



## Effective SRHR Messaging in Changing Times

### Kick-off

With the theme of 'effective SRHR messaging in changing times' we would like to touch upon the growing influence of individuals, groups and organisations who oppose SRHR. Even though opposition to SRHR is nothing new, it seems opposition is growing in the sense that they are increasingly capable to organize themselves and quite successful in getting their anti-SRHR messages across to a wider public and to decision makers. As an SRHR community we have been discussing this trend and identified ways to limit the influence of opposition. One way is that we should spread our own messages loud and clear. The way we develop our messages now is very fact-based, and it seems these messages do not resonate very well with our audiences. It is time to do some self-reflection and see how we can make our messages more effective. That is what this Share-Net meeting is all about. This meeting was organised by one of Share-Net's CoPs consisting of Rutgers, Amref Flying Doctors, RNW Media, AFEW International and individual member Doortje Braeken.

In our efforts to bring about positive change for progressive SRHR, we -advocates for SRHR- cannot ignore that opposition groups seem to become more influential and have a (negative) effect on reaching our goals. Why do people support actions that are discriminatory and oppressive? More important: how do we need to react and adapt? As a SRHR community, we should take a pro-active approach instead of focusing too much on responding to opposition's messages and actions. We need to get our own messages across loud and clear. However, sometimes there seems to be a disconnect between how we as a SRHR community talk about SRHR issues and how our messages are perceived by the wider public.



## PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel was moderated by Leila Prnjavorac (<http://www.lvision.nl/>). Leila is presenter, trainer, day chair and workshop leader.

*'You know what is insanity? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the same result. We think we are right. We are doing the same thing year in and out. Us telling people facts is not working. Facts don't change opinions. None of us are influenced by facts. All of us make decisions based on values and moral frameworks. If we are confronted with a fact that does not fit our moral views, we ignore it'*. Heather Barclay, Senior Advocacy Advisor, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) puts the audience directly on the edge of their seats. She continues explaining that we need to think about how we, ourselves, make decisions.

Another very important factor that we need to recognize is: know your audience. Understand who you are talking to. Usually, we get stuck in a polarizing world view: the good and the bad guys. The 'very bad' guys are not worthwhile to put your efforts. Focus on the 'movable middle'. Investigate 'who is in that group'? What kind of people are in that group? What are their values? Loyalty? Protection? In general, people tend to distrust spokespeople. Therefore, it is not easy to get people's trust. However, basing your frame, your story, on shared values, make you a more trustworthy spokesperson.

Catherine Heaney, Managing Director at DHR Communications, Ireland, confirms: *'Do not waste your time on people who you cannot convince. Put your effort on the middle ground. That is where you can win. This is where the shift happens. Keeping our eye on the middle ground. What is it they want to hear?'* She tells us how she decided to fly to the USA when she saw Hilary Clinton campaigning and join the forces there. She heard campaigners trying to convince voters on the telephone. However, sometimes they kept on trying convincing people who could not be convinced. Then it is better to move on. Same for Ireland. *'We knocked on people's doors to ask for their votes'*.

Catherine mentions several factors that enabled change in Ireland. Firstly, two women died tragically wanting to terminate their pregnancies. Media covered these deaths, putting faces to the fight. People empathized with these 'real' women.

Secondly, they tried to reframe their language. *'We moved away from the word 'choice'. We stopped calling the anti-choice groups anti-choice, but called them 'anti-reform'. Also, we tried to stay away from terms like 'my body, my rights'. This might not be the best language'*. So make sure to adjust your message. 'Repeal t-shirts' worked well in urban Ireland, but might not have worked in rural areas. Very important, a trusted voice needs to be in the middle of the debate. In the case of Ireland, there were trustworthy gynecologists, female doctors as spokespersons.

Thirdly, the parliament set up a committee of politicians composing the entire political spectrum. They had intense hearings and brought in experts from all countries to provide evidence for or against abortion. They could not find experts that would hold up the anti-choice arguments. Also, workshops for politicians in safe spaces to talk about abortion were organised. Over 60 politicians took part in these trainings. Catherine provided them with media training. How to talk about this topic.



All of a sudden, people were going to talk about this issue. Even at the dining table. Many people shared their stories, suddenly it was safe to talk about the 'taboo'. Aunts started all of a sudden talking about SRHR. Something shifted. We started to understand the circumstances and relate to them. The examples of the two women helped us to start talking about the case. It was a trickle effect.

The anti-groups made a mistake: they used children with the syndrome of down for their campaign. People did not want their down syndrome kids used for this purpose.

A concern is raised in the audience: how to make sure to keep the success? How to prevent a backlash, like possibly will happen in Norway now? Catherine stresses: 'Never take your eye of the ball.' Also make sure to be cautious of the ones who just joined us: we need to be sure they stick around. We have lots of young activists now. We need to make sure that our young generation does not think that referenda are 'just' won. We must make sure that history will not be forgotten.

Furthermore, SRHR needs to be a wider issue. SRHR is still behind the scene. Open up the conversation about for example sexual pleasure. There is a need for conversations with other people, like LGBTI groups, Family Planning groups, professional services to talk about a healthy and pleasant sex life.

Heather adds to that: 'Never take changes for granted'. With regards to Norway, we have to analyse what are the triggers of the movable parties? For sure, do not go into a debate about gestational length; you cannot win when you debate about when life begins. Focus on what do we think is important. What are our values. An amazing shift occurred in Ireland. A shift away from traditional ideas. Redefine the change, we want to have a more gender equal society include LGBTI groups etc. Then we need to talk about our wish to have free, healthy lives.

