetrators by 42% of young women in Zimbabwe.

“Before, in an abusive environment, there was some relief when the partners went to work.”

Mental health



Many young people reported feeling depressed, or even suicidal, due to their isolation and experienced feelings of loneliness. Many also felt that they were unable to control what happened to them with regard to the virus and other aspects of their lives. This appeared to exacerbate or precipitate anxiety and poor mental health.

“People are affected not only physically but also emotionally and mentally. Not only me, but my friends also felt depressed and went through the same feelings as I experienced. Where I live, seven people died by suicide.”

LGBTI groups

“You are forced to be under the same roof with people who don’t accept you. It’s really hard to survive.”

Those particularly at-risk before the pandemic have often faced additional hardship. Young people who identify as LGBTI frequently suffered great stigma as they were forced, by lockdown, to move back to their home communities and live with relatives who did not approve of their lifestyle. The closure of support groups and drop-in centres increased this isolation.

Young people living with HIV/AIDS were also unable or unwilling to risk being seen taking their medication during lockdown for fear of their status being exposed to their families and communities, while transgender people faced difficulty in accessing hormone supplements.

RHRN resources

Looking for ways to improve your advocacy? Explore the full [RHRN database](#) – jam-packed with toolkits, reports and resources that you can use to aid your own advocacy work. Our [Localizing accountability mechanisms](#) toolkit can help you adopt approaches to your context. The materials are available in English, Spanish and French.

Want to know more about how you can support or get involved with RHRN?

Reach out to us via rhrncommunications@rutgers.nl

The next phase of RHRN

While the first RHRN programme concluded in 2020, a new iteration of RHRN kicked off at the start of 2021. It builds on the successes and outcomes of the first five years, to continue the work towards creating a world that respects, protects and fulfils the health and rights of young people, everywhere.

To keep up to date with RHRN's advocacy and impact, follow us on

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