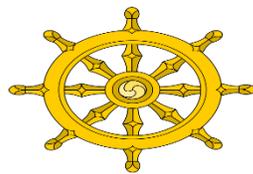


# Keeping the Faith in Sexual and Reproductive Health





## FAMILY PLANNING

### Why These Points?

Sexual and reproductive health matters are contentious. They arouse strong feelings and provoke disagreements wherever they are discussed. Despite the differences, what unites people of faith are common positions on basic human needs, aspirations and values of human dignity, noted in and affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among other international treaties and conventions.

Leaving no one behind is both a driver, and an objective of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda. Since 84% of the world's population identifies with a religious group, this document

highlights some religious teachings of major world faiths which affirm an area of important population issue which intersects with sexual and reproductive health and gender equality.

These *Faithful Affirmations* are provided by a collective of religious leaders, theologians, 'hands-on' programme managers in faith-based NGOs, and secular human rights actors, and trainers, who are versed in, and work with, their respective faith traditions. They are intended to be user-friendly and succinct and are the first 'pilot' in a series on around "Keeping the Faith" in religions and SRH and RR intersections.

### Family Planning and Human Rights



#### *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights... Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status... Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person"



#### *ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 7.2*

The ICPD defines sexual and reproductive health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being... in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so."



#### *UNFPA, State of World Population Report, 2012, p.8.*

"The practical expressions of the right to family planning can be divided into freedoms and entitlements to be enjoyed by individuals, and the obligations of the State. The freedoms and entitlements of individuals are strongly dependent on States' obligations to ensure an equal opportunity and the progressive realization of human rights, including the right to health, for all without discrimination. They achieve this through strategies that contribute to removing obstacles and the adoption of positive measures that compensate for the factors that systematically prevent specific groups from accessing quality services."

### Family Planning and the Sustainable Development Goals

Family Planning is covered by SDG number 3 "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" thus: (3.1) By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births; (3.2) By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births; (3.7) By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.





SDG 5 “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” also requires ensuring “universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences”.

## Faithful Affirmations

### Hinduism



From the earliest of age, Hindu children are taught to revere the divine feminine, as embodied in Her multiplicity of forms: from Sita, the perfect wife, to Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, to Radha, the Lover of God, to the heroic Durga, the slayer of demons, and beyond.

Perhaps owing to such reverence, Hinduism's ancient scriptures discuss the crucial importance of promoting women's strength. “Parents should gift their daughter intellectuality and power of knowledge before marriage” (Rig Veda 10.85.7) “O woman, may you be strong and powerful like a rock. May you gain brilliance of the sun and have a long prosperous life that benefits all.” (Atharva Veda 14.1.47).

Marriage is seen as a sacred bond that lasts lifetimes. Through it, a couple learns to love one-another, so that they can more completely love God. For this reason, ancient scriptures, such as the Athrva Veda urge, “May the husband and wife be complementary to each other. May the husband be a song, the wife be a verse.” (14.2)

In the heart of Hinduism, all that is and all that ever existed is forever

pure and undifferentiated from divinity itself. In other words, Hinduism, according to ancient traditions, is actually a monotheistic religion that views all of creation—including animals, gods and people—as divine aspects of the same holy Creator. The ancient text, the Devi Mahatmya, in its Aparajita stuti (5:1-82), for example, reminds us that the Creator, as the Divine Feminine, manifests throughout the universe as consciousness, energy, intellect, faith, knowledge, and all else that exists. For this reason, on high holidays such as Durga Puja, it is not uncommon to find little girls being worshipped by their entire communities as embodiments of all that is sacred and pure through showers of fragrant flowers and scriptural recitation. According to what is considered to be humanity's first scripture, the Manusmriti, “Where women are worshipped, there the gods are delighted; but where they are not worshipped, all religious ceremonies become futile” (3.56).

Also according to the Manusmriti, (9.130) “A daughter is equivalent to a son.” In light of this, at the dawn of the 20th century, renowned Hindu leader, Swami Vivekananda urged a steadily-modernizing society to end discrimination between the sexes, saying, “Is there any sex-distinction in the Atman (the eternal soul, which is inseparable from God)? Out with the differentiation between man and woman! All is Atman!” (Complete Works, Vol. 6/XLVII).