Another question is raised in the audience how to go about religious groups who sponsor people in the governments. They stigmatize the people who are talking about this topic. Catherine: We have to remain resilient. However, sometimes you have to listen a bit to the opposition. You have to look at them and listen. We tend to get too passionate sometimes. It can be better not to argue all the time, not to use all your energy to fight, but to expend your energy to find people to be your champions. We need to invest in positive energy.

A participant in the audience is wondering if indeed facts do not change perspective, then how can we use data as it is our greatest tool. Heather reacts: '*Our greatest tool is our passion and commitment. We have to frame facts in values. The facts are not itself the tool. It is about how we use our facts.*' She adds to that the importance of double-checking your own message if your language cannot be easily misused. What am I actually saying?

Catherine continues saying that language is not stationary. We have to invest, test and make sure our language is appropriate to a certain context. The IFPA invested in testing messages in focus groups. These investments are necessary to get your message right. Also, make sure all your agents are using the same language.

Our facilitator Leila asks both panelists to conclude with their final remarks on effective communication. Heather stresses the importance of remembering the values and morals of what you are pushing for. Start with defining our own values and we have to remember that just because we are right, people do not have to care about that. We have to understand what the other side wants to hear. Do not start with facts, but with values. Catherine finalizes the conversation by emphasizing not too loose sight of the middle ground. In addition she underlines the importance of being a trusted voice.



## Workshop 1.

Reframing language:  
how to reach the  
wider public with  
your message?

How do people form their views and political attitudes on abortion, gender equality or sexuality education? How do the language and imagery used in public debate shape people's stances on those issues? How can we communicate our values and frame our issues in ways that engage people and mobilize support for progressive long-term social change? In this workshop participants engaged in the art of reframing messages through an interactive presentation and group work.

### *Key lessons from this workshop:*

- Identify our values to create commonalities
- We need to tell the whole story. Not just a part of it.
- Identify words that work and do not hide the perpetrators.
- Find out how to work together as a community.

*Facilitation by Heather  
Barclay, Senior Advocacy  
Adviser, Global  
Engagement, International  
Planned Parenthood  
Federation*

All presentations and relevant information about the workshops and panel discussion can be found on our [website](#).





## Workshop 2.

### How to talk about sensitive topics within communities?

*Facilitation by Doortje Braeken, Consultant SRHR, former Senior adviser adolescents, gender and rights, IPPF and Lindsay van Clief, Content Strategist, RNW Media. Resource person: [Sara Nazzerzadeh](#); Chair Middle East Health Committee of WAS (World Association Sexual Health). Co-author of Sexuality Education: Wheel of Context.*

What do you need to make your messages contextually relevant? What information do you have to collect to make the content of your messages relevant for the people you want to reach? How can you make a connection between the values and social norms in the community and the realities of sexuality, sexual reproductive health and rights? One of the main characteristics of having impact, is that it is evidence-based. But robust evidence and science are not enough. We also need to bear in mind the cultural and religious norms in the countries and communities we work in, without losing the core of our rights-based messages.

Key lessons:

- How to actually talk to the people in the communities? Practice active listening, give respect and compassion, have the conversation – this needs to be done over and over again.
- Know what you need to ask to the communities and then ask to understand their values. You need to do your research before you can fine-tune the message.
- How do you protect and support people who stick their neck out? There is too little attention for that.



## Workshop 3.

### Lobby messages towards conservative governments – fight or unite?



In the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA), as well as in some Central European countries such as Poland and Hungary, the space for civil society is shrinking. This seems to be a global process, but the EECA region is specifically affected with many countries following Russia's example in restricting the legal environment for HIV-focused civil society organisations. This workshop discussed different strategies for civil society on how to cope with these restrictions. How should we react? Do we fight, or do we unite? And what are the pros and cons and our dilemmas?

#### Key lessons:

- Analyse what can we learn from the positive stories, like the one from Ireland, in the case of Eastern Europe
- We need solidarity between CSOs, also Human Rights movement, women's movement, etc. Build bigger coalitions where you can build on the same values.
- There are different strategies: fighting, hiding, uniting. Morally we feel we have to fight, but there considerations to be taken into account (e.g. with a fundraising for fine from the Russian state you are also funding the Russian state) i.e.

*Facilitation by Janine Wildschut (Director of Programmes- AFEW International). Resource persons: Anya Sarang (President-Andrey Rylkov Foundation) and Ralph du Long (Co-Chair of the EU Russia Civil Society Forum, human rights trainer and Regional Parliament member Drenthe).*

## Join Share-Net!

and become part of the knowledge platform on SRHR as either a member or a sponsor. When joining Share-Net, you will not only be contributing to our mission and vision, but you will also be able to enjoy specific member benefits:

- Have free access to all the meetings that we organise. (Non-members participate at cost-price)
- Participate in our working groups or CoPs, which is exclusive for members. These groups are crucial for agenda setting, organizing meetings and executing small research projects. For more information on the Share-Net Netherlands working groups and thematic groups please visit [www.share-net.nl/working-groups](http://www.share-net.nl/working-groups).
- Be elected in one of our governing bodies, the Steering Committee of the Netherlands or the Board of Share-Net International. All members are invited to our annual business meeting.
- Be eligible for our yearly call for proposals for the Share-Net International Small Grants facility.

For more information about our work and how to get involved. Please contact our Share-Net Netherlands Coordinator, Meike Stieglis at [M.Stieglis@kit.nl](mailto:M.Stieglis@kit.nl)