

# Fact Sheet: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Eritrea



Eritrea (officially the State of Eritrea) is a country in the Horn of Africa, bordered by Sudan in the west, Ethiopia in the south, and Djibouti in the south-east. Eritrea has a population of 6,527,689 people and Asmara is its capital.<sup>1</sup> The two dominant religions of Eritrea are Islam and Christianity. 50-60% of the population is Christian, while 40-50% is Sunni Muslim.<sup>2</sup>

## Current situation in Eritrea

Eritrea is regarded as one of the most repressive states in the world.<sup>3</sup> Eritreans have been leaving the country for years to escape the highly repressive regime of President Isaias Afewerki and his intensified recruitment drive for the mandatory and indefinite national service. The UN High Commissioner of Human Rights has reported that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations are being committed by the Eritrean government: rights and freedoms are severely curtailed, without the rule of law. The commission also found violations in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture), national service and forced labour.

## Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

The findings in this fact sheet derive from various studies, reports and existing rules and regulations in Eritrea regarding Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). This fact sheet is intended as a summary of relevant data gathered from available sources; it does not claim to be complete.

### Sexual violence

Female victims of violence, particularly sexual violence, face stigma and shame.<sup>5</sup> They are silenced by fear of stigmatisation and by the difficulty to access (or the total lack of) avenues to report and seek justice for violations. The legal protections provided by the laws are not upheld in practice, affecting women's access to justice. Women and girls are at high risk of rape and other forms of sexual violence in all areas of national service, and particularly in military training camps, where they are often forced into concubinage by superiors in the camp. Hundreds of Eritrean refugees have been enslaved in torture camps in Sudan and Egypt in the past 10 years, enduring violence, rape and extortion by traffickers, often in collusion with state security forces.<sup>6</sup>

### Childbearing, family planning, abortion

The fertility rate in Eritrea was 4.7 in 2013.<sup>7</sup> Childbearing begins early in Eritrea. One fifth (19 percent) of women aged 25-49 have given birth by the age of 18, and more than one third (36 percent) by the age of 20.<sup>8</sup> Teenage pregnancy and motherhood has declined from 23% in 1995 to 14% in 2002, and to 11% in 2010.

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eritrea>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mapsofworld.com/eritrea/information/facts.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/commissioninquiryonhrinEritrea.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual\\_health/defining\\_sexual\\_health.pdf](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/sexual_health/defining_sexual_health.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A\\_HRC\\_29\\_CRP-1.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/11/eritreans-enslaved-traffickers-sudan-egypt-torture-camps>

Rutgers is an international centre of expertise on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) founded and based in the Netherlands, but operating on both a national and international level. We envisage a world where all people are able to make their own sexual and reproductive choices, free from discrimination, coercion and violence.

Rutgers uses the definition of SRHR developed by the WHO: "Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled."<sup>4</sup> Sexual rights include: the right to the highest attainable standard of sexual health; to sexuality education; to consensual sexual relations; and to decide whether, and when, to have children.

<sup>7</sup> <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.country.8300>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/2010/Eritrean-population-health-survey-2010>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/2010/eritrean-population-health-survey-2010>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/5185/abortion-law-eritrea>

<sup>11</sup> <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.country.8300>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/2010/eritrean-population-health-survey-2010>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/2010/eritrean-population-health-survey-2010>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/eritrea/2010/eritrean-population-health-survey-2010>

<sup>15</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/eritrea>

Knowledge of any contraceptive method is high, and higher among sexually active unmarried women (96%) as compared to currently married women (86%); whereas knowledge of any contraceptive method among men is nearly universal at 97%.<sup>9</sup> The current use of any contraceptive means among all women aged 15-49 is 5.5%, with 4.7% using modern methods; whereas the current use of any contraceptive method amongst married women is 8%. There has been no change since 1995. Not even one third of sexually active unmarried women use any contraceptive method. The most common reasons for not using any contraceptive method amongst married women aged 15-49 were: wanting to have as many children as possible (55%); fear of side effects (36%); lack of knowledge (6%); and opposition for mainly religious reasons (6%). Total unmet need for family planning in Eritrea is 28% (21% for spacing and 7% for limiting). Unmet need for family planning is highest among women age 15-19 (33%), and lowest among women age 45-49 (15%).

Abortion is forbidden, except "when it is performed to save the pregnant woman from grave and permanent danger to her life or health that cannot be averted in any other way".<sup>10</sup>

#### **STDs/HIV**

The HIV prevalence rate is 0.7 (2014).<sup>11</sup> 95% of women and 98% of men aged 15-49 have heard of AIDS.<sup>12</sup> However, comprehensive knowledge of AIDS is uncommon, with only 22% of women and 35% of men having comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention methods.

#### **Child marriage**

Legal age of marriage is 18 years (2007).<sup>13</sup> However, 6% of women aged 15-19 were married by the exact age of 15. Even though this percentage has declined over the years (27% of women currently aged 45-49 were married by age 15), child marriages are still a common practice.

#### **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**

There is a Proclamation to abolish female circumcision.<sup>14</sup> However, 83% of women reported that they had been circumcised (compared to 95% in 1995). Younger women are less likely to be circumcised than older women. One third of women (34%) were circumcised before the age of one, while 59% of women were circumcised before they reached five years of age. Consistent with general historical and now contemporary patterns, women in the younger age groups, the more educated and the more affluent women are more likely to affirm that there is no benefit of circumcision compared to older women, less educated women, and less affluent women.

#### **Sexual orientation**

Same-sex sexual relations are criminalised and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals face legal and social discrimination.<sup>15</sup>