For reasons such as these, it is paramount to core Hindu values that girls, from the moment of conception, be respected and cherished as divine reflections of a single, loving Creator. As such, modern trends of selective-sex abortion and female infanticide are heinous sins, according to numerous scriptural sources. For example, says the Krishna Yajur Veda (6.5.10), “A slayer of an embryo is like the slayer of a priest.” The same holds true in regards to violence of any kind against women and girls. Says the Manusmriti, (3.58) “A family where women feel insulted or discriminated against... is destroyed in the same manner as poison kills all those who eat it.” Says the Mahabharata, where “daughters and daughters-in-law are saddened by ill treatment, that lineage is destroyed.” (Anushashanparva, 12.14)

When it comes to reproduction, scriptures emphasise that intimate relations be respected as sacred and kept within the confines of marriage. Temperance is urged in all matters, lest a person become carried away from all that is joyful and divine, and led instead into endless, painful cycles of unquenchable desires and temptations. Says the Atharva Veda, “It is by their union that offspring results. Each has to emotionally fulfill the vow of being faithful for higher values of life.” (14.2.7)

Lastly, according to the Manusmriti, women should be given the duties of managing the finances, maintaining hygiene, spiritual and religious activities, nutrition and household

**Women  
should be  
revered**



# Keeping the Faith in Sexual and Reproductive Health

items, (9.11) and “Women should always be revered under all circumstances.” (3.59).

that women’s dignity, women’s rights and respect for the sanctity of women’s and girls’ lives, always be upheld.

It is therefore crucial  
**Hinduism**



**Contemporary Buddhists advocate for women, girls and LGBTI rights, promote self-awareness for the purpose of realizing social justice related to sexual health and reproductive rights.**

Women (wives) have equal rights, obligations and responsibilities as men (husbands) when it comes to family planning, with regard to the size of family, the method of contraception, the wellbeing of sexual life and the wealth of the family. Within Buddhist contexts, family planning is not discussed in the language of rights, but rather in terms of benefit and harm to a family, and from within an intention of relieving human suffering. As the Buddha suggests in the Aḡañṇā Sutta, morality may be declining, but the effort of searching for one’s relief from suffering will never fail.

With this understanding of Buddha’s teaching, and in compliance with moral precepts and government policies, family planning should be considered in so far as it is to safeguard the welfare of, and secure benefits to, family members and society at large. When observing the teachings of Buddhism on the issues of sexual and reproductive health in the modern context, it is clear that although some Buddhist context may subordinate women, this is due to cultural influences, rather than Buddhist principles. Buddhists have re-interpreted ancient texts in order to reflect contemporary realities, advocate for women, girls and LGBTI rights, promote self-awareness for the purpose of realizing social justice related to sexual health and reproductive rights, and thereby recognise progress of gender equality and family planning, in recent years.

Judaism begins with the Bible’s proposition that all humans are created in God’s image and likeness [Genesis 1:27]. It follows then in classical Jewish legal texts that Jews should violate even the most sacred laws to protect a life [Babylonian Talmud Yoma 84b-85a]. Indeed, it is considered a religious obligation to provide medical advice and care [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah 336]. Respect for the body is paramount [See e.g. Leviticus Rabbah 34:3].

It is fair to characterize Judaism as positive in its attitudes about sexuality [See Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 62a regarding Rav Kahana’s characterization of sexual education as “Torah that must be learned.”]

Jewish men are obligated to provide their wives sex regularly,[Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 61b], even as men are strictly forbidden to have non-consensual sex [Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 100b].

Family planning is expected in religious Judaism, with the legal discussion focused on the minimum number (two or three) of children required to fulfill the biblical commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28).[Babylonian Talmud Yebamot 61b-62a]. There are recognized forms of contraception [Babylonian Talmud Yebamot 12b (*mokh-* a contraceptive sponge) and Yebamot 65a (infertility drug)].

As a broad general principle, the mother’s health is paramount and a fetus is considered part of the mother until birth (Mishnah Ohilot 7:6).

While there is broad discussion and debate about these and other issues regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights, this brief survey captures the normative opinions of Jewish literature over the past 1,800 years.

