



**ICRW Africa Sexual
and Reproductive
Health and Rights
Research Program**

Introduction

ICRW is implementing its 2023-2026 Global Strategy, which articulates the vision of an equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world where women, girls, and gender marginalized people flourish and thrive. **The Strategy prioritizes four broad thematic areas critical to gender equity:**








The thematic areas represent issues where ICRW believes it can have the greatest impact, based on need, opportunity, and expertise. ICRW is committed to understanding and highlighting how gender plays out in each of these areas to shape discrimination, privilege, power, access to social services and lifelong opportunities and outcomes.

ICRW Africa is currently adapting and localizing its approach to effectively address the unique needs and challenges of the communities it serves on the continent while tackling some of the most stubborn and difficult SRHR challenges of our time.

Context

The African Union has set its continental SRHR priorities in the Revised Maputo Plan of Action 2016–2030 which operationalizes the Continental Policy Framework on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights¹, the Agenda 2063 'The Africa We Want'² and the Sustainable Development Goals. The commendable intentions of the Plan of Action notwithstanding, African countries continue to bear a disproportionately high share of the global burden of adverse SRH outcomes, and of SRH disorders associated with gender inequality.

It is currently estimated that:

-  **8.3 million** women in Africa have **unsafe abortions each year**
-  **210,000** women die from pregnancy-related conditions.
-  **About 42 million** of the region's women do not receive the **treatment they need for chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis and trichomoniasis**³.
-  In 2018, all but one of the top 20 countries in the world with the **greatest burden of cervical cancer were in Africa, and in 2022,** women and girls in Africa (SSA) accounted for **63% of all new HIV infections globally**^{4,5}.
-  While modern contraception use continues to grow globally, **access to reliable family planning services and products remains limited on the continent.**


According to UNICEF, SSA has made the least headway in reducing child marriage rates despite having the world's second highest number of child brides⁶. Further, few African countries have clear policies on comprehensive sexuality education and the age of consent for SRH services, limiting young people's access to life-saving services and information and exposing them to sexually transmitted infections, early unwanted pregnancies, and negative long-term socioeconomic and health outcomes.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls, as well as child sexual abuse, persist at high levels throughout Africa. The African Development Bank notes that the prevalence of intimate partner sexual or physical violence in Africa is about 40%⁷. Social media technologies have exacerbated the risk for SGBV and child sexual exploitation and violence in the region. However, effective policy and programmatic actions to address technology-facilitated violence and abuse are rare in Africa. Organized opposition to gender equality, and reproductive and sexual minority rights is also on the rise across Africa, evidenced, *inter alia*, by growing ferocious anti-gender equity, anti-LGBT, and anti-SRHR movements and discourses.



The above and related trends raise the urgent need not only for robust evidence to guide policy and programmatic action, but also for deeper understanding of the intersecting drivers and dynamics of the region's persistently poor SRHR indicators.

Our Program Goals

-  Generate contextually relevant evidence to advance inclusive and rights-based SRHR policies, programs, and practices in Africa;
-  Support the use of evidence-informed solutions to Africa's SRHR challenges;
-  Advance innovative and Afro-feminist methodologies for researching and understanding women and girls' SRHR issues, and
-  Contribute to a strengthened gender-just SRHR ecosystem in Africa.

Our Approach

Throughout our work, we champion a triad of approaches rooted in human rights, advancement of gender equity and women's empowerment, and prioritization of those most at risk and/or facing intersecting forms of discrimination. Our work closely integrates rigorous research, sustained advocacy, innovative public engagement, and evidence-based programmatic solutions.

Learning questions

The ICRW Africa SRHR research program is guided by a set of core learning questions, motivated by the need to increase progressive and inclusive policy and programmatic action by more closely integrating research, advocacy, and solutions in a revitalized act of curiosity and courage, political imagination, and innovative public engagement.



According to UNICEF, sub-Saharan Africa has made the least headway in reducing child marriage rates despite having the world's second highest number of child brides.



Some Core Learning Questions

1. What are the patterns and dynamics of access to safe and legal abortion services, including self managed abortion among different sub-groups of women in Africa, and what are the implications of emerging patterns for public health policy and programming?
2. Where and why are rates of child marriage still high in Africa and what policy and programmatic actions are required to bring them down?
3. How are age-related discrimination practices affecting young people's SRHR outcomes in Africa?
4. How are the risks for poor SRH outcomes evolving for women and girls in Africa, and how can policies and interventions be strengthened for more effectiveness?
5. What are the effects of socio-economic disadvantage on SRH outcomes, and vice versa?
6. How do marginalized women and girls in Africa experience, encounter, and navigate the intersecting, concurrent, and colliding burdens of their economic vulnerability and SRH needs?
7. How are the risks for child sexual abuse evolving for different populations of African children, and how can policies and interventions be strengthened for more effectiveness?
8. How can the growing backlash against SRHR, including comprehensive sexuality education and women's and sexual minority rights, be understood, challenged, and addressed?

Core Competencies

ICRW Africa has extensive experience in SRHR research and programming, program evaluation, policy development and advocacy. We regularly collaborate with researchers, philanthropies, implementing organizations, the media, policy advocates, and government agencies to foster understanding of, and address, the critical SRHR and gender-related issues of our time. Our approach is intersectional, driven by our well-honed and in-depth understanding of how multiple forces shape outcomes and opportunities for communities, groups, societies, women, men, boys, and girls.

ICRW Africa draws on the expertise of researchers across disciplines to inform and drive its work. Our technical staff include public health specialists, social and behavioral scientists, economists, anthropologists, gender and youth specialists, lawyers, public policy specialists and other subject matter experts who combine academic expertise with field experience and deep contextual knowledge.

Sample relevant projects

- 1 **Understanding the Root Causes, Drivers & Possible Solutions to Child Marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Asia (2023). Donor: Plan International**

ICRW undertook a scoping review to investigate the intersecting factors driving the persistence of high rates of child marriage (CM) in low- and middle-income countries. The assessment shed light on why, despite years of substantial and ongoing investments, attempts to eliminate CM are not yielding the anticipated results. The study will inform new research, policy, and programmatic directions.

- 2 **Gender and Adolescent SRH in West and Central Africa (2022-2023). Donor: International Development Research Centre (IDRC)**

In partnership with IDRC, ICRW is assembling new research evidence on SRHR among young people for publication in a special issue of the African Journal of Reproductive Health. The project, the first of its kind in the sub-region, brings together new research and insights that allow scholars, practitioners, state actors, and the public to develop a more nuanced understanding of the intersections of gender and sexual and reproductive health, including violence, abuse and exploitation that are part of the everyday lives of adolescents in WCA.

- 3 **Strengthening Abortion Research Capacity in sub-Saharan Africa (STARS) in Mali (2020-2023). Donor: Anonymous**

African countries are in urgent need of high-level local abortion research capacity. To address this need, ICRW and its partners in Mali piloted an abortion research capacity strengthening initiative. The program, *Strengthening Abortion Research Capacity in sub-Saharan Africa (STARS)*, focused on generating a critical mass of skilled abortion researchers in Mali to boost the number and quality of studies in the country and advance the availability of robust, nationally generated evidence to improve SRHR and the wellbeing of women and girls. In its first phase, STARS trained over 50 university-based scholars on abortion research methodologies and supported several of them to publish their research in reputable journals.

- 4 **Setting the research agenda on SRHR in East Africa (2023-2024). Donor: William & Flora Hewlett Foundation**

East Africa is undergoing considerable transformation, which is creating new research concerns and highlighting long-standing puzzles regarding SRHR. However, the research agenda on these issues has been largely set by donors, researchers, and program actors from outside the region, with little or no involvement from critical stakeholders in the region. ICRW Africa is undertaking a project, which involves a desk review as well as a multi-stakeholder research agenda-setting and discovery exercise to identify, prioritize, and communicate urgent emerging and unresolved questions in SRHR in East Africa. The long-term objective of the study is to develop an informed, locally relevant, and locally owned research program agenda for understanding and tackling significant new and enduring SRHR challenges in East Africa. The findings of this study will advance investments in evidence based SRH policies and initiatives to promote health and well-being in the region

- 5 **Understanding and Addressing the SRHR Needs and Challenges of Young Women and Girls in Humanitarian Settings in Nigeria and Uganda (2019-2023). Donor: International Development Research Centre (IDRC)**

In partnership with Action Health Incorporated (AHI), Nigeria and the Uganda Red Cross Society (URCS), ICRW conducted mixed-methods research to understand and address the unique SRHR challenges of girls and young women in humanitarian settings. Utilizing the findings from in-depth interviews and surveys, we are working with stakeholders to redesign SRHR services in these settings to better meet the needs of abused and marginalized girls and young women in contexts of displacement.

6 Promoting positive masculinity for SRHR in urban informal settlements of Rwanda, Nigeria & DRC - ICRW (2019-2023). Donor: International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

ICRW and its partners, the University of Nigeria, University of Kinshasa and the Rwandan Men's Resource Centre, implemented a project to generate and disseminate evidence on the implementation, effectiveness, and challenges of male-targeted SRHR and positive masculinity initiatives in poor urban settlements in Nigeria, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In addition, ICRW assessed the gender attitudes, norms, and sexual practices, including practices related to sexual contact and marriage with minors, and supporting existing male-targeted SRHR and gender norms change initiatives to use the emerging evidence for program improvement and to strengthen the delivery of transformative male-targeted SRHR programs.

7 (Re) solve (2016-2022). Donor: The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

ICRW served as the monitoring and evaluation partner for (re)Solve-FP, which is designed to generate and rapidly test innovative solutions to resolve behavioral barriers and increase women's use of modern contraception in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and Bangladesh. In partnership with Pathfinder International, Camber Collective and ideas42, ICRW captured the process by which our partners use human-centered design principles to develop innovative solutions to reach women with unmet need for family planning in each of the project's countries. ICRW also monitored how our partners adapted these solutions as the consortium discovered what works or what does not during the testing of these solutions. ICRW worked closely with Pathfinder to capture and disseminate knowledge about the process by which these solutions are adapted. Through its role in (Re)Solve-FP, ICRW increased knowledge about effective interventions to increase the uptake of modern contraceptive use among women wishing to avoid pregnancy in the three target countries.

About ICRW Africa

ICRW Africa serves the sub-continent from our offices in Kampala and Nairobi. We were registered as an Indigenous NGO in Kenya on 6th July 2011 and in Uganda on 14th November 2017. Currently, the Nairobi office serves as the headquarters for ICRW Africa.

We have conducted research in over 25 countries across sub-Saharan Africa, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Malawi, Senegal and DRC. Across all of ICRW's hubs we collaborate closely with local, regional, and international partners to undertake research, advocacy and programmatic evaluation and guidance. We communicate our findings to policymakers and other stakeholders through participation



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