## Judaism



**“It is fair to characterize Judaism as positive in its attitudes about sexuality”**

**“Family planning is expected in religious Judaism...”**



## Christianity

Christians value life (Genesis 1:27) - The Bible says all human beings are created in the image of God with inherent dignity and value. Therefore, Christians promote policies and approaches that elevate the value of life and show respect and concern for all humankind.

Christians celebrate the equal dignity of the sexes (Genesis 1:27) -- **God** created females and males as equals and as helpmates for one another. Christians support gender equality and have a duty to reduce inequality and discrimination, for example by empowering women and girls. Christians reject practices and policies that prioritise, or promote the domination of, one sex over the other.

Christians value all that is good, including the body and human sexuality (Genesis 1:31) -- Christians celebrate the human body and the gift of sexuality. Sexual exploitation and practices such as female genital mutilation, which disfigure the body and are harmful to women and girls, are not in accordance with God’s plan. From the beginning, sex was gifted by God for multiple purposes, including companionship/intimacy and procreation (Genesis 1; Song of Solomon). It is designed to be sensual and consensual.

**“All human beings are created in the image of God with inherent dignity and value”**

As male and female created in God's image, God has given humanity responsibility to steward creation, including within each family (Luke 1 4:28-30, I Timothy 5:8, Genesis 1-2) -- ensuring that families and communities are healthy is an essential aspect of Christian calling as stewards of God's creation. Maternal and child health therefore, should be priorities, since poor service provision puts the health and wellbeing of women and children at risk.

In order to act responsibly, people should be enabled to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, rather than be kept in ignorance or coerced. For this reason, Christians approve of age-appropriate sex and sexuality education. Access to safe services, and accurate comprehensive information about sexual and reproductive health need to be made available to adolescents and adults alike, to facilitate informed decisions about their own lives and those of others.

Christians celebrate the birth of every child as gift from God. Children are a blessing, but procreation is not an absolute obligation to be pursued regardless of consequences. Parents ought to consider their physical, psychological,

**“Planning together for healthy families is an essential aspect of following God and promoting life”**

social and economic conditions, and their ability to provide for their children’s health, education and wellbeing. They should discuss together the number, spacing and timing of their children.

Planning together for healthy families is an essential aspect of following God and promoting life. All Christians promote responsible parenthood and approve of family planning. Official Catholic teaching permits fertility awareness-based methods but prohibits modern methods of contraception that interfere with biological processes. Some Catholics regard certain contraceptive use as legitimate. Christians do not have consensus on abortion. Some Christians disapprove of abortion in all circumstances. Christians who view abortion as permissible often approve of it only in certain restricted circumstances.

While Christians differ in the way they apply the Bible in their lives, there is broad consensus concerning matters of sexual and reproductive health. In general, Christians

**“...Christians promote full knowledge & broad services to support SRH...”**



promote full knowledge and broad services to support sexual and reproductive health, in keeping with the dignity of the human person and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the requirements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



## Islam

The Holy Quran is the ultimate resource for all Muslims regardless of the sect they abide by. The Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and the Sunnah (narrations provided of the everyday life of the Prophet, PBUH), are the second universally acceptable resources. Taking into accounts the debates and various interpretations of different schools of jurisprudence, the fundamental understandings on human life and family planning based on the Qur'an, generally refer to these concepts below.

**“Men and women are equal in their creation...”**

Humans are God’s ultimate creation. Men and women are equal in their creation (Qur'an 49:13) and reap the same rewards for their faith and good deeds (Qur'an 33:35). They were created from a single pair (Qur'an 49:13; 4:1). Their religious duties are the same (Qur'an 9:71). They are encouraged to think deeply (Qur'an 3: 190, 191), act in moderation across the board (see Qur'an 2:143 and 7:31), protect their health (mental and physical) and avoid self-destructive behavior (please see Quran, 28:77, Quran 2:195, and Quran 4:29); and have self-control.

Islamic laws are meant to protect five individual rights: the right to religion, life, lineage, intellect (reason, knowledge, education), and property. This is known within Islamic law as the Maqasid al sharia – the foundational purpose of sharia.

A woman cannot practice and protect her 5 individual rights if she does not have knowledge of self, health/reproductive education and its implications, and a foundational understanding of her religious rights. When a child goes into a contractual marriage, she is not educated about her rights and duties, she is too young to have developed knowledge of self and understanding, all of which are prerequisites to "giving consent" to marry. An Islamic marriage is not valid nor legal without consent of both parties.

The Qur'an (18:46) notes that "wealth and children are [but] adornment of the worldly life. But the enduring good deeds are better to your Lord for reward and better for [one's] hope". Although having children is a right, Muslims are commanded to place quality over quantity. Leaving behind a "quality" child with "enduring good deeds" is arguably achieved in a home that protects the 5 individual rights. When the mother is a child or has had her rights and means to achieve her rights taken away from her (such as the pursuit of knowledge) then the emphasis is placed on having more children rather than having better quality of life for the family as a whole.

The verse “God commands justice and good deeds,” (Qur'an 27:90) and the tradition of “no harm, no harassment” are rules that flow from the principle of “common good” (*Maslaha*). The validity of “public good” or “common good” as a legal principle since its admission in legal methodology has allowed for deducing fresh rulings. Issues pertaining to abortion, contraception, IVF, technically assisted reproduction etc., are all contemporary and controversial issues that have not been directly answered by Islam’s two main sources of law, Quran and Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*). Although they remain unresolved by Islamic jurisprudence, there is consensus to addressing them in the confines related to protecting the mother’s health, having birth spacing as a “common good” for the society’s economic health, and to have quality in lineage as opposed to quantity.

**“Men and women are complements...”**

Muslims consider family as the nucleus of society. Therefore, verses of the Qur'an on human creation, reproduction, sexuality, marriage, relationships between men and women, family relations, parenting, and family resilience, are abundant, and include principles to guide practices and behaviours. The aim of these principles is to achieve general well-being in society (*al-maslahat al-ammah*), not only for the benefit of certain individuals.



Men and women are each other's complements (Qur'an 2:187). The Qur'an tells the believing men and women to guide one another (9:71). Just as men have their rights and duties toward their wives, women also have their rights and duties toward their husbands. Men and women should treat each other in a good way (*mu'asharah bi al-ma'ruf*, Qur'an 4:19), sincerely (Qur'an 4:4) and seek consent and consensus through *mushawarah*/dialogue (Qur'an 2:233, 3:159, 4:24).

God asks men and women to be just to one another, for both men and women are equal before God, who judges them only according to their piety (Qur'an 49:13, 16:97, 4:124). Men are not allowed to force themselves on women, or to make things difficult for them (Qur'an 4:19, 2:187). These principles regulate marital and familial relationships, including gender equality and sexuality.

Continuation of generations is one of the basic purposes of Islamic teachings (Qur'an 16:72). Children are known to be as *the dearest creations* (*qurratu a'yun*) (Qur'an 25:74). But God warns that parents should be cautious to leave behind a weak generation (Qur'an 4:19), and neither parent should be harmed in any way because of their offspring (Qur'an 2:233). Thus, family planning is allowed, provided that it is perceived as birth spacing (*tandhim an-nasl*), rather than limiting the number of children (*tahdid an-nasl*). The debatable areas involve controlling the number of children; traditional views and beliefs; contraceptive methods (whether reversible or permanent).

In particular situations (for health reasons), sterilization is allowed by Islam when the mother's life is in danger. There

are verses to emphasise the importance of the physical and mental health of a child (Qur'an 18:46) and advice on quality of children over their number (Qur'an 2:249).

are verses to emphasise the importance of the physical and mental health of a child (Qur'an 18:46) and advice on quality of children over their number (Qur'an 2:249). The discussions around religious jurisprudence in this area mainly focus on the health of the mother and the fetus. In some discourses this constitutes grounds to allow abortion to save the life of the mother. However parents are not to "kill" their children on the ground of financial constraints (Qur'an 6:151) or the gender of their child (Qur'an 4:124).

In general, Muslims value the wellbeing of the family as an integral part of the overall health of society. Caring for each and all members of a family is part of the quest of Muslims to avoid destruction on earth (Qur'an 28:77) and to seek "*what is good in life and the hereafter*" (Qur'an 2:201).

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Mahabharata Anusasana Parva Section XLIV and Section XLV